

"And Also Some Women" Episode #002: Bad Girls of the Bible (Interview with Amy Kalmanofsky)

Anne: Could you briefly introduce yourself?

Amy: My name is Amy Kalmanofsky, I'm a professor of Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. I'm also the dean of our undergraduate college and our graduate school, also at J. T. S. I teach widely about the Bible, but mostly I address questions of gender and particularly how they intersect with theology and religious meaning. I have a recent book out, called *The Power of Equivocation*, which just came out this year, which - I actually have three books. If you read my first book I ever wrote, it was called *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible*, then I wrote *Gender Play in the Hebrew Bible*, and just this year I have *Power of Equivocation*. And if you read all three of these books, you, basically I handle every single narrative, just about, that is female-centric in these books. I always try to write to be read, so I think these are accessible stories.

Anne: Great. And can you give us a brief overview of Jezebel's story?

Amy: So I was thinking a little bit about who Jezebel is and the nature of her story. You know, she is a Phoenician princess who marries the king of Israel and becomes the queen of Israel, her husband is King Ahab, and it's interesting to think about her narrative. We first hear of her, actually, in that she is marrying King Ahab. So we don't really know much about her except for the fact that she is, in fact, a princess, she comes from a royal family, and the fact that she's Phoenician. These are actually important narrative details. I always like to say that the Bible, when it provides detail, it matters. So in introducing who Jezebel was, it's important that she is a royal person, a royal figure, and that she is Phoenician, not Israelite.

We first meet her when she gets married, but most of her narrative actually occurs in one chapter around one particular incident in her life that has to do with, I'd like to say, a kind of illegal land grab that doesn't end well for any of the people involved in it. And it's one of the most interesting chapters in all of the Bible, and it's also a relatively detailed story, but that narrative, that story, really takes up the bulk of her narrative. In other words, we don't really know much about her early life, and we don't really know much about her day-to-day life. We know this particular story, and then the most incredible thing about Jezebel is she has, I like to say, the most dramatic and, one could say, gory death scene there is in all of the Bible.

And as I just said a minute ago, details matter, and the detail that is put into her death scene in my reading of this, is incredibly intentional. So her story sort of spans the Book of Kings. You first met her in the first book of Kings, and her death is in the second Book of Kings, in chapter nine. The chapter that is the most detailed and significant, the story of her doing the land grab, is in First Kings, chapter twenty one. And it's in that story that Ahab, her husband, wants to take the vineyard of his neighbour, or actually take some land from his neighbour, Naboth, and he offers to give some of his land to Naboth, or he offers to pay for his neighbour's land. And Naboth says no to the king, and basically refuses to because he's not willing to give up his family property, which again in the ancient world, is really a significant

detail that's actually seen to Naboth's great credit. He's not willing to give up his vineyard. That's his family's land.

So Ahab does not take this news very well, and he actually goes into a deep funk and despair and depression and he - again, wonderful moment, wonderful detailed scene - he essentially crawls into bed, faces the wall and refuses to eat. It's amazing. So Jezebel then enters into the scene and basically says, "What is going on here?" And when she finds out that Naboth is not giving the land, she says to her husband, King Ahab, "Okay, this is ridiculous. Get up. Eat, drink, make yourself merry, act like a king, and I'm going to get you that land."

So she does and she actually schemes to get the land by effectively accusing Naboth of treason, which is a capital crime in the ancient world, and he is in fact killed, and when he dies, the land is given to Ahab and he gets the land. And, well, you know, that would be the end of the story, except it's not, because there's a foil in the narrative. We have a very famous and well-known prophet named Elijah, and one of the things that I think is - it makes this story so, so rich and fascinating - is that one could read the story as that the prophet Elijah, which is a very significant prophet in Israel in many ways, is the counterpart to Jezebel. It's really that it's almost like you have these two figures facing off against each other.

So Elijah is not happy about this land grab and the fact that murder was committed to get this land, and he basically curses both Ahab and Jezebel and sentences them to destroy their households, and to have a gruesome, gruesome death, they will be effectively eaten by dogs. Their blood would be licked up by dogs. And at the end of chapter twenty one, in receiving this news, Ahab becomes kind of contrite and takes on a kind of pious behaviour, and God forgives him a little bit. He still gets punished in the end, but not immediately, and not as gruesomely. And Jezebel does get punished in the end, and, as I said before, in one of the most gruesome death scenes the Bible records. So that's really, basically Jezebel's story, is that moment where she intervenes on behalf of her powerless husband to take this land.

Anne: One of the things you said, that I found really interesting, is that you spoke about how Jezebel's story shows this fear of foreigners, and especially foreign women. I would love it if you could speak a bit to that.

Amy: So this is - I'm happy to speak about - I would say the Bible's relationship to foreign individuals. And I would actually sort of separate that out, the Bible's relationship, one could say, it's different to foreign males than it is to foreign females. Both foreign males and foreign females are threatening. But, you know, it's actually an interesting question to think about.

You know, scholars, sociologists like to think about cultures that are endogamous or exogamous. Those are fancy words, it just means like, are you going to marry within your group, endogamous, or you're going to marry outside, are you open to marriages outside, and very often, you know, I think people assume that the Bible, ancient Israel, was endogamous, right, not open to external marriages, and we know that's actually not the case, right? We know that there were marriages to foreigners that took place in ancient Israel, and one of the most interesting things is that most of those foreigners are actually -

the individuals who marry outsiders tend to be significant figures. Oh, I don't know, like, Moses, right? Like Solomon, Like, half of these are kings, political leaders. And so the thinking is that they were open to marrying foreigners because it was good, it was politically wise. So, you know, the sea peoples, the Phoenicians, that was a politically wise move on the part of Ahab to marry right into to connect his kingdom to Phoenicia. That made a lot of sense. So there is a certain sense where the Bible is open to exogamous relationships and foreigners.

Okay that said, it is also suspicious of foreigners. Think, for the obvious reasons, right: protection, and it has a different relationship to foreign males and foreign females, and for the most part it's more forgiving, more accepting, more inviting of foreign females, because you could sort of absorb them into Israel's culture. One of the most difficult passages in the Bible that we have is actually the laws related to a captive woman, a woman that you take in war. Forgive me, I mean, this is the ancient world that, you know, that was the behaviours and how that woman could be brought into the Israelite community. The assumption being that that individual can be brought in, right. So there is a certain degree of openness for bringing in foreign women like Jezebel into the community.

Incidentally, I would say, not so with foreign men. That's much, much more terrifying, and the best narrative to illustrate that ever is the story of Dinah and Shechem and Hamor in Genesis thirty four, because that's really a story about, can you marry Israelite women to non Israelite men even if they convert? Which is not, you know, that's not actually a term I would use to describe anything in the Bible, but the answer to that, at least according to Genesis thirty four is, no, you cannot. You cannot marry an Israelite woman to a non-Israelite male, but you can marry a non-Israelite female to an Israelite male.

There is still suspicion and there, you know, The suspicion is really very straightforward. It's fear that, yes, you can marry a foreign woman, but she may bring in her foreign practices and it is a gateway to apostasy, to idolatry, and again, for your listeners, that, like to, you know, anyone that talks about the Bible, you know, The more Bible you know, the better off you are. Everything is intertextual. Everything, you know. It's sort of, it's an echo chamber. And the - there's actually a passage in the Book of Exodus in chapter thirty four, verses fifteen and sixteen, that actually says this outright - if you marry foreign women, it's going to introduce foreign practices into Israel and that is a dangerous thing.

Anne: One that I found really interesting in your writing is that you refer to Jezebel as the Bible's drag king? I would love it if you could speak to that, and the ways that she exercises power are so different from any of the other queens that we see.

Amy: Happy to talk about the Queen, and what differentiates Jezebel from the other queens that we see, which is related to your question about you sort of seeing her as the drag king, and I'll just start there because I meant something very specific in my reading of the narrative with the vineyard.

When she says to Ahab, "Okay, you just go drink and be happy and behave like a king, I'm going to act like a king" she actually takes his seal and staff, and I think literally puts on the symbols of authority and becomes the king, right? She's not doing an act of subterfuge as if, you know, like, as if Ahab is sort of writing his name and she is really just forcing him to. She

is, I am saying, acting like, takes on the authority of the king, and everyone knows that, and I think she does it quite overtly. So that's when I, you know, talk about her being the drag king. That's kind of what I'm trying to talk about.

But it's quite interesting to think about Jezebel as a queen and what queens were like in the ancient world. And there's actually quite a lot of debate about this, and the question really is: how powerful were the queens in the ancient world? And I always like to say to my students, you know, as somebody who teaches around gender and the Bible a lot. I always talk about differentiating between power and authority. People have power, right, because they're powerful people, and it's sort of an innate quality. That doesn't necessarily mean they have authority. When the distinction I'm making is the position gives them a certain kind of authority, right, there's, you know, that's given to - I am now the President of the United States. I now have the authority to do that.

So the question really comes - I mean it's an open debate about whether the queens in the ancient world have actual authority, right? Do they have any power that comes from the position of being a queen? Or do they, just because they're queens, have a kind of innate power that they can manipulate others, they can convince others to do their will, bend to their will, or does their position give them a certain kind of authority? And it's an open question in the Bible.

There are a lot of questions, like: is the Bible fair to use the category and label it a patriarchal text? Some people say yes, some people qualify that. In my scholarship, I pretty much embrace the term patriarchal, and one of the things that I think makes it a patriarchal text is how focused it is on protecting the property of men, and making sure there's the progeny, male progeny, to be able to inherit the property. You want to have a male heir, and many, many, many stories in the Bible, which many of your listeners I'm sure are familiar with, have to do with making sure there's a male heir.

So one of the things that people think about with queens is, are they really there to make sure that there is the next generation? That a royal son, right, the next king is going to be born through them. And so you could say that the queen's narrative is mostly about making sure of that. One of the other famous queens, of course, is Bathsheba, and it's actually quite interesting to compare her to Jezebel. Their stories are very interconnected, and Bathsheba is somebody whose story, in many ways, is about making sure that David's kingdom passes to her son. That's not Jezebel's story - that gets back to this question of if she really functions as a king, in many ways. She's really about acquiring property more than she is about having a child and securing the next generation, which is really quite remarkable.

There are so many interesting things about Jezebel that make her such a unique figure. I want to go back to the queens in just a second, but, by the way, she has one other, very interesting thing - most people assume Athalia is her daughter, who was another evil kind of queen-like figure, who also takes the position of being a king for a number of years. So it's interesting that it's really not about having a son. It's sort of like she has this female line going that is quite interesting.

But one of the things that might be fun for your listeners to do - very often when I teach about the queens, and I like to put Jezebel in the context not only of Bathsheba, but also of

Esther, because these are the three Biblical queens that have the most narrative to them. For the most part, nobody knows anything about the queens. If they're mentioned, they're mentioned as a name, and you move on. But Esther has, obviously, a full narrative and a book in her name - incidentally, she's also not about securing an heir, which is quite interesting. And then you have Bathsheba, who, you know, also has actually quite a lot of narrative, and I think has a very significant role to play in securing the heir. And then you have Jezebel.

And the question that I like to ask my own students is, who's the most powerful queen in the Bible? And you could really make an argument for any one of the three queens. You could actually say that Bathsheba's the most powerful, because she makes sure there's Solomon, and that David's legacy is continued. You could say Esther is the most powerful, because she is actually a saviour figure. I would actually argue that Jezebel is the most powerful, frankly, because she's the most threatening, right? She is a religious threat. She's a political threat. She's a social threat. And I think that's why the Bible gives her such a gruesome death, is that she has to be destroyed and not just destroyed. She has to be obliterated.

Anne: And can you speak a bit about her gender performance right before her death, when she puts on the make up - which, as you write, is so often interpreted as a seduction?

Amy: This is the story that comes in Second Kings at the end of chapter nine, this incredibly remarkable death narrative where, essentially, people are coming to kill her, and she knows it. She knows that her time is limited, and Jehu is coming with his army to destroy her, and I'm not sure if she's actually in a tower, but I sort of envisioned her in a tower watching this army approach, and she's seated in a window, and she dons make up, and she sort of watches as this army encroaches. And most people read this as - and we have another example, actually, of this that, in another scene in the Bible, that comes from the Prophet Jeremiah - that some people essentially read this that she's presenting herself as a kind of damsel in distress and/or as a seductive moment where the male usurpers are going to come, and instead of kill her they will keep her alive, and could do worse things than that. But that this is seen as a kind of moment of either seduction, or of evoking some kind of sympathy, and all of that is possible.

You know, what makes, again, the Bible so magnificent is that it is a text that is meant to be interpreted, and that it holds multiple ways of meaning in any one of its narratives. There's no right - I mean, that's probably an exaggeration, but I sort of come at this like there's no right way to read this. But one of the things that's interesting is that she's sitting looking out as this army is approaching. Two things are interesting: she's framed by a window, and she's also surrounded by eunuchs, which are always interesting in the Bible. And, you know, we have several narratives that include eunuchs, including the book of Esther, which is actually kind of interesting too, because some people have suggested - I mean, certainly seems true in the Book of Esther - that eunuchs were often sort of there to guard the queens, because they were not sexually threatening figures. They were sort of their own gender. They're neither male nor female.

But Jezebel at this moment is looking out the window - in fact, we have images similar like this in the ancient world of women sitting, which seems to be framed in by windows like this and scholars have looked at these figures and either interpret them as royal figures. And

somehow this is the symbol of their power, or even of symbol of being goddess figures. In my own read, after she behaved badly and sort of took on the role of the king - when she is at the end of her life she is, in some ways, presenting herself very overtly and fully in the role of the queen at this moment. And one could see it actually as a kind of expression of her power, right, and not a kind of seduction.

And one of the things I always like to say about Jezebel is that Jezebel's often very misunderstood mostly by contemporary readers. I mean, she's one of the rare Biblical figures, she has an afterlife, and a very interesting afterlife. There are even Jezebel magazines and Jezebel movies, and when people call women a Jezebel, I mean, it's an interesting thing, and very often she's looked at as being a seductive figure, an overly-sexualized figure and, one, I just think it's incredibly important to understand that that's just not how she functions in the Bible at all, right, at all. I think she, you know, she's not a seductive person. I think she's an incredibly powerful person you know, and a politically powerful figure, and that's actually what caused literally her downfall. Because she's tossed out of the window by these eunuchs and she tumbles to her death, and, you know, essentially her body is in fact torn apart and trampled by horses, and one assumes ultimately eaten by dogs.

You really see in that moment the sense of the fall of her authority. And of course, I don't know if you are going to ask this as well, but she's utterly obliterated, except for her skull, her hands and her feet, and, again, the Bible does not include detail without some intentionality. So you, as a reader of this narrative, have to ask, well, why those three things? And, again, we don't entirely know, but they can be, actually, symbols of her power. In a way, the head in the Bible is authority, and hands, and even feet, can be symbols of strength and authority as well. So you could almost read this into, like, almost opposite ways. You could see that this hugely powerful figure gets obliterated, and that these are the symbols of the power that once was and is now obliterated, and that's all that's left of her. On the other hand, you could say that this woman was obliterated and yet the symbols of her power still remain. It's incredible.

Anne: This is, I think, a quick question, but I was really interested in how you mentioned that vineyards are often symbolic in the way that they're used in the Old Testament, and I would love it if you would speak a bit about what the vineyard symbolizes.

Amy: So it's a great question, and again, I keep saying the same things, but: details matter, right. So, in fact, to go back to the story of the land grab, Ahab wants to take Naboth's vineyard and turn it into a vegetable garden. So vineyards do have symbolic power in the Bible, and are, you know, Israel? The people Israel sort of identified as a vineyard. Vineyards were part of the economy of the ancient world. They were very, very precious. You have to take care of them, you have to nurture a vineyard. And probably the most famous equation of Israel to a vineyard actually comes from the Prophet Isaiah in chapter five, where he says Israel is a vineyard. So it's very interesting that Naboth, again, won't give up any land. But it's a vineyard, the symbol of Israel that he will not give up.

It's also interesting that Ahab wants to turn a vineyard into a vegetable garden, which, you know, the Bible does not mention vegetables. It mentions food quite a bit, and it's always important to look at the food. I actually just had a graduate student who wrote her dissertation on food in the Bible. So food is mentioned. It does matter. But vegetables, not so

much. So you have bread. you have fruits, you have lots of meat, but you don't really have vegetables. And, you know, there's a certain sense that vegetables were sort of a lower thing, they weren't as valuable in the ancient world as they are today. Like, we think about vegetables as being so central. So it's just an interesting thing that they have wanted to convert a vineyard, the symbol of Israel, into a vegetable garden. It just shows how clueless he actually is.

Anne: My last question is that - so, I'm basically going to quote your own words back at you, but in the introduction to gender play in the Hebrew Bible, you write about how the stories of gender play that you describe don't actually support an alternative set of gender norms, but ultimately support the Bible's conventional gender norms. I would love it if you could explain a bit more about that.

Amy: There are a fair number of stories in the Bible that I study in this book that play with gender norms, right. Which means the gender norms are not set. They're not innate to society and behaviour. I think the Bible recognizes that gender norms are in fact constructed to a certain extent, and it wants to protect a certain kind of gender dynamic.

I always say that the Bible is deeply invested in - here's how I would describe it: gender distinction and gender hierarchy. So there is a certain sense where it really wants to ensure that women behave like women in certain kinds of ways, and men behave like men in certain kinds of ways, and that the relationship between men and women remains a kind of hierarchical relationship.

And the Bible is deeply invested in that gender distinction and gender hierarchy, but it recognizes that those things have to be maintained and sustained and protected, which, for a contemporary read, there's something really appealing about that. As I said, gender norms are not inscribed. They're not innate to us. There's a certain recognition of that because otherwise you wouldn't have to protect them, they would just be. So, I feel like the Bible - I mean, Jezebel is a perfect example of this, but there are many other narratives. Probably the other most familiar one to your audience would be the story of Jael and Deborah. That's another story that is so clearly playing with gender. By the way, the book of Esther also plays with gender. I think the Bible really does, at various times, understand gender, and actually intentionally plays with gender, and these are narratives that, in fact, are playful, that seem to let women behave in ways that are not typical of the ways that women should behave.

But in all of these narratives, this kind of gender play is indicative of a larger chaos, And in a way, what these stories ultimately are trying to do is bring us back to this norm of gender distinction and gender hierarchy. You don't actually want to live in a world, would be my argument in this book, where, you know, Queen Jezebel can behave like a king. You don't want to live in a world where Deborah is a Judge leading you into battle, and Jael is going to be the warrior female. That's not the world you want to live in. In some way these stories help show you the dangers and the potential chaos, and then bring us back to again this norm of gender distinction and gender hierarchy.

Anne: Perfect. and then the only other thing I need from you is if you could just do a brief intro

Amy: My name is Amy Kalmanofsky, I'm a professor of Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. I'm also the dean of our undergraduate college and our graduate school, also at J. T. S. I teach widely about the Bible, but mostly I address questions of gender and particularly how they intersect with theology and religious meaning. I have a recent book out, called *The Power of Equivocation*, which just came out this year, which - I actually have three books. If you read my first book I ever wrote, it was called *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible*, then I wrote *Gender Play in the Hebrew Bible*, and just this year I have *Power of Equivocation*. And if you read all three of these books, you, basically I handle every single narrative, just about, that is female-centric in these books. I always try to write to be read, so I think these are accessible stories.