

Intro: Welcome to the Quadcast, a Yale Divinity School podcast series focusing on issues related to religion, culture, and politics. In this episode, Emily Judd interviews YDS alum Dr. Julie Faith Parker, author of the book *Eve Isn't Evil: Feminist Readings of the Bible to Upend Our Assumptions*. Dr. Parker discusses reclaiming the biblical figure of Eve as the hero rather than a scapegoat.

Dr. Julie Faith...: So there's a lot that's in there that really makes her the hero of the story as I read it, but that's not what we've been told throughout the ages.

Intro: She questions the common belief that only men wrote the Bible.

Dr. Julie Faith...: There are some texts that really seem like they are women's stories and there are some texts that are clearly in women's voices.

Intro: She also interprets some of the most problematic passages for women in the New Testament through a feminist lens.

Dr. Julie Faith...: This shows Jesus as a feminist because He shows that He can admit He's wrong to a woman.

Intro: And Dr. Parker argues that some of the women in Jesus's circle are more important than some of the 12 disciples.

Dr. Julie Faith...: There are women who are much more important to Jesus, like Mary and Martha and Mary Magdalene, than Bartholomew, Thaddeus. What can you tell me about them? Nothing.

Emily Judd: For thousands of years, Eve, the first woman, has gotten a really bad reputation, first for eating the forbidden fruit, second for convincing Adam to eat it as well, and three for then causing original sin to fall on all humanity. But in your book titled *Eve Isn't Evil*, *Eve Isn't Evil*, you reframe Eve as a curious seeker of knowledge instead of this scapegoat. How did you do that?

Dr. Julie Faith...: Emily, it's actually not that hard if you just look closely at the text. So much of what we've heard about Eve, you mentioned that she's responsible for the fall. The word the fall is nowhere in the text at all. All of this that we've learned about her, these are just layers of interpretation that have become so well-known to us we assume they're in the text, but if you go back to the original Hebrew, you will discover so much of what we think we know about Eve actually isn't there.

Emily Judd: That's so interesting how you said that the fall is not in the text because one thing I remember learning at YDS, at Yale Divinity School, was that the fruit, it was never mentioned that it was an apple in the text, but that idea developed over time, the thought that it was an apple. But it was never specified what type of fruit it was. So would you say that there are traditions that have been carried on or are these interpretations?

Dr. Julie Faith...: Tradition's a nice way to put it. I'd say it's a millennia of misogyny honestly, this whole idea of saying that women are responsible for evil in the world, that women are the ones to blame for this original sin. Again, that word is nowhere in the text. Sin, original sin, not there at all. What Eve does in this story is she ... So first, she's created after the ha'adam or the human creature or the earthling. In my understanding, she is the crowning of creation. Just like in the first creation story in Genesis 1, the absolute culmination is on day seven and that is the creation of the Sabbath. In Genesis 2, you get all these different things that are created. You get the plants and you get the animals and you get this human one and then the crowning of creation, the ultimate thing is the woman. So she's the pinnacle of all this creation.

And how is she created? She's not created from the head to rule above or the feet to be below, but from the side to be alongside. She is described as the ezer-kenegdo in Hebrew and that is the helper, literally to be facing. She is the one to be with this ha'adam, with the human one, but when it says helper, we think that's the one that's going to get the cosmic coffee and clean up and tidy after all the important people have left. But in the Bible, 90% of the time that same word refers to God. It's really a great compliment to call her this ezer. She is the one, as I read it and as the text can certainly sustain ... She is the one who's the decision-maker in this couple. That is why the snake goes to her because she's the smart one. She wants to learn about ethics. She first thinks before she makes a decision. She's wise. She's discerning She wants to know how to make her way in the world. She seeks wisdom, she seeks knowledge, and like Prometheus, she pays a big price.

But she's not the only one who eats of it. This was part of my original contribution to this discussion is to point out how Adam is with her the whole time. That's clearly in the text, but what I've researched is the history around that word immah, meaning with her, saying that he is with her the whole time and how he does nothing to intervene. He eats of the fruit also, and he's the only one who heard the commandment saying, "Don't eat of this fruit of the tree", because she hadn't been created yet. So there's a lot that's in there that really makes her the hero of the story as I read it, but that's not what we've been told throughout the ages.

Emily Judd: Well I'm glad that you have absolved her of the guilt that has been put on her.

Dr. Julie Faith...: I'm trying. I'm trying, Emily.

Emily Judd: About Eve, Sojourner Truth actually has a great quote. She once said in a speech, the speech was called Ain't I A Woman?, she said, "If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again." What do you think are the implications of a new biblical interpretation of Eve on women in our world today?

Dr. Julie Faith...: I hope that it will provide a source of some resistance and a lot of liberation and joy because women are told frequently, especially in certain circles and I would say even certain Christian circles, conservative Christian circles and I say this, I'm a Christian myself, I'm an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church, of what they can't do because of the Bible, because of women, because of Eve. What I'm saying is, "Not so fast." I feel that we can interpret the text lots of ways and if anyone says, "My way is the only way or the right way," run, don't walk in the opposite direction because that's, I think, about control, about power, and it's not life-giving. As I read the text, it's not in accordance with the word of God. So I hope that these readings will empower women to recognize a few key principles.

First, the Bible is descriptive of people from another time and place long ago and far away. It's not prescriptive for everything we should do in the 21st century. Second, there is no one right way to interpret the text, but there is a wrong way and that's any way that is harmful to yourself or someone else. Third, the power is not in the text. The power is in the interpretation. So interpret it in a way that you find to be life-giving which is what I hope that this understanding of Eve, that this feminist reading of the Bible will do not only for women, but also for all people who are interested and all people who love the Bible.

Emily Judd: Now, you mentioned that the Bible is descriptive. It came from a certain era. Some people say that, because of this, the Bible is a patriarchal text because it was written by men. Albeit divinely inspired, it was written by men who came from patriarchal cultures. Would you say that a feminist perspective of the Bible is then unfair to the text?

Dr. Julie Faith...: I would say a feminist perspective is as unfair to the text as a North American perspective is or as an Asian perspective is or as a queer perspective is. None of these things are in the text. Or a conservative Christian perspective is. None of them are in the text. Yes, that world is male-dominated. You say written by men. I put a little asterisk there because I don't know that we can say the Bible was entirely written by men. We know that women wrote in the ancient world and nearly all of the authors of the text are anonymous. There are some texts that really seem like they're women's stories and there are some texts that are clearly in women's voices. We can see that grammatically. So I like to make space at least for the possibility that some women contributed to the text because we just don't know.

Emily Judd: You write in the book that Jesus treated women "as full people who deserve as much respect as men which is the heart of feminism," but some would counter that argument with the problematic passage of Jesus referring to the Canaanite woman that He encounters. He refers to her as a dog and I actually personally have an issue with this passage. What would you say to that?

Dr. Julie Faith...: I love that story and I'm so glad you brought it up. In short, that's one possible interpretation. No, Jesus doesn't totally respect women because, look, He calls

this one woman a dog, but by that same logic ... So that's Mark 7. You go to Mark 8 and what does Jesus say to Peter? "Get behind me, Satan." By that same logic, all men are demons. All men are devils. If I had the choice of being a dog or a devil, I'd totally take a dog. Where does that leave you? If we take that same story of this Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7 and we read it through a feminist lens, first let's talk about Jesus. I love this story. One of the reasons I love this story is because He's so human. He's having a rough day, He's trying to get away, and this woman comes to Him and He's just about had enough. I think a lot of Jesus's popularity was because of his ability as a healer.

So this woman comes to Him seeking help, not for herself but for her daughter. She asked for this help. He says, "No, I've come to serve the children of Israel, not to the dogs." Even the dogs deserve a crumb from the master's table. So she bests him. She doesn't take it. Like a feminist, she speaks up. Like a feminist, she speaks up. For whom is she advocating? Her daughter. Jesus says, "For saying this, your daughter is healed." He doesn't say, "I only care about sons." He doesn't say, "I said get out of my face." He recognizes that she's right and that her daughter deserves healing too. So the daughter is instantly healed. To me, this shows Jesus as a feminist because He shows that He can admit He's wrong to a woman, even a woman of this Canaanite descent. Second, He cares about girls and He heals that girl. So to me, this is actually quite a feminist biblical story. It all depends how you read it, Emily.

Emily Judd:

I'm actually going to look at that passage differently now because I always felt that that was a problematic passage. So thank you for that new perspective. Some feminist theologians critique Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her depiction in the New Testament as this woman in the traditional maternal role, but other feminist theologians, they actually applaud Mary because they say, no, she actually had her own power in itself because she did not need a male partner to conceive Jesus. What do you think? Can Mary be interpreted as a feminist icon?

Dr. Julie Faith...:

I think she absolutely can. The part of Mary's story that I really like, that I really love, that I really gravitate to is the Magnificat. She just speaks this incredible theology of radical reversals about how the rich people will be sent empty away, the hungry are filled with good things, and that, to me, is the heart of Jesus's theology. That's what we read in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, the Sermon on the Plain in Luke's Gospel. "Blessed are the mourned and they'll be comforted. Blessed are the meek. They shall inherit the earth." All these reversals.

Where did Jesus get His theology from? Where do most of us get our theology from? Chances are our mothers have something to do with it. So I see Jesus as being really someone who is very radical in His love and He got that from His mother. In that way, I see her as a feminist icon because when she says this prayer, first she is praising God. She is articulate. She is making her voice heard and she is speaking of hope for the world and care for all people. To me, that is the heart of feminism as well and that's what I like to see in Mary.

Emily Judd: So the Apostle Paul in his letters, he says women should be silent in church. Women should cover their hair in church. How do you reconcile these things with a feminist reading of the Bible? Is it even possible to have a feminist lens for those particular passages basically telling women to shut up and how to dress?

Dr. Julie Faith...: It's always possible to have a feminist lens, Emily. Some passages lend themselves to it more easily than others, but it's especially those passages that are really difficult that we need to bring the feminist lens to. A lot of these passages that are anti-women, let's say, that we find in Paul actually are not from Paul. They're Deutero-Pauline like Ephesians. It's 5:21 or 22 where it says, and I talk about this in an appendix of the book, "Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord." In that verse if you look at the most recent Greek scholarly edition of the text, the Nestle-Aland version twenty-eight, there is no verb. So what it says in Greek is, "Wives to your husbands as to the Lord." What? There's no obey. There's no submit. The scandals of translation are outrageous and we see this in passages that are particularly related to women.

Now in fairness, the passage is a context of hierarchy, but still in fairness, there is no verb there and it has been put in by the translator. So that's something that feminists, now that there are feminist biblical scholars, we can say, "Not so fast, boys. We have these tools too and so we're just going to revisit those translations." But so in Ephesians, some people think is Paul. I don't think it's Paul. I think it's much later because it deals with issues in the church that really weren't part of Paul's time. The letters from Paul are the earliest New Testament texts that we have. Let's say 1 Thessalonians. Let's date it to the very middle of the 1st century CE. So these are earlier than the Gospels, right? Earliest Gospel, Mark, let's say around 70 CE.

So by later on, the church has these issues because women are taking on lots of roles of leadership. The early Christian communities were strikingly egalitarian, and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, a scholar taught at Harvard for many years, she talks about this in her landmark book *In Memory of Her* and also in subsequent books as well. But Jesus has this radically inclusive community and He does have women who are among his disciples. So not among the 12. Now, the list of the 12 varies in the different Gospels. There's not a set group of 12. It's just that we need to have 12 because there are 12 tribes so now you need to have 12 disciples. But there are women who are much more important to Jesus, like Mary and Martha and Mary Magdalene, than Bartholomew, Thaddeus. What can you tell me about them? Nothing. There's nothing, but we have stories about these women who proclaim Jesus as the Christ.

In John 11, Martha says that, "I know you are the Christ." So we have these incredible women who are right there with Jesus. In Acts 9, Dorcas or Tabitha, she's called a disciple. The Greek word is *mathetes*, it means learner like mathematics, and she's called a disciple very matter-of-factly. This is not just a label for men. This is something that men and women were very much a part of, but later on because women take these roles that are important within Christian

circles, those who want to hold onto the power smack them down and those writings get into the text because women have these places of prominence. I like to point out that if women didn't have these places of leadership and prominence, it wouldn't be an issue. If women weren't speaking up in churches in 1 Timothy 2:12, if women weren't speaking up in churches, somebody wouldn't have to say, "Hey, don't have those women speak up." It shows that this is going on and it shows the inclusive community that Jesus had and I like to think intended.

Emily Judd: Thank you for that very comprehensive answer. I wanted to ask you how did your Yale experience shape you both in general and in your current work as a biblical scholar and author?

Dr. Julie Faith...: Well I really loved my time at YDS and at Yale more widely. I say that if you like school and I like school, Yale is one of the world's ultimate playgrounds and the resources are incredible. I studied the Yale Babylonian Collection which is extraordinary. I used to take field trips there. I took a course with Ivan Marcus, used the collection at the Beinecke.

Emily Judd: Oh, professor Ivan Marcus is one of my favorite professors. I actually meet up with him when we're in Jerusalem whenever it aligns that we're there the same time. He's so great.

Dr. Julie Faith...: Well please give him my warmest regards because he was wonderful, really wonderful. All the professors I had were wonderful. John Collins also shaped and mentored me, taught me a lot, and I'm very grateful to all of them. I still support Yale. Not that Yale needs my very humble contributions, but it's just a small way for me to say thank you for all that Yale has done for my life.

Emily Judd: I feel the same way. I'm so grateful for my time at Yale. I want to thank you so much for taking time out of your day to join us and share all of your insights about reading the Bible through a feminist lens. Thank you so much.

Dr. Julie Faith...: You're welcome, Emily. Thank you so much for having me.