

“And Also Some Women” Podcast Transcript

EPISODE 4: OLD TESTAMENT HEAVY HITTERS

June: This is And Also Some Women, a podcast from Broadview Magazine, and I'm your host, June Joplin, and joining me is our researcher and writer, the ever-luminous Anne Theriault.

Anne: Thank you! That's me! And you're looking pretty luminous yourself.

June: Thank you, Anne. Well, welcome, friends, to our fourth episode. Over the last three, we've explored and reevaluated the stories of Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary as well as three notorious biblical villainesses, Jezebel, Delilah, and Salome.

Anne: This week we've got another tripleheader, with three powerful Old Testament women who have largely been overlooked by Christianity: Miriam, Deborah, and Esther.

June: And you know, Anne, it's incredible that these women don't get more attention when you consider their stories read like action movie plots - daring escapes and murders and sabotage and stuff like that. And so much more!

Anne: And so much more! I know! First up is Miriam, who many of you may know as Moses's sister. She was also a prophet in her own right and pivotal in the Exodus from Egypt. I'll let our guest take it from here.

Susan: Hi, I'm Susan Ackerman, I'm a professor at Dartmouth College. At Dartmouth, my primary appointment is in the religion department, but I'm also a professor of women's, gender, and sexuality studies.

Susan: Miriam first appears in the Exodus narrative in Exodus 2. And her role in that story in Exodus chapter 2 is a very famous one. Baby Moses was supposed to be killed at birth, as were all Hebrew male children, because they were perceived by the Egyptian Pharaoh to be a threat.

Moses's mother hides Moses for as long as she can after birth so that he won't be killed but, like any baby, he becomes a little bit more difficult to hide once the months go on. And so then she places him in a basket and puts him in the Nile River, or in the marshes alongside the Nile, hoping that somehow he'll be delivered from his fate otherwise of death. And indeed he is found by the Pharaoh's daughter.

As all of this is going on, Moses's sister - and again one would say that is Miriam - is watching to see what happens. And when she sees the Pharaoh's daughter discover the

baby in a basket alongside the Nile, and the Pharaoh's daughter decides to adopt the baby and rear the baby, the sister approaches her and asks her if she needs a wet nurse. And in one of the great ironies of the story, the wet nurse becomes Moses's birth mother.

Miriam then disappears from the story and shows up again at the end of Exodus 15. By that point in the story, Moses has grown to an adult and has managed to liberate the Hebrews, or the Israelites, who are slaves in Egypt, from their Egyptian captivity, and bring them out of Egypt to the Red Sea or the Reed Sea, depending on what translation you're using.

By that point, the Egyptian Pharaoh has come to regret his decision to let the Israelites leave Egypt, and so has pursued after them, and there is this climactic confrontation at this sea. I think most people probably know it best from the Cecil B. DeMille movie version of it, where Moses holds up his staff and the sea splits dramatically in two so that the Israelites can cross on dry land. After they cross, the Egyptians pursue, but Moses lowers his staff, the sea comes back over them, and covers them, and they are drowned.

Anne: I just want to jump in and say that I actually know this scene thanks to the 1998 DreamWorks film *The Prince of Egypt*, a movie that lightly traumatized my youngest sister.

June: And in that, Miriam is voiced by Sandra Bullock!

Anne: Top-tier cast, to be honest.

June: So after the parting of the Red Sea is Miriam's big moment, and this is one of my favourite scenes in all of scripture, because it's when Miriam gets to lead the women in a song and dance of celebration because, apparently, she's remembered to bring her tambourine when they escaped from Egypt, which I love.

Anne: Yes, it's one of Susan's favourites too. And as she points out, it's in this brief passage, just two verses of Exodus 15, when Miriam is called a prophet. And then she disappears from the narrative again for quite a while.

Susan: She shows up in the book of Numbers with her brother Aaron, where she and Aaron asked jointly of Moses that, should they not also be serving, as does Moses, as an intermediary between God and the Israelite people? Does not God also speak through them?

God responds, I would say kind of ambiguously, God doesn't deny that God might speak through Aaron and through Miriam, but God says Moses is special, that with Moses God speaks mouth to mouth is the literal Hebrew, or face to face. And then God, who has decided that Miriam and Aaron have been a little presumptuous in raising this question of getting to speak to God in the same way Moses does, God decides that punishment is necessary, although only Miriam is punished. Her skin is turned as white as snow, so some kind of skin disease, commonly translated as leprosy.

She is expelled from the camp where the people are encamped and remains outside the camp until Aaron intercedes on her behalf. Her leprosy is healed, and she's allowed to come back into the camp. And then she disappears again, she appears only again in Numbers

chapter 20, and she appears there in precisely one verse, to die. That's the end of Miriam's story.

June: And really, it's not even an entire verse. Miriam gets one sentence, and it goes, "There Miriam died and was buried."

Anne: Poor Miriam, she deserved better. Aaron gets eight whole verses about his death, and we're told that the community mourned him for thirty days.

June: And there's no explanation given in scripture for why Miriam was punished but not Aaron, or why Miriam's death gets such a brief mention. But it's hard not to wonder if Miriam being a woman has something to do with it.

Anne: It really feels like Miriam gets the short end of the stick, especially when you consider that being a prophetess made her part of a pretty elite group.

June: Right, because there are only like five women in the Old Testament who get referred to as prophets.

Anne: Yeah, and of those, Susan says she would actually discount Isaiah's wife because she probably only gets the title of prophetess from being married to a prophet. So that takes us down to four.

June: That's four women compared to dozens of named male prophets.

Anne: So, Susan explained a theory to me about what might have allowed these select women to become prophets in patriarchal circumstances. So during times like war, when social hierarchies break down and traditional power structures disintegrate, women actually have a unique opportunity to exercise their own power in the public sphere. Susan gave me a really interesting example of this from recent history.

Susan: In the United States, we might think during World War Two of what is called the Rosie the Riveter phenomenon. The society was in a point of turmoil because of the war, and many, many of the men of our society had gone off, and were in Europe fighting. So who is going to be in the factories building the aircraft or the tanks or whatever the weapons that are needed to wage this enormous war effort? Women took on a lot of positions in that economic niche, because the men were absent

June: The Rosie the Riveter phenomenon. I love that. And I love the idea of Rosie being used to explain social dynamics in the Old Testament.

Anne: And while Susan thinks this theory - which she stressed wasn't her own - explains how other women in the Old Testament were able to become prophets, she thinks there's an even better explanation for Miriam. For that, she draws on some fascinating work by a man named Arnold van Gennep.

Susan: So, Van Gennep was a French ethnographer who was active at the beginning of the 20th century, and his most famous book Rites de Passage, or Rites Of Passage, was

published in 1909. And in that book Van Gennep suggested most prominently that rituals, and especially rituals that move or pass individuals from one stage of life to another, Van Gennep suggested those rituals all had a common pattern, and that pattern - it was a three part pattern - very simply that you are separated from your old stage or status in life - we might think of this, let's say, in a marriage ritual, when, especially the bride is kept in a room separate from all the other wedding guests and from the groom until the ritual proper begins - at which point the ritual participant moves into what Van Gennep called a liminal phase, where you are famously described as betwixt and between your old status.

That woman, as she walks up the aisle isn't really single anymore, she's separated from that, she's left that behind, but until some officiant says "I now pronounce you man and wife," she's not married. She's kind of betwixt and between these two places of single and married until that final moment, that moment that Van Gennep called re-incorporation, where someone says, "I now pronounce you man and wife," and she's re-incorporated back into an identity, but now a new identity, with a new status. She's no longer a single woman, she's married.

Van Gennep also suggested that this pattern could apply to other kinds of events, such as journeys - you separate from, from where you start, you journey around to get to where you're going to, but you're not there yet - you're betwixt and between Place A and Place B, and then you get to place B.

June: That's exactly like the Exodus story

Anne: Exactly.

Susan: The Israelites start in Egypt, they journey around, according to the Biblical tradition, for 40 years. So they're betwixt and between Egypt and the Promised Land, or the land of Israel, to which they're headed. They're kind of betwixt and between identities - they're no longer slaves in Egypt, but they're not yet a political entity who has - who is living in the land of Israel. They're in this middle phase, what Van Gennep called this liminal phase, that comes from the latin word *limen*, which means threshold.

And what I've at least tried to suggest is that in those liminal times, things can happen for women, and for men, that don't happen in ordinary life. And they, in a certain sense, have no structure that's defining them. And so I think that's what happens for Miriam in the Exodus story: she's able to break out of the structures that constrain women in ancient traditions and be a prophet, because she's in this betwixt and between time and place and once that betwixt and between time and place ends, she dies.

June: That's so interesting. Miriam is obviously a fascinating character with a strong personality - not only does she take leadership in an uncertain time, but she's also willing to argue with God, which is a proud tradition in the Hebrew scriptures. It's really too bad she tends to be overshadowed by her brothers in the Christian approach to the Exodus story.

Anne: Totally! And another female leader who has mostly been sidelined in Christianity is Deborah, an Old Testament prophet, judge, and military commander. Her story is one of my favourites and it's wild to me how underappreciated she seems to be.

June: It's one of my favourites, too and I can't wait because our next expert is my friend Austen!

Austen: My name is Austen Hartke, I am the author of a book called Transforming: The Bible And The Lives Of Transgender Christians that just had a new second edition come out, which I'm very excited about. I'm also the executive director of an organization called Transmission Ministry Collective that supports transgender and gender expansive Christians with online support groups and workshops and all kinds of programming. I'm a big Bible nerd and I love talking about stories like this.

Austen: The story of Deborah starts out with a description of who Deborah is, and the one sentence description we have at the very beginning of the story of who Deborah is, is fascinating because it really emphasizes her gender.

So we get this - we're told that she is a prophet woman. We are told that she is a Lapidoth woman. But we're told that she is this woman who is judging in Israel - so she's not called a judge, which is what you would expect in the Book of Judges, but she - we're told that she is judging in Israel, so she's given sort of the action. And she is judging Israel in the time of an oppressive cultural leader in the nearby area. Right, so the Hebrews are being oppressed at this time. And so she calls upon this person named Barak. And she says, "Barak, we are called by God to free the Israelites from this oppressive leadership."

Barak is like, "I'm not going unless you come with me" - which, there's been a lot of discussion about why Barak says that. Like, is Barak being cowardly, or - what's going on? In the Septuagint, which is the Greek version of the text, they actually add a second little bit to Barak's speech, where Barak says, "I won't go unless you come with me, because how will I know when God says to, like, go take our army." So in the ancient Greek version of this story, they kind of give Barak this out of, like, Deborah's the prophet, so she's going to know when God says to attack, and so that's why they need Deborah to be there.

But in reality what Deborah says is - when Barak says, "I won't go unless you come with me," Deborah says, "Well, then God will deliver the general Sisera into the hand of a woman."

June: And Sisera, he was the general of the Canaanite army, and they were the ones oppressing the Israelites, right?

Anne: Yeah, exactly! And there's this implication that God would have let Barak have the victory against Sisera, but since he doesn't immediately obey, and insists on Deborah coming with him, instead God delivers the victory to a woman

Austen: And so they go to fight this battle against this general called Sisera, and together they rout Sisera's army, and totally win the day. And at the end of it, this general Sisera is running away from the battle, and as he runs away from the battle, he meets this woman named Jael.

And Jael says, "Here, Sisera, come into this tent. I will hide you." And Sisera is like, "Oh, great, this is perfect. This is my escape route." So he goes into this tent, and Jael kind of, like, comforts him and makes him feel very safe and cozy. And then as soon as he falls asleep, she drives a tent peg through his head and kills him. And so she ends up being the person who kills the general.

So it's the story of these two women, Deborah and Jael, essentially winning this war.

June: Jael and the tent peg. It's such a short narrative - this whole story gets told in just one chapter - but it's full of action.

Anne: Yeah, even on the surface level, there's a lot going on here. A prophecy, really a couple of prophecies, a big battle, a woman driving a tent peg through a man's head. And, as Austen is about to explain, this is really an iceberg situation where the stuff that's explicitly said is dwarfed by the subtext.

Austen: The interesting thing about that first sentence, where Deborah is described, is that, number one, she's the only woman that's talked about as a person judging Israel, and so that, you know, makes her interesting just in that fact.

But what it means to be a judge in Israel is part of why the language is very careful about how it refers to Deborah. Because to be a judge in Israel meant to be a leader, and it also meant to be a leader in the context of, like, military action. And so, when the text calls Deborah and says that she is judging in Israel - rather than saying she was a judge of Israel - they're trying to skirt around this issue of, like, a woman as a military leader. Like. Is that an okay thing to call her? So it's - I really think this story of Deborah and Jael is a story about gender loopholes.

June: "Gender loopholes" - I love that idea.

Anne: Me too! And, as Austen points out, if the language used to describe Deborah is very careful about reminding us that she's a woman, the language used when it comes to Jael is interesting in a whole different way.

Austen: Jael's name, there would typically be a different version of that name to make it more distinctly feminine. So it's interesting that it's not. It's like, a more masculine-leaning, gender neutral name, is kind of how we would read it. Oh my gosh. I could talk forever about what's going on with Jael, and, like, the way that she is gendered.

There's a moment when Sisera comes to the tent and says, "Hey, Jael, hide me here." And then he says, "Stand at the door and wait in case anybody comes in." And when Sisera says, "Stand at the door," he actually uses the masculine version of that command, "stand." Which is really weird, like, we don't know why that happens and some translators have tried to kind of make that make sense by saying, like, "Oh my gosh, he was just so exhausted he couldn't even remember how to speak," but that feels like a real cop out, I think.

June: I think a lot of us Christians tend to fall in this trap of talking about biblical manhood and womanhood as if they're these well-defined things, but with stories like this, it's obvious

that being a woman in the Old Testament can mean a lot of different things. Maybe that's why Deborah and Jael have been so ignored by leaders of the Church. They just don't know what to do with people that don't fit into those strict gender roles.

Anne: Austen brings up a really interesting point about how the idea of womanhood in this story is pretty flexible, but masculinity is still seen in a very stereotypical way.

Austen: There's an article called "Gendering Violence and Violating Gender in Judges 4 and 5" by Susan Haddocks, and she talks about how one of the things that's going on in this whole story is that there's an association of masculinity with violence.

And so then when we look at what Deborah and Jael are doing, one as sort of a military leader and the other as, you know, killing in this very specific way, there's a lot we can say about Jael and what's going on there. But we're connecting masculine with violence, and then we're seeing Deborah and Jael, and seeing them enacting violence, and therefore thinking about them as more masculine women.

And that's a complex thing to think about. Like, is that really a way that we want to understand how gender works? Do we want to celebrate these two women as, like, powerful women just because they're enacting violence in some way, or they're connected to violence? Like there should be another way of thinking about what it means to be a strong woman, without thinking about it within that context of violence.

June: That's such a great point. And I think it also ties in to larger discussions about healthy masculinity. As Austen says, is that really how we want to understand how gender works? Or how power works?

Anne: Exactly. And, as you mentioned earlier, given how Deborah bucks traditional gender roles, I'm not surprised Christianity doesn't quite know what to do with her. But we really need these nuanced conversations.

June: Definitely. Well, thanks, Austen. Thanks, Anne.

June: And to close out the show, we have the inimitable Queen Esther and her story.

Anne: That's right! With a guest who sees a connection between her story and the Me Too movement.

Marion: I'm Marion Taylor, I teach the Old Testament at Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto. I love the book of Esther, it's a book that I've taught, and written about, and the character of Esther inspires me, as does the character of Vashti.

Marion: So the Book of Esther is everything our culture loves in the binge-worthy show. It's got Gatsby-level opulence, rebellion, debauchery, plot twists, revenge, and a stellar heroine.

So the first chapter invites us into this grandiose world of the most powerful King Xerxes, of - he's the king of Persia. He's powerful, ostensibly, but even in the first chapter we meet this king who's very inept, he doesn't know how to make decisions, he wants to impress

everyone, he drinks a lot, and he's a womanizer. So that's the king we meet in chapter one, and chapter one tells us that he has these incredibly large banquets, 180 days of drinking and eating, and there's another banquet after that of seven days where he invites all these people, these men, to drink as much as they want.

And then you have the king at this - on the seventh day of drinking, with all his buddies, saying, I want to show you one more of my treasures: my wife, Vashti. And so he sends his servants out to call Vashti, and she says no, and there is the problem. What do you do when the wife of the king says no, she won't come to a banquet to be shown off as a treasure? And so that creates the crisis for the king, who was inebriated. And his - one of his advisors says, "Oh well, you've got to do something about this, if all our wives hear that your wife has disobeyed you, they'll become disobedient, so you should make a law that all wives should be - obey their husbands, and you need to get rid of your wife, just depose of her."

Whether she's just put in the harem, or killed, we don't know.

June: What's with all these inept kings?

Anne: This is at least the fourth one we've had on the series so far! And five if you count Samson.

Marion: That's how the story is set up, and it's like, whoa, this is so interesting. In terms of the narrative, the problem is now the king doesn't have a wife. We've got to find another one. So, he - he misses his wife and his attendants say, "Oh well, let's find you a new wife. Let's have the equivalent of this competition to search the kingdom. You know, 127 provinces, and find the most beautiful woman, bring her in."

They essentially herd all these young women. It's not a beauty contest like we would talk about today, it's a herding of women into the harem, and then these women get prepared, like, a year long beauty spa, with, you know, exfoliation, and perfume, and all this to prepare for their, essentially, one night with the king. And if he - and if he didn't like you that night, you would be put into the harem, never to be seen again.

But the woman he chose happened, just happened, to be a young Jewish woman, who - an orphan woman who was now like, I would argue, they were kind of sex trafficked into the harem. And she pleases the king, and becomes the Queen, so then you have a banqueting scene, and that's how Queen Esther, the Jewish queen, becomes queen as a replacement for Vashti.

June: What an incredible setup this!

Anne: And so much more happens. This book is an important one in Judaism because it forms the basis for the holiday of Purim. And of course Esther is the great heroine of this story.

June: And the larger picture is that Esther is this orphan who's raised by her uncle Mordecai, who has found favour with the king because he discovered a plot to kill him. But Mordecai's angered the king's right-hand man, Haman, by not bowing down to him. So Haman vows

revenge and manipulates the king into signing an edict to kill not just Mordecai, but all the Jewish people in the Persian Empire, which includes modern day Israel. So basically, all Jewish people everywhere.

Anne: And Esther hasn't revealed to the king that she's Jewish. So when Mordecai discovers Haman's plot and begs Esther to put a stop to it, at first she's like, "I can't. If I even talk to the king without him first summoning me, I risk death." And Mordecai's basically like, "this is worth risking your life for."

June: And it is, and that's what Esther does. She puts on these beautiful robes. She hangs out around the court until the king notices her and summons her. And the king is so taken with Esther's beauty that he promises her up to half of the kingdom. But instead of asking for exactly what she wants, Esther mysteriously invites the king and Haman to a banquet, where she still doesn't ask the king for what she wants. She just invites them both to another banquet.

Anne: And this is where Marion says the tension is rising in the story. The king is so disturbed by all this drama that he can't sleep, so he has his servant read the court chronicles to him, which reminds him that Mordecai saved his life and was never actually rewarded. So the king rewards Mordecai in a way that hurts Haman's pride. And this is the turning point.

June: So now we come to this second banquet, and Esther finally reveals to the king all the details of Haman's plot. And so the king orders the execution of Haman. Now you'd think the king could just cancel his own edict, but he can't annul a royal decree, so instead he just adds to it. And he says that the Jewish people can defend themselves, they can come together and kill those that want to destroy them. And because they have all this time to prepare and come together, they defeat their enemies and win.

Marion: So that is successful, and then at the end of the book, the Jews, they celebrate in a festival called Purim. They celebrate reversal of the edict of death, because life has come, so it's joyous and celebrative. And that is the festival that, really, is the reason the book was written, to explain why we have this festival of Purim that the Jews had and loved, because it was a lot of drinking and eating and celebrating.

And in that second last chapter, nine, the Jews, Esther and Mordecai, they write the Purim as a law that the Jews should celebrate this every year.

June: Esther really is this incredibly important heroine, and yet we get so little of her in Christianity.

Anne: Yeah. Marion says that one of the things that Christianity really struggles with about the Book of Esther is that God isn't mentioned in it.

June: And Christians don't celebrate Purim.

Anne: Exactly. Something else that really intrigued me about Marion's commentary on the Book of Esther was that, as I mentioned, she drew parallels to the Me Too movement.

Marion: When I was writing the book, the global Me Too movement - this was in 2017 - was emerging, and brought attention to many of the issues raised in Esther related to the abuse of power, the objectification of women, and sex trafficking. And so, I think all those things are talked about in the book of Esther. These are not the issues that, historically, interpreters would have raised, but I think because we're very sensitive to these issues of power, and abuse of power, and the objectification, and commodification of women in the sex trade, like, this story, especially in chapter two, where you talk about, they would have scoured the country for all these beautiful, probably 11, 12 year old girls, right, then they bring them into the harem, they never go back, they never see their families again.

So it's not the bachelorette, it's not the dating game, it's not, you know, who wants to be the king's wife. Like, these are girls, young girls, and there they have them in the harem, and for a whole year they trained these girls as to how to please the king sexually. I mean, it's really a horrible story in that way, right?

Anne: And it isn't just the girls who are being abused in this kingdom, either.

Marion: The issue of abuse of power is very strong in the book. Like many ancient rulers, they surround themselves by eunuchs, right. So who are these eunuchs? And these would be young boys who were traded after a war, like, or part of your tribute every year was to give 50 beautiful-looking guys, little boys, right. And then they would castrate them, and put them into positions of power, because ancient rulers thought, well, you know, if they're castrated, they don't have a lot of testosterone, so they're safer to be surrounded with, they probably won't take over the kingdom.

June: People so rarely talk about eunuchs in the ancient world and how forcible castration was really a type of sexual violence.

Anne: Yeah, absolutely, and I love this perspective that Marion brings to the story. She really tries to understand Esther as this orphan who has been taken away from her only relative and put into a harem, and, really she's a traumatized child.

Marion: So what do trauma victims do? They do anything to survive and thrive, and that's exactly what Esther does. She plays the game as a young girl, like, she finds favour. She's beautiful, and so she finds favour with everyone around her. And so, you know, that, I think, opens up the character of Esther in a very helpful way.

June: Now, I think this just all highlights Esther's bravery against all these odds. She's a young girl going through this huge trauma. She's scared the king will kill her if she approaches him, but she does it anyway to save her people.

Anne: Exactly.

June: I think another interesting aspect of the story is the way that Esther's predecessor Vashti *does* exercise her agency, even if it means that she winds up losing her position as queen.

Anne: Yes! Marion had some great stuff to say about that.

Marion: I think the storyteller wants us to compare Esther and Vashti. Like any good story, you've got a foil - good guy, bad guy right? And Esther comes on to the scene after Vashti is, you know, deposed. And Vashti dared to say no, and then you see this portrait of this young girl who finds favour with everyone. So I think the narrator is inviting you to compare these women. But the question is, what does the comparison look like? And the history of the interpretation of the book of Esther is very - it's mixed, in a way, but most people, they were sympathetic to Vashti. The rabbis certainly were, and later interpreters, because, like, what woman would want to come and display her body before a group of drunken men?

June: I like this. It's a both-and situation, where instead of pitting two women against each other, we're looking at how each of them uses her own techniques of surviving this oppressive environment. You know, Anne, I feel like all the women in this episode are coming out ahead in spite of the patriarchy. Miriam's a prophet and leader who goes toe-to-toe with God, Debra gets to lead a military campaign, and then Esther rises above her circumstances to become a heroine. Really, all three of them save their people in times of strife!

Anne: Yes! And so much of modern Christianity has missed out by ignoring these towering figures.

Anne: So, just a quick note on some sources before we end. I relied on Susan Ackerman's book *Gods, Goddesses, and the Women Who Serve Them*, as well as Austen Hartke's *Transforming: The Bible And The Lives Of Transgender Christians*, and Marion Taylor's book, which is called *Ruth, Esther*.

June: Amazing resources, all of them. Well thanks y'all for tuning in to the fourth episode of *And Also Some Women*. It was hosted by me, Junia Joplin.

Anne: And written and researched 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. This is a project of Broadview, North America's oldest, continuously published magazine.

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. And so dear listeners, if you've liked what you've heard and we hope you have, we hope you'll follow our podcast, subscribe to the podcast, and maybe even leave a favourable review so that others can discover and listen to it for themselves.

Anne: Thanks for listening!