

“And Also Some Women” Podcast Transcript

EPISODE 2: BAD GIRLS OF THE BIBLE

June: This is “And Also Some Women,” a podcast from Broadview magazine, and I’m your host, Junia Joplin.

Anne: And I’m Anne Thériault. Thanks for tuning into our second episode, where we tackle some of the ... trickier women in the Bible.

June: We're going to get into the stories of Jezebel, Delilah, and Salome – three biblical figures whose reputations precede them in the worst possible way.

Anne: And while I don't know if we'll be able to entirely redeem them, I think our guests present some pretty compelling arguments about how to see them in a different light.

June: So our first villainess is someone whose name has literally [become a synonym for a quote-unquote loose woman](#), and that's Jezebel.

Anne: Yes, but as our amazing guest Amy Kalmanofsky is going to get into, there's very little in Jezebel's story that's actually about sex.

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.

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. I always like to say that the Bible, when it provides detail, it matters. So in introducing who Jezebel is, 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 like to say, a kind of illegal land grab that doesn't end well for any of the people involved in it. 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.

June: Well, now, Amy's got me hooked. So, I remember the land grab that she mentions. It's in the Book of Kings and basically Jezebel's husband, King Ahab, wants his neighbour, Naboth's, vineyard, but Naboth refuses to sell his family's ancestral lands.

Amy: 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, 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.

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.

June: You're right, this is not a terribly sexy story. So where does Jezebel's reputation as a seductress come from?

Anne: Of all things, it comes from her death scene, because when she gets word that the enemy army is approaching, she puts on makeup and does her hair. And people have read into that one line this idea that maybe she was trying to seduce them or appear as a damsel in distress. But Amy sees this act as part of a larger story in which Jezebel really plays with gender. In fact, she calls Jezebel "the Bible's drag king."

Amy: 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, you know, the symbols of authority and becomes the king, right? And I think she does it quite overtly. So that's when I, you know, talk about her being the drag king.

June: So Ahab's acting in this way that we might not think of as being typically masculine. He's taking to his bed and sulking. And meanwhile, Jezebel's being a king in his stead and he seems more or less okay with that.

Anne: What you've got to remember about Jezebel is the Israelites were already primed to distrust her because she's a foreigner. Though, Amy does point out that the ancient Israelite culture was more exogamous, or open to marrying outside their group, than people might think. It might not have been a regular practice, but there are several examples of high profile figures like Moses and Solomon who did so.

Amy: 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.

Anne: Amy also said that while the ancient Israelites might have been suspicious of foreigners, women were seen as being easier to absorb into the culture, more likely to conform, so there was a degree of openness for bringing women like Jezebel into the community.

June: Hmm. So this is another way that Jezebel doesn't really fit in with established gender norms. She doesn't conform to the culture she's married into, the way that women typically would have been expected to. And she's really not conforming because we know that she keeps on worshipping the Phoenician god Baal after her marriage to Ahab, instead of worshipping the Israelite God. And she even drew her husband into her religious practices, which was obviously a big deal.

Anne: Yes! And there's a real reversal of expected gender roles at play here. Another example that Amy gave is that Jezebel seems very uninterested in the main role of a queen in the ancient world, which is to provide a male heir and secure the next generation. But Jezebel is more concerned with acquiring property, which is yet another way that she functions more as a stereotypical king than a queen.

June: Okay, but how did we get to the point where Jezebel's name has become an actual insult directed towards women?

Anne: That's the key question! And I'm going to let Amy explain, because she puts it so well.

Amy: One of the things I always like to say about Jezebel, which is, you know - Jezebel's often very misunderstood, mostly by contemporary readers. I mean, she's one of the rare Biblical figures, she has, like, an afterlife, and a very interesting afterlife. And very often she's looked at as being a seductive figure, you know, 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.

June: So if Jezebel wasn't so powerful, she wouldn't have made the men around her so afraid.

Anne: And we probably wouldn't still be talking about her today.

June: Okay, so, who do we have next?

Anne: We've got the wonderful Rivka Gheist on to talk about that infamous Old Testament hair-cutter, Delilah.

Rivka: My name is Rivka Gheist and I'm a shul-going, kosher-keeping former dominatrix, as well as a writer and editor, focusing on Jewish life.

Rivka: You know, we all know the popular rendition of Samson and Delilah, which is kind of - boy meets girl, boy is a Nazarite judge of Israel, girl is a Philistine prostitute, boy falls in love with girl, girl gets bribed to betray boy, nags boy to reveal the secret to his Godly strength. Boy lies, girl pouts. Boy reveals the secret to his miraculous strength is in his unshorn Panteen locks to get her off his back, girl cuts his hair during nap time, thus breaking his vow and depleting his strength. Girl sells him out to the Philistines and vanishes into the ether of Biblical infamy, while boy is tortured, used as a dancing bear and lodestone by the Philistines and their courts until his hair begins to grow back, and in an act of self-sacrifice, he begs the Lord for his strength back once more, so He can bring the stone court of the Philistines down on everyone inside, killing the Philistines and himself, and thus fulfilling the prophecy that he would be the saviour of the Israelites and the deliverer of them in their struggles from the Philistines.

So that's the very very basic bare bones. That's the popular rendition. Now, a lot of this actually comes not from the text of Judges itself, but actually from the Talmudic discourse, and the midrash, meaning kind of the folk tales in the extended universe of the Tanakh.

June: I love the idea of an extended universe of the Tanakh. If Marvel can have one, why not religious texts? So for listeners who aren't familiar, the Tanakh is the canonical collection of Hebrew scriptures, are mostly the same scriptures that Christians call the Old Testament, though they're in a different order. The Talmud is a multi-volume series of legal arguments and debate interpreting the Torah into rabbinic law. Midrash is the extended analysis or commentary of the stories that are in the scripture.

Anne: Yes, and as Rivka says, a lot of the legend of Samson and Delilah actually comes from the Talmud and the Midrash, rather than the text of Judges itself.

June: Right. So, going back to Samson for a second, it seems like there's a lot to unpack here, even before Delilah arrives.

Anne: Yeah, Rivka takes us back to before his conception, with an origin story that might sound kind of familiar.

Rivka: So first things first, Samson is born a Nazarite, meaning that his parents took the Nazarite vow on his behalf before he was even born. An angel appears to his mother and tells her that she is going to be the mother of someone very special, of a Nazarite who will deliver the Israelites from the Philistines.

This man from his infancy possessed an enormously privileged status with God for just a few simple sacrifices, lifelong. One, that he may never consume grapes or any foodstuffs made with grapes, meaning no wine and no dolmas, which is kind of a bummer. That he may not make himself ritually impure by touching or handling corpses. And thirdly, that he may not cut his hair. Those are the big, three elements of the Nazarite vow, and breaking one and or all of them could corrupt or nullify his status as a Nazarite, and all of the powers and the elevation that come with that.

Anne: And Rivka says that he really plays fast and loose with all these vows. He doesn't seem to like following any rules. He even marries a random Philistine woman against his parents' wishes!

Rivka: This is a man who is not careful, he is not humble, he is perhaps overconfident in his favour and status with God, and in some ways I really read this story as less a fable about the dangers of foreign women, and way more about the fallacy of pride and overconfidence in one's favour with God, as well as a fable against the carelessness with one's gifts from God and obligation to God.

June: And this marriage would have been a huge deal because this was during a period of ongoing conflict between the Philistines and the Israelites.

Anne: And Rivka points out this marriage is part of a larger pattern with Sampson when it comes to his treatment of women. And also a pattern of taking risks and assuming that he'll face no consequences. For instance, he annuls his marriage with the Philistine woman and we just never hear about her again.

Rivka If we are to posit, then, that Delilah is a Philistine woman, it's pretty clear to us that he hasn't actually learned his lesson. This is not a man who has learned his lesson in the interim, between his first wife and Delilah.

There's another woman. There's a third woman, there's a Gazite prostitute or, I believe whore-woman is the actual more literal translation. Right? Well, this is ancient Israel. That is the more direct translation of the term that is used, that he just hits it and quits it. This is not a man that values women. This is not a man who views women as anything other than a passing pleasure. And, in fact, one of the things I think is so interesting about this story, and Samson's ongoing saga, is that Delilah is the first woman who's named, and she's the first woman that we are actively, explicitly told that he loves her.

June: So do we know much about Delilah?

Anne: We get very little information about her, and, just like Amy mentioned about Jezebel, Rivka is adamant that scripture is very deliberate in what it tells us about Delilah - and also what it *doesn't* tell us.

Rivka Delilah seems to kind of exist behind, like, almost a veil of misdirection. So here's the thing. The name Delilah is Hebrew, but there are plenty of non-Jewish characters with Hebrew names throughout the Tanakh, so that's not really a deal-breaker. Now she lives in Nahal Sorek, which is right on the border between the Philistines and the tribe of Dan. So we never get a physical description of her, nor do we get any details about her parentage or her affiliations. In the Bible, it's quite common to hear, you know, Mary, the daughter of Avraham, or something like that. Women are usually, it's quite common, to identify them by their closest male familial relationship. That's never done, anywhere. She is simply Delilah.

All we can derive directly from the text is that she is a woman who never verbally reciprocates Samson's declarations of love, and who delivers the man who adores her to the

hands of his enemies for eleven hundred coins, and who is willing to leverage his love for her to do it.

June: Wait, so it's possible that Delilah isn't even a Philistine?

Anne: Yeah, and as Rivka said to me - if she was, wouldn't the writers make a point of mentioning that? She thinks there's a possible reading of the text where Delilah is an Israelite betraying her own people. But we just don't know, because so much information about her is omitted.

June: All we know is that she badgers Samson into revealing the secret of his strength.

Anne: Yes, and something else Rivka pointed out to me is that Samson isn't some young fool when he meets Delilah. He's been judging, which in this context really means ruling, the Israelites for 20 years before she shows up. Rivka believes he's skirted the rules so many times at this point that he has a really inflated sense of his own safety.

Rivka : And that's ultimately what is his downfall, because then she hands him over to the Philistines. They torture him. He was a Nazarite judge of Israel in an extremely prestigious role, and now he's reduced to literally hauling bricks and mortar and dancing in court for the people that are his sworn enemies. That's humiliating, and I think through that experience he truly learns repentance. He learns humility, and he asks God once more for his strength back, and when that happens, God sees that he is repentant and that he has truly learned his lesson, and God says, "Okay, you can have your power back." Just for a minute, just for a little bit.

And he chooses to sacrifice himself, a thing that he has never actually done before. He's never really put himself in any serious risk before this, and he decides to sacrifice himself, brace himself against the pillars of the Philistine court, and bring the whole darn thing on to everyone's heads, killing himself and the Philistines. And in so doing, he fulfils his vow of defeating the Philistines, and delivering the Israelite people from their oppression and antagonism. He doesn't actually fulfil that mission and that prophecy until he humbles himself enough to appreciate the gifts that God gave him from birth. And I really think that is the point of the story.

June: Wow, I love this. I love turning that story back onto Samson and his bad behaviour, rather than pinning it all on Delilah. Samson was the vehicle of his own downfall!

Anne: Absolutely. It's really not the story we typically think it is!

June: That brings us to our final villainess, Salome.

Anne: The star of one of my favourite weird New Testament stories! Many listeners may be thinking, I have no idea who that is, but I guarantee they do. They might not know her name, but they know her story!

June: Though as with so many biblical figures, I bet we tend not to get her story right. And, in fact, we're covering her here, so that means we probably don't.

Anne: Yep. And here to talk about her is the brilliant F. Scott Spencer, who generally goes by Scott.

Scott: I'm F. Scott Spencer, I have been a professor of religion at Wingate University in North Carolina and at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, for a total of 30 years or so, in an academic career.

Anne: For this story, we get to spend some time with the Herod family, which is frankly a confusing and soap opera-like establishment. So Herod the Great is the one who appears in the Nativity story, but the Herod we're dealing with in the Salome story is his son, Herod Antipas. Herod Antipas married his brother's ex-wife, Herodias, and Salome is her daughter, which makes her Herod's stepdaughter. Salome appears in both Mark and Matthew, but Scott's going to focus on her narrative in Mark.

Scott: And the basic story is a very famous one, and it's very odd for the Gospels, and it really stands out as this grisly tale of beheading.

John the Baptist, who was the one who sort of set the way for Jesus, has been imprisoned because he criticized this marriage between Herod Antipas, who took his brother's wife while his brother was still alive. There was a tradition called Levirate marriage, where you could take your - in fact, you should take your brother's wife if she became a widow and didn't have children. That's not the case here. John pretty much just calls this adultery, and rails against this king. He's not really a king, he's actually a tetrarch, which means he has a quarter kingdom. So he's kind of a mini little king, but he thinks pretty highly of himself, and he's the power at this time.

But John's in prison. Herod kind of likes him and wants to listen to him, but he can't deal with this criticism, and John's also very popular with the people, and so all of this is very dicey politically.

Well, it's birthday time for Herod, there's a big birthday bash, and as a king - or king wannabe - he throws a big party for all his cronies, and the elite of the area, his staff, and his officers, and such. And it comes time for some entertainment, as would happen at such parties. And so Salome, or this daughter, who's called a *korasion*, which is a little girl, or a little daughter, and we have no idea what age, but there is a little bit of a stress on a little girl. So that might change some of our popular imagination.

But she comes and dances, she does a dance. My daughter went through ballet all her life. I've attended more dance recitals than I can count. And all it says is that this little girl pleased Herod. Now all kinds of stuff has been read into that. What kind of dance was it? How pleased was he? Is there an erotic dimension? And all of that is certainly possible and could fit the cultural time. But all we know is that Herod was pleased with his little daughter, his little step-daughter's dance, whatever it was, but then he gets a little carried away, saying, "This is so wonderful, I'll give you anything you want, Honey," I'm elaborating a little bit, but up to half the kingdom - that is in the story.

Anne: So Salome runs to her mother, Herodias, to find out what she should ask for. And remember, John the Baptist has been criticizing Herodias' marriage, which is a genuine threat to her. So Herodias seizes the opportunity and has Salome ask for John's beheading.

Scott: So Salome comes back in and says, "Daddy," (if she does say that), "This is what we want. This is what me and Mommy want." Herod, according to the story, is, he's just - the term is, and I can say more about this later, he's "deeply grieved." It's like, oh, I mean, you know, he doesn't like John the Baptist's criticism, but he's a little afraid of John as a spiritual guy, and maybe, you know, he's got some spiritual power, and we don't want to cross that, and the people like him, and this was not at all what Herod planned. But - and I think this is really key in the story, it's not emphasized much in later traditions - Herod, because his word is on the line, he's made this vow, this oath, however rash it is, before his cronies, an honour thing is on the line. It's a big power thing, and he cannot afford to lose face.

So, grieving though he is, and I think Mark in particular is really - this is a lot of irony and a lot of, "yeah, he's really torn up about this." But I still think it's a dicey situation. And it says he sends one of his henchmen saying, yeah, go bring me John's head on a platter. And here it comes in. John is beheaded. And then it becomes this really sort of grisly scene, although Mark doesn't elaborate on it, doesn't really need to be elaborated on, although there is so much art work on this, if you just want to see a whole - all the gory details.

Anne: And while this story can be interpreted in different ways, Scott says there's an underlying message of: "Look at what the women will do if you give them half a chance. They all want your head."

June: Ugh, and can we just comment on how over the top the Herodian dynasty is? I mean, serving John the Baptist's head on a platter in the middle of a banquet is like Game of Thrones level unhinged. There's a real strain of insecurity running through that family.

Anne: Definitely. And some of it was justified. The family had come into power after the messy dissolution of the last dynasty to rule an independent Judea. And they, the Herod's, whose family were fairly new converts to Judaism, were propped up by the Roman Empire. So they weren't super popular with the people they were ruling over. And by this point, Rome wasn't thrilled with them either. And then Salome, who is likely this little girl, gets caught in the crossfire of all these politics.

June: And we can't forget about John the Baptist in that political equation.

Anne: Absolutely! He rightly gets overshadowed by Jesus, but I've always found him to be a really interesting figure. Scott calls him a wilderness prophet. And in fact, he says it wouldn't be wrong to call John an apocalyptic prophet, because he's predicting this huge regime change. This messiah who's going to come and bring about God's true kingdom. And of course, in the meantime, John's hanging out around the Jordan River baptizing people.

June: Right. Including, famously, Jesus himself. And after that big baptism scene, the next time we hear about John, it's when he's beheaded.

Anne: And again, Herod had him arrested because John's been saying that his marriage is illicit. And as Scott points out, from the perspective of Herod's wife Herodias, John could be a real liability.

Scott On mamma's part, if I may, I mean she is in a difficult political situation, because of this denunciation of the marriage. And if push comes to shove, you know, if Antipas had taken her from his brother's wife, if Antipas thought she was too hot a political liability, he just dumps her. That's kind of the way things work. And she and her daughter are out, So she, in a sense, is protecting her interests.

And I'm not for any kind of capital punishment, least of all beheading in this way, so there's no justifying, but still, seeing the political dynamics that involved the women as victims, as much as, you know - oh well, you know, Herodias is playing her power card. Well, she's doing what she can in her limited situation.

June: Now I know that Scott said earlier that John the Baptist's death scene is a very odd story in the context of the Gospels, but did he give you any sense of why it gets included?

Anne: Yeah, he has a few ideas. One of them is that John is really Jesus' forerunner, and his gruesome death at the hands of the state foretells that Jesus will also die gruesomely at the hands of the state. Another is the fact that John's disciples actually retrieve his body and place it in a tomb, which can be seen as a direct contrast to the behaviour of Jesus' disciples at his death. They hightail it out of there before the crucifixion even happens. But there's also a third level of symbolism, which is that John's head is presented on a platter, like food, and then at the Last Supper, Jesus talks about giving his own body as food to his followers.

June: Oh, well that is a really good connection. It's almost like Mark is trying to be clever in this really dark way.

Anne: Yeah. And Scott reads some further irony into Mark's choice of words about Herod's reaction to John's death.

Scott: Mark says that Herod was *perilypos*, the Greek word that means he was deeply grieved, when he heard this request. It's like, "Oh, no." He, though, has to follow through, and the narrative says, and it's only one verse, but it's important: because of his guests. He would look bad, he would lose face, and we can't have that, however badly he feels. So Herod's caught in this great crisis of conscience.

"Come on," I can hear Mark say. "Do any of you really believe he's deeply grieving?" And the reason I have, I think, some support for that - other than that's the way I want to read it - the only other usage of this *perilypos*, this "deeply grieved" phrase, comes with Jesus later in the garden of Gethsemane, where he is deeply grieved about his impending death, and prays, "Father, If there's any way," - there's other emotional words used, He is agitated - "If there's any way to let this cup pass from me."

Jesus himself struggles, and he's deeply grieved with losing his life, which he goes ahead and submits to, later, for the sake of, as Mark - this is Mark language - as a ransom for others. There's a lot of theologizing going on there.

But I think Mark deliberately sets up this incredible juxtaposition between Herod, who is playing this grief game, and not giving up any of his standing, surely not giving up his life, willing to sacrifice somebody else's life - namely, John the Baptist, who was in fact the forerunner of Jesus. So, deeply grieved, give me a break.

Jesus, on the other hand, really struggles - I don't want to minimize that - but works through that for the sake of giving himself, and it's meant to make us think and be uncomfortable, and to sort of to say, look, you've got this political, Herodian, Pilate, Greco-Roman regime, and then you've got this weird wilderness prophet John, and this itinerant Jesus, who wanders around and doesn't have a penny to his name, doesn't have a place to lay his head, but is still the very messiah of God. Where is the real power? Where is the real life? How do you resist? How do you comply?

June: There really is so much more to this story than the simple, inaccurate narrative that Salome, this child, seduced and tricked Herod into killing John the Baptist.

Anne: Yeah. Exactly.

June: Okay, so in this episode, we've had these three powerful figures who are typically seen through this very sexualized lens, which, that's a classic move used to disempower women. But when you take a closer look, sex is the least interesting thing happening in their stories if it even shows up at all.

Anne: Right? I'm always amazed by people who can take these stories that feel so familiar and then crack them open in a completely new way. That helps us better understand these women as people instead of just tropes.

Before we go, just a quick note on sources. Jezebel's story appears in Amy Kalmanofsky's book *Gender Play and the Hebrew Bible*, and F. Scott Spencer wrote about Salome in his book *Dancing Girls, Loose Ladies, and Women of the Cloth*. You can find Rivka Gheist's essays and poems in the *Odyssey Monthly*. For a full list of their incredible work, listeners can visit Broadview.org/podcasts.

June: This was *And Also Some Women*. It was hosted by me, June Joplin.

Anne: Research and reporting by me, Anne Thériault.

June: With script editing by Kristy Woudstra and sound production by Michael Brown and Messenger Bag Media. Jocelyn Bell is our executive producer.

Anne: It's a project of Broadview magazine, North America's oldest, continuously published magazine.

June: *And Also Some Women* was made possible by a generous gift from Reverend John Perigoe and Reverend Dr. Lillian Perigoe. Lillian Perrigo devoted much of her vocation to advancing feminist theology, and this podcast is inspired by her life's work. And we want to

encourage you, friends, to subscribe and leave a positive review for and also some women because that will help more people discover and listening to this wonderful podcast.

Anne: Thanks for listening.