

Episode 3: Virgin Mary

June: Welcome to Episode 3 of And Also Some Women, a podcast from Broadview Magazine that aims to take a fresh look at some of the most famous and infamous women from the Bible. I'm your host, Junia Joplin.

Anne: And I'm Anne Thériault. Thanks for joining us. In this episode we're gonna do our best to tackle one of the Bible's biggest celebrities

June: The most venerated saint, wife, and mother in the whole New Testament, the Virgin Mary herself.

Anne: She's one of my all-time favourites! One of the oldest drawings I have from when I was a kid is a picture of the Nativity, and Mary is this huge central figure in the drawing, and then Joseph and Jesus are kind of off to the side, and that was clearly my root as a Virgin Mary fan girl.

June: Well, I grew up Baptist down in the American South and we downplayed or even ignored Mary, but in the last couple years I've come to really treasure her. Well, Anne, I hear that you've brought us some amazing guests this week.

Anne: Absolutely. Three experts who are going to share some fascinating insights about Mary, including how her politics may have shaped Jesus' ministry and how Church Fathers have used her image to enforce patriarchal ideas. I'll let our experts introduce themselves.

AJ: 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 30 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.

Dorothy: I'm Dorothy Lee, I'm an Anglican priest in the Church in Australia, the Anglican Church in Australia, and I'm professor of New Testament. My speciality is in the Gospel of John, although I'm interested in all the Gospels and in all the New Testament, I have a particular interest in women's issues and spirituality, as well.

Barbara: I'm Sister Barbara Reid, I'm a Dominican sister of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and I am the president of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, where I've been on the faculty since 1988, teaching New Testament studies.

June: What a lineup! Well, the Virgin Mary feels like such a towering figure, especially in Catholicism. So Anne, where do we even start?

Anne: AJ, Dorothy, and Sister Barbara are going to walk us through where and how Mary appears in the Gospels, first in the Synoptic Gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which share many of the same stories - and finally in John, the Fourth Gospel, which is a bit of an outlier. So we're moving from the Annunciation, when Gabriel tells Mary that she's going to give birth to the Son of God, all the way up to Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit visits the apostles after the Resurrection.

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.

Dorothy: We have various incidents in the life of Jesus, including as a precocious adolescent. We have various incidents where she struggles to understand what's happening.

Barbara: She'll disappear from the rest of Luke's gospel until chapter eight in verse nineteen, when she and Jesus' siblings come looking for Jesus. And this is the episode where Jesus talks about who his true kindred are.

Dorothy: But then in John's gospel, we find her at the foot of the cross. She's not explicitly named in the synoptics - although there is a Mary there, we're not clear who she is - but she's mentioned then in the Gospel of John as being at the foot of the cross, and one of two main disciples who are there at the foot of the cross.

Barbara: It's really a way in which the fourth evangelist resolves that question about the relationship of the true kindred of Jesus, or the children of God, and it's both those who are bound to Jesus by blood ties, represented in his mother, and all those who have come to believe in him embodied symbolically in the beloved disciple, and they're entrusted to one another, and together they carry on the mission that Jesus birthed.

Dorothy: And then finally, the other reference to her - explicit reference to her - is in Luke, again, Luke, at Pentecost, where she's among the apostles, the Twelve Apostles, reconstituted, and the Holy Women, who - and Mary, the the Mother of the Lord. So, she's not mentioned very often, but I think in very significant locations.

June: It's interesting that there are so many lost years in Mary's life in the Gospels, and in Jesus' life for that matter. AJ mentions that Joseph was planning on divorcing Mary until he had a prophetic dream. That really underscores how precarious Mary's position was.

Anne: Yeah, and that parallel between that Joseph and the Joseph of the coat of many colours, who also has prophetic dreams, is really interesting.

June: Yeah, because both Josephs end up in Egypt. Genesis Joseph because he's been sold into slavery by his brothers, and the New Testament Joseph because their family is fleeing Herod's order to kill all the boys under the age of two.

Anne: AJ gave me some context for these parallels between the two Josephs. They're part of a broader effort by the Gospel writers to allude to the Old Testament as a way of making it clear that the life of Jesus is part of the same tradition.

She also pointed out that all these allusions kind of obscure the historical Mary, because it's not always easy to tell when the Gospel writers are saying "this thing actually happened in exactly this way," or when they're setting up these signposts pointing back to the Old Testament.

June: Right. Okay, so where exactly do we look to find a historical Mary?

Anne: Well, as you can imagine, AJ also has some ideas about that, particularly about Mary's role as a woman during the Second Temple period, which lasted from 516 BCE to 70 CE. Her understanding of this role is informed by some of the deuterocanonical books, which are Old Testament books that aren't included in the Protestant Bible.

AJ: 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. 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, she would have known the stories of the Maccabean martyrs.

Also, books in the Old Testament apocrypha, the deuterocanonical literature, 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 - 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.

June: So those stories about women giving up their lives because they're forbidden from practicing these elements of Judaism, those come from another book that's not included in most Protestant Bibles. That's the second book of Maccabees, right?

Anne: Yes, from the period when the Greeks were ruling Judea and were massively oppressive of the Jewish religion. An uprising called the Maccabean Revolt eventually established an independent Judea and is the source for the holiday Hanukkah. Anyway, what's important to note is that this independence was only established a little over a century before Mary would have been born, so this would have been very fresh history for her.

June: Okay, and now here she is living in a country that's once more occupied by an oppressive regime. And so maybe even as a young mother, she's already having seditious thoughts about the Herods and about the Romans, and even if she's not going to act on them, she's going to pass them on to her son.

Anne: Speaking of Herod, he's actually sort of connected to all those New Testament Marys that we talked about in the Mary Magdalene episode.

June: Right! Historians estimate that something like one out of four women living in Judea and Galilee and the surrounding region at the time would have been named Mary.

Anne: Here's AJ explaining how the name's enormous popularity might have something to do with King Herod, as well as the prophet Miriam, who we'll talk about in our next episode.

AJ: King Herod had at least 10 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, and her name was Mary, Mariamne. 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 it's - the name is doing double duty, it's 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: The interesting thing here about AJ saying that Jewish mothers who named their daughters Mary might have been saying, among other things, “my daughter can be a prophet like Miriam,” is that both of our other guests actually refer to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a prophet

June: Oh. Okay, so, in what sense do they see her as a prophet?

Anne: She’s someone who receives communication directly from God and foretells the future, like with the Magnificat, which we’ll get to shortly. She’s also prophetic in the Wedding at Cana.

June: That’s right, Mary is the one who gets Jesus to turn the water into wine. In fact, she kind of puts him into a position where he can’t say no, and Jesus is not too thrilled about that! He has this whole bit where he says, “Woman, why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come!

Anne: But Mary knows that his hour actually has come. And she turns out to be right - when Jesus turns the water into wine, that’s the moment when people really start to believe in him.

June: Yeah. So it’s actually Mary who gives Jesus the nudge that sets everything into motion.

Anne: Exactly! And while all of our guests agree that Mary is a prophet, Dorothy Lee goes one step further and calls her a priestly figure, particularly with regards to a title given to her by an early council of Christian bishops.

Dorothy: I’m not trying to claim that Mary’s a priest. She’s not, and women weren’t in the Old Testament, but she’s priestly in the sense that she gives birth, she bears Christ, so the Council of Ephesus declared her to be the God Bearer, which is translated as Mother of God, which is maybe not the best translation into English. But God Bearer is exactly what the Greek says. So she bears God in her body, and not just as a physical act, but as a spiritual act, as well. Her “yes” in Luke, at the Annunciation, is her “yes” to God dwelling within her. And so in that sense she does what the role of a priest does, or indeed of the priesthood of all believers, either way, and that is to bear God within ourselves. She is given that role, and therefore she is a model for the church, and she stands for the Church in that sense that we bear God within us, and birth God, as it were, to others.

June: So we’ve got a Mary who’s named for these two strong symbols of independence. We’ve got a Mary who’s a prophet who kind of kickstarts Jesus’s ministry. And we’ve got a Mary who’s a priestly figure who bears God within her and births God to others.

Anne: And the case for all those things becomes even stronger when we consider the Magnificat ...

June: ...which is the hymn that Mary sings for her cousin Elizabeth shortly after the angel Gabriel visits Mary. It’s the one that begins with, “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

Anne: Right, and this is some of the strongest evidence that we have of Mary being a prophet, because she's foretelling all of these great things that God is about to do. But when Sister Barbara Reed looks at the Magnificat, she also sees a subversive message against the Roman Empire.

Barbara: As we look at what's in the hymn, one of the things that doesn't sound subversive to us, with all the familiarity that we have with the hymn, is just the titles that she gives God, for instance. So, she calls God "Lord Saviour," "Mighty One," as she is singing about all that God has done to rescue God's people, and while that language does not sound subversive to us, that's standard God language for us, but in Jesus's day, Mary's day, anybody would have recognized those are the same titles that the emperor loves for himself, to appropriate to himself. So saviour - for instance, there are a number of inscriptions that we have where the emperor is called Saviour of the Universe - well, you'll notice that in Luke's gospel, in particular, there are more references to Jesus as saviour and God as saviour than in any of the other New Testament writings, and I think it's a deliberate way to say under your breath, "This is going contrary to, it's contradicting the Imperial claims." So if the emperor thinks you're the Saviour of the Universe - oh no, you're not! There's only one and it isn't you.

Anne: Sister Barbara also says that when Mary sings about God lifting up the humiliated, the Greek word she uses is *tapeinos*, which is often translated as having humility. But Sister Barbara believes this should be humiliated. So Mary is saying God will do the opposite of what the Imperial forces are doing, whose power partly comes from keeping the humiliated in their place. But an even more interesting point that she made was about the other ways the word *tapeinos* is used in Scripture.

Barbara: An even more powerful nuance that you can see underneath this is that the verb *tapeinoo* is used a number of times, at least six or seven times in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, to talk about sexual humiliation of a woman who has been raped, and so in - so one particular nuance in Mary's Magnificat can be her voicing the dream, the hope that when God's reign is fulfilled, no one need worry about being overpowered and sexually humiliated by another. And it was well known that that was a weapon of war then and now, and so an end to that. She sings, too, about peacefulness.

June: Wow, that's beautiful! And of course the Septuagint would have been the version of the Hebrew scriptures that the gospel writers would have most familiar with, since they spoke and wrote in Greek.

Anne: You know, we talk a lot about stuff that gets lost in translation, and the nuance of *tapeinos* really seems like one of those things.

Barbara: And so this is not a nice lullaby that Mary is singing, This is a powerful hymn, that is - both exalts God's saving deeds in the past, but also counts on God to continue to save, to liberate, in the future, and ways that overturn unjust systems, not just in individual acts of mercy and kindness, but ways that get at the root causes of injustice and overturn those.

And then in the gospel, this is Mary singing the Magnificat, Luke sets that in the visitation scene, when Mary is visiting her kinswoman, Elizabeth. And so it's envisioned as being in a domestic setting, which is the proper place for women of her day, most women of her day.

That, you know, she doesn't go out into the streets singing and shouting this message. But her son will. He will, in chapter four, His first public appearance at the synagogue in Nazareth, in Luke 4:18, He will use the words of the prophet Isaiah to announce himself and announce His mission as a liberating mission with the same themes, the same kinds of things that Mary is singing about in the Magnificat. And I like to think, well, where do you think He got it? You know, with a mother who sings like this while she's putting you to sleep. Now, let me backtrack on that, this is not a lullaby, this is a militant song. And so, and so He imbibes that, and it will be He that then takes it public in the rest of the gospel, and then the disciples that He forms, that will continue that on.

June: I love that there's this theme here of Jesus picking up all these radical ideas from his mother. It's something that might not feel explicit until you start looking at the Magnificat. Even without reading it as anti-Roman, the song is still expressing a lot of stuff that Jesus later preaches about, but I love that extra layer of reading it as an anti-imperialist hymn.

Anne: And that obviously ties into what AJ was saying about Mary being Jesus' first teacher. We know so little about Mary, really.

June: Yeah, definitely. So in Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox churches, a lot of the beliefs surrounding Mary are from traditions that developed after the events described in the Bible and came from Gospels that weren't even included in the New Testament.

Anne: For Catholics, a big one is the Gospel of James, a second century non-canonical book that describes Mary's childhood and education and is also the earliest source we have for the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity.

June: Which is the belief that Mary is a virgin not just before Jesus' birth, but also for the rest of her life.

Anne: Yes. And Dorothy Lee takes issue with this as something that she believes makes Mary more palatable to men.

Dorothy: I think Mary has been used as a tool of patriarchy, and it saddens me to say that, because here we have, you know, the first woman in the New Testament who has first place alongside, I might say, Mary Magdalene, but both of those women are first. And yet one of them - both of them, in different ways - have been, their wings have been cut off.

In the Virgin Mary, it's the notion of her perpetual virginity. Because she's not sexually active. She's not a threat to men. A sexually active Mary, who has a good relationship with her husband, good enough to produce a whole heap of kids, and I have no doubt in my mind that they are full siblings of Mary and Joseph, and I would argue that against those who claim the perpetual virginity of Mary.

I think she's safe. She's safe. She's a safe female. She's no threat and therefore it's taking the whole feminine world, the world of women, and putting it into a little box. And therefore she's used to keep women at a distance.

June: And as with so many things about Mary, it's tricky because there's nothing in Scripture that supports the idea of perpetual virginity, and there are even some things that contradict it like the mentions of Jesus' siblings.

Anne: Yes, and for Dorothy, the doctrine of perpetual virginity is a symptom of a larger problem in Christianity, namely a real discomfort with sex.

Dorothy: I think what happens in the early Church is that there comes a kind of suspicion of sexuality, and in the Western church it leads to celibacy eventually being enforced for priesthood, because sexuality is seen as something that's dangerous and threatening, and that goes alongside women being seen as threatening as well.

I mean, sexuality in the Old Testament is absolutely a gift of God. Doesn't mean it doesn't have its dangers, or can't be abused, it can and does. But it's - if you look at, read something like the Song of the Song of Solomon, it's very - it's erotic. And even the image of marriage - I know that there might be problems around that, but the marriage between God and Israel is talking about sexual intimacy and love. And I think Scripture is entirely positive that this is one of God's wonderful - slightly crazy and difficult to handle, it's the wild card, you know, the Joker in the pack - but it's an absolutely wonderful gift, and so much so that the final banquet of the end time is described as marriage.

June: Well, there's definitely a lot of sexy stuff in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, and I agree with the reading that some of these beliefs and traditions that have grown up around Mary seem to serve men much more than they serve God.

Anne: Yes, and while Sister Barbara wouldn't agree with the idea of dismantling the doctrine of perpetual virginity - obviously not, it's a core tenet of Roman Catholic Mariology - she does agree that the idea of a shy, retiring Mary has long been used by men to keep women in their perceived place.

Barbara: I see her as a strong woman with a sense of self-direction, a model theologian, one who understands the systems that - and analyzes what is keeping poor people poor, and hungry people hungry, and dispossessed people downtrodden, and what is needed in order for them to take their rightful place. And so, you know, how the meek and mild image of Mary has been used over centuries, is many times it has been used to keep other women in our society in positions of subservience and obedience to men. And so an image of Mary as a strong woman who is able to communicate directly with God and interpret what God is doing for her people, and be that kind of conduit that a prophet is, that opens up a very different understanding of Mary, and a very different role model not just for women Christians, but for men as well.

June: I love that idea of Mary being a model for men, for women, and really for all genders.

Anne: Yeah, exactly. Finally, I want to finish with something AJ said that has really stuck with me. We've spent this episode hearing about how Mary has been reduced over time to being nothing but this meek virgin child-bearer, and how wrong that is. So when Christian feminists try to claim Jesus as the answer to gender equality, it's like they're further sidelining Mary, and also feeding into some antisemitic tropes.

AJ: 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 sixties and early seventies, when women in Christianity, Protestant, Catholic, and to a lesser extent but still there, Eastern Orthodoxy, were wondering, gee, 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 12 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.

So if you can't find Jesus being proactive, the easiest thing to do as 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 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 - they picked out some really, really negative things that a few rabbis said about women, retrojected all that stuff into the first century, even if it's 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.

June: Ugh, seriously. For listeners who aren't familiar with the Talmud, it's this multi-volume series of legal arguments and debate interpreting the Torah, the first couple of books of the Hebrew Bible, into rabbinic law. It's enormous and it's varied.

Anne: Yeah, so it's very disingenuous to take the most negative stuff about women from the Talmud, written three or four hundred years after Jesus was alive, and say, see? Women were so loathed and oppressed in first century Judea and Galilee that any interaction Jesus has with them proves that he's a feminist. And while AJ points out that this time and place was definitely patriarchal, we do know from scripture that women owned their own homes, like Martha, and had access to their own funds, like the women bankrolling Jesus' travels.

June: Absolutely. And it's entirely possible that Jesus was radical about women and the gospel writers just didn't record it. But then let's focus on finding actual historical evidence to

support that, rather than putting first century Judaism in such a poor light, and, as you point out, diminishing the roles of women like Mary.

Anne: Well, thank you for coming down this Virgin Mary rabbit hole with me. For someone who doesn't get all that much airtime in scripture, I feel like this discussion really took us to a lot of places!

June: Of course! Well, from Mary as Jesus' first radical teacher, to Mary as a prophet, to the way that church fathers later softened her image and used her to keep women in line, I'd say that we've covered a lot.

Anne: Before we end, just a quick note on some sources - I relied heavily on AJ's book *the Misunderstood Jew*, which is published under her full name, Amy-Jill Levine, and on Sister Barbara Reid's book *Wisdom's Feast*, which is a feminist interpretation of Scripture. I also relied on an article Dorothy Lee wrote for the online outlet, *The Conversation*. You can find links to their work on Broadview's website at Broadview.org/podcasts

June: You can find links to their work on Broadview's website at broadview.org slash podcasts. Well, friends, that concludes our third episode of *And Also Some Women*. It's a project by Broadview, North America's oldest continuously published magazine, and I'm your host, Junia Joplin.

Anne: This episode was researched and written by me, Anne Thériault. With script editing by Kristy Woudstra and sound production by Michael Brown and Messenger Bag Media. Jocelyn Bell is our executive producer.

June: *And Also Some Women* was made possible by a generous gift from Rev. John Perigoe and Rev. Dr. Lillian Perigoe. Lillian Perigoe devoted much of her vocation to advancing feminist theology, and this podcast is inspired by her life's work. We encourage you to subscribe and leave us a positive review if you can because that will help others discover and listen to this wonderful podcast.

Anne: Thanks for listening!