

**What's God Up To?
Bible Stories Through New Eyes
#2250
Study Guide**

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Introduction

Award-winning author Madeleine L'Engle describes first experiencing the Bible as a storybook, as most of us did. Many scholars remind us that the Bible should be taken seriously but not literally. Professor Virginia Mollenkott tells of having read the Bible through what she called "fundamentalist lenses" so that, even though she was trained in literary criticism, she had not realized there were two separate creation stories. When we read some of these stories carefully, they raise lots of questions. "Why did God put the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden in the first place, if Adam and Eve were not to eat of it?" "Does God tempt us and then punish us if we fail the test?" In this video series, with the help of New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine, we're going to look at six Bible stories and struggle with these and other questions.

The Bible

In many worship services, the reading of the Scripture is concluded with a phrase something like this: "This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God." Some of us think, or act as if we think, that this means there should never be any questioning of the Bible, even when the text puzzles us or seems to portray God as harsh and judgmental in some places and loving and forgiving in others. But there is a long Judeo-Christian tradition of struggling, questioning, even arguing with the text, as Abraham argued with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is in this tradition that A-J approaches the texts in the series. She uses the word *kvetch*. Webster defines it as meaning (1) to be urgent or insistent or (2) to complain. The word comes from Yiddish (*kvechen*) and German (*quetschen*) and it's easy to hear and see the relationship to the English word, "question." So join A-J as she *kvetches* with these texts in search of fresh, broader and deeper understandings of the Word.

A-J's Hints for Bible Reading

Throughout the programs are some hints to keep in mind as you read the Bible. We've gathered them together here for your convenience.

- Look at the text with new eyes, as if you don't know the story.
- Read closely. Pay attention to what the text actually says and doesn't say.
- The bible is usually terse. When it goes out of its way to give additional information, something's going on.
- Frequently, motives are suppressed; we're told what someone did, but not why they did it. You have to use your imagination.
- The Bible is written from an androcentric point of view; that is, stories are seen through men's eyes.
- Don't just identify with the hero or the protagonist and don't identify solely with characters of your own gender.

- Check out the back story. Often it helps in trying to understand an incident in Abraham's life, for instance, to know something about his life before.
- Read the stories just before and just after the one you are studying to see the context the writer set it in.
- One of the joys of biblical texts is that you can come up with mutually exclusive readings, both of which the text can support.
- Parables mean different things to different people. If they mean something to you, you've got it right. If they mean something different to someone else, they've got it right, too.

The Leader

Amy-Jill Levine grew up Jewish in a Roman Catholic neighborhood in Massachusetts and loved attending mass with her friends. When she was 8, a classmate called her a Christ-killer. She determined to learn, if she could, why a boy would say a thing like that. Now a New Testament scholar and teacher at Vanderbilt University Divinity School in Nashville, Tenn., she opposes religious bigotry on several fronts. She teaches and writes about the relationship between Judaism and the origins of Christianity and helps her students understand attitudes toward Jews in the New Testament. She also heads a project designed to help persons and groups in the community understand and deal with issues of gender, sexuality and intolerance as they impact church and synagogue. A popular professor, known for being smart and funny, she describes herself as a "Yankee Jewish feminist who teaches in a predominately Protestant seminary in the buckle on the Bible belt." She is in demand as a speaker and lecturer, especially in churches where people are eager to hear her fresh perspective on Scriptures. A colleague has said that she could offer a course on the phone book and 50 students would sign up.

The Videos

The series consist of six programs. VHS tapes. Each program treats one biblical story. A-J presents a brief lecture on the story, bringing to bear her broad knowledge of not only the Old and New Testaments, but of Jewish and Christian tradition and scholarship and raising the kind of questions that can only come from a close reading of the text. She then invites questions and comments and responds to them, sometimes with even more questions, but always with keen insight, great good humor, and with the intention of increasing the understandings that might emerge from a loving struggle with the text. The programs are intended then to promote discussions within the viewing group.

The Guide

This guide is organized to provide help for discussions. You may want to copy part of it to hand out.

1. An overview of the six programs (page 5). This includes a list of all six programs and references for Bible passages viewers would benefit from reading and reflecting on in advance.
2. Beginning on page 6, an outline of the programs, including the on-screen question at the end.
3. Additional questions for reflection and discussion (pages 17 and 18).

Using the Videos

If you are using these videos with a group, the following suggestions may be helpful.

Suggestions to help discussion

- Encourage the group to view actively, looking for conflicting views and noting questions that occur while viewing. Urge people to bring their Bibles.
- At the end of each program, a question appears on the screen to kick off discussion. Use the additional questions on pages 13 and 14 if they are helpful, but don't feel obligated to cut short a lively, productive discussion to get them all in.
- During the discussion, don't be alarmed if there are occasional pauses. Wait a few seconds before moving on. Look for ways to include less talkative members, though people should be allowed to participate at a level comfortable for them.

Preparation and equipment

- Preview each program before showing, referring to the outline for that program and noting themes that interest you.
- Put the question at the end of the program on newsprint.
- Make sure the VCR/DVD player and TV are set up in advance and are in working order. Cue up the resource ahead of time.

Bibliography

Alter, Robert, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

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Kraemer, Ross Shephard, and D'Angelo, Mary Rose, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Levine, Amy-Jill, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Matthew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

Levine, Amy-Jill, *The Old Testament*, 24 video or audio tape lectures (The Teaching Company, 1-800-TEACH-12).

Overview of Programs

1. Temptation in the Garden

Genesis 3:1-24

See also Genesis 1, 2 and 4

2. The Sacrifice of Isaac

Genesis 22:1-19

Abraham's story: Genesis 12:1—Genesis 25:11

3. David and Bathsheba

2 Samuel 11: 1-27

David's story: 1 Samuel 16: 1—1 Kings 2: 12

4. The Prodigal Son

Luke 15: 11-32

See also Luke 15: 1-10 and Luke 16: 1-13

5. The Canaanite Woman

Matthew 15: 21-28

See also Matt. 15: 1-20, Matt. 15:29-31, Matt. 10: 1-8 (the commission to the disciples)

6. Jesus with Mary and Martha

Luke 10: 38-42

See also Luke 10: 25-37, Luke 11: 1-14 and John 11: 1-44 (the raising of Lazarus)

1. Temptation in the Garden

- Look at the text with new eyes. There's no apple and Eve doesn't tempt Adam.
- In the first creation story, men and women are created equal (Genesis 1:27). Chapter 2 retells the creation.
- Name *Hadam* comes from Hebrew meaning "arable soil"—an earthling from the earth or a human from the humus. An "it."
- God appears to be setting up the man with the forbidden fruit (Don't eat the cookies).
- A-J's question: What can Eve do that the animals can't? Answer: Speak with him?

A-J: Communication? Possible. I'd like that to be the answer. I worry there's another.

Answer: She can have babies.

A-J: Companionship and procreation.

Q.: Incest?

A-J: Absolutely. And there's more in the Old Testament. Sarah is Abraham's half-sister. There's a gradual moving away from incest—a closing in on what's permitted.

Q.: Myth?

A-J: Myth is a story of origin, to tell you where you came from, to locate you in the world, explain why you're here, what you're supposed to be doing and it's something that will often challenge an individual. It's not a false story.

- Snake would seem to be the villain, but all God's creation is good so the snake has to be good. Eve is not dumb. She thinks about what the snake says and decides to eat. She hands it to Adam and he eats. Is Adam equally guilty? Is he stupid? Is he a jerk? Is Eve the smart one? Has Eve been beguiled? Is the snake evil?

Q.: If creation is good, where did temptation come from?

A-J: Why assume this is bad? Could God be acting like a parent trying to get the kids out on their own?

Q.: Yet throughout scripture, God is displeased when people don't obey.

A-J: God expects obedience but realizes we're not made that way. Is Adam dumb or is he a *mensch*—doing what he thinks is right, in solidarity with Eve?

- Word normally translated as pain in childbirth is same word for work Adam will do in the field. Maybe just means women will have to work and bear children. Is it really a curse? Not called a curse.
- "Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you." The beginning of patriarchy or permission to enjoy sex?
- Is leaving Eden a curse? God goes with them. They get to have children, see the fruits of their labor, keep the goodness of all creation (not just Eden).

Q.: Why do we want to get back to Eden?

A-J: Because we have a myth of Eden as what we think we want. We all can find Eden—place of no shame.

On-screen Question: Is this a story of failure or of liberation? On whose part?

2. The Sacrifice of Isaac

- God chooses Abram and puts him through test after test.
- Then in chapter 22, a test no father would want. Why does God do that? Some say to signal to ancient Israelites that human sacrifice is no longer to be practiced. Too easy.
- Who passes the test? Was God wanting Abraham to refuse?

Q: Scriptures are full of people who say no and are punished.

A-J: Sometimes better to reject a command, even from God.

- If Abraham could plead for Sodom, he could've pleaded for Isaac.
- When Abraham tells the servants he and Isaac will come back, is he lying?
- Is Isaac a victim or a willing sacrifice? How old is Isaac?
- Parallel between Isaac carrying the wood and Jesus carrying the cross?
- Text asking if we are willing to give up what is most precious to us for a higher cause.
- Little children sacrificed to the god Saturn, so they could protect their brothers and sisters. One sacrificed to save everyone else. That is the Christian story.
- Not sure Abraham passes the test. Also suspect God didn't want Abraham to say no because then God would have to back down.
- Is God pulling back? Is that why the angel rather than God stops Abraham? We think of God as omniscient, omnipotent and good. No one told the authors of Genesis. This is a god they will dispute with. "Israel" means "to wrestle with God."
- Abraham comes back to his men alone. Where is Isaac? Are Abraham and Isaac estranged? Is Isaac exhibiting symptoms of child abuse? Abraham and God don't talk anymore.

Q.: You suggest Abraham and God both failed and in my belief system, there is no failure with God.

A-J: I like the idea of God learning how to deal with human beings.

Q.: You indicated that Abraham, Isaac and servants were all silent. Does that speak to the church and the silence as we see children sacrificed to drugs and violence?

A-J: There ought to be a commandment, "Thou shall speak up."

Q.: Isaac seems complicit, quite trusting. What does this say about children in potentially abusive situations?

A-J: I think what happened to Isaac suggests the dangers of child abuse. Isaac grows up to be weak.

Q.: It's clear to me that Abraham had no problem with the angel, rather than God, releasing him.

A-J: I still worry, Why the angel? When God himself told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Joy of biblical texts is that you can come up with mutually exclusive readings, both of which the text can support.

On-screen Question: Is this a story about an abusive God and a weak father or a story of unquestioning obedience and commitment?

3. David and Bathsheba

- David is ancestor of Jesus
- Story of David's reign is in 2 Kings and is told again in Chronicles, but Chronicles omits the Bathsheba incident.
- Text raises series of dichotomies: Relationship between a man and a woman, king and subject, religion and politics, Jew and Gentile, justice and mercy, forgiveness and debt.
- "When Kings go out," but David stays home. Negotiating peace? Shirking his duty?
- Bathsheba, wife of a mercenary in David's army, victim or vixen? The King sends messengers to bring her to the palace. The king seduces her. What *is* she thinking?
- Both are guilty of adultery—capital crime.
- David calls Uriah home, hoping he will go home to his wife and the pregnancy will be explained. Are David and Bathsheba colluding?
- But Uriah follows Jewish law and becomes the outsider, whose ethical behavior calls the covenant community to account.
- How much does Uriah know and when does he know it? Why not just do what the king wants?

Q.: We like our heroes without flaws. David and Bathsheba come off differently than most of us understood.

A-J: Most understood it as romantic love story. Do we want heroes flawless? Perhaps we like a flawed hero.

- David learns Uriah did not go home. Uriah says he can't while his mates are in the field.
- So David invites him to dinner and gets him drunk but it doesn't work. So David sends him back to battle with his own death warrant.
- Joab does what he is told, except he doesn't have the men draw back. Some of them die along with Uriah. What is Joab's responsibility?
- David says, "Tell Joab not to be distressed. These things happen."
- Bathsheba mourns for the required time, then David brings her to the palace and marries her. The child dies but they have another—Solomon.

Q.: Concerned that Bathsheba is objectified. How far can this be pushed as the victimization of women?

A-J: David is the one with whom we identify; story told from his point of view. Bible is androcentric. But there is too much detail about Bathsheba to say she's objectified.

Q.: Do you think this account is included because too many people knew? That it's unavoidable?

A-J: Chronicles *did* avoid it. Think they included it because they wanted to. David—the King—commits adultery, arranges a murder and his child dies

because of his sin. Later, one of his children is raped by another of his children and a civil war ensues. Story tells us that adultery is not just between two people. David's household is ruined but the throne is preserved because as unfaithful as David was, God remained faithful.

On-screen Question: Is this just biblical soap opera or is there more?

4. The Prodigal Son

- Parable is preceded by two others—the lost sheep and the lost coin, which Jesus told in response to Pharisees grumbling about the tax collectors and sinners coming to hear him.
- Typical reading of this parable is about the grace of God. I want to take this reading and complicate it.
- First two parables warn me that reading this as about repentance doesn't follow from the first two. Sheep and coins don't repent. If we call this the parable of the prodigal father or the father and two sons, or the absent mother, might read it differently.
- Allegorical reading: tax collector and sinners=younger son. Father=God. Scribes and Pharisees=older brother.
- Jesus says it's about a man with two sons. Younger one says, "Give me my share now." When it's gone and he's with the pigs, don't think he repents.

Q.: Son may not have repented but when he saw how much his father loved him, he could repent.

A-J: Don't want to make this father God; don't want God keeping slaves. Do slaves ever get a fatted calf? Older son still has life of privilege. Parable of slaves in want?

- If we identify with younger son, and read it allegorically, everything goes to the scribes and Pharisees.
- In terms of family dynamics, what happens when the party's over?
- Parable has a lot more meaning if you strip away God = this and repentant sinner = that.

Q.: Some may say Jesus understood himself as the prodigal who had abandoned much of his community.

A-J: As I see Jesus, he's part and parcel of the community—not alienated from it.

Q.: What would story read like with a mother?

A-J: Kenyan student would say something's wrong with this family—not only no mother, but not enough children. If there were a mother, parable would never have gotten off the ground. Not mother, no logic.

Q.: The sin of favoritism.

A-J: Not sure I want to call it a sin. Clearly a mistake. We have favorites in this parable.

- Could we welcome back a son who has degraded himself? Difficulties with grace. Father has to re-integrate younger son into family. What's good for God might be bad for human parenting.

Q.: Cautioning older brother not to impose his own requirements for guilt and repentance on others.

A-J: Yeah, older brother has already decided younger brother isn't going to get what he deserves.

Q.: Some message here about people with special needs?

A-J: Marvelous.

Q.: Suppose younger son is struggling with some kind of addiction?

A-J: Right. And how wonderful if somebody who has been addicted comes to his senses and says, “It’s not this pig slop that I need.” And then the older brother’s responsibility kicks right in.

On-screen Question: Should this be called a “parable of playing favorites?”

5. The Canaanite Woman

- Woman agonizes with Jesus; he shuts her down. Finally she gets her way.
- Gospel of Matthew seems to be saying certain groups have privilege.
- To call Jesus “son of David” says, “You won.” Jesus ignores her, then says he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.
- When woman kneels in front of him, she is holding her ground. Her words are like language of prayer, “Lord help me.”
- “Not fair to take children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Is he teasing? Not clear why Jesus is putting her through this.
- She won’t give up; throws his words back at him. And he says, “Great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish.” Is this a confession of Christian faith on her part? What changed Jesus’ mind?

Q.: Jesus is testing her?

A-J: I’d rather think he’s challenging the disciples. Another way to think: tough to be poor in U.S. because the rich claim privilege. Tough to be of other than northern European descent, not be Christian.

Q.: If you’re on outside, do you need to give up your religious identity to accept this new promise?

A-J: Perhaps Jesus is pushing her to recognize it’s not Canaanite gods who are in control; it’s Jesus’ God.

Q.: Text shows Jesus’ humanness?

A-J: No problem with Jesus changing his mind. If something means enough to you, fight for it. And if you have to fight God, that’s OK too.

Q.: If we take WWJD seriously, here Jesus ignores her, talks back to her. Bad example.

A-J: Distinction between Jesus and the rest of us. The church was smart in putting together New Testament: give us four Gospels, the Epistles and the Apocalyptic material. Says there are a host of ways of being Christian.

Q.: How to deal with text that says no one comes to the father except through Jesus?

A-J: I’m more into the many mansions model, but taken seriously. Jesus says “by me” (not “by the church”). Text may be saying you don’t have to join it to get benefits.

Q.: See Jesus in the learning position here, and maybe prompting him to see the bigger picture—mission to Gentiles.

A-J: I see this woman in a teaching position and Jesus admitting she had a point and she gets her miracle. As historian, I think Jesus did not intend a mission to the Gentiles.

Q.: She’s tactician; she needed her daughter healed.

A-J: Her search is not for God but for a cure.

Q.: Other Gentiles in Matthew?

A-J: Rahab in Jesus’ genealogy, also a Canaanite. She acknowledges the Israelite God is strongest, which may be what this woman is being forced to do.

Q.: Could you address this as an issue of respect for each other?

A-J: Wish I could. I tend to read the text as one of great rudeness.

On-Screen Question: Is Jesus guilty of ethnic prejudice or was this a staged event to make a point?

6. Jesus with Mary & Martha

- How many of you [women] identify with Jesus? Look at the men: Do you identify with Martha? With Mary?
- Look at Martha. She owns her own house. She is the one who welcomes Jesus. If you recall Gospel of John, this is a lady with a mouth. She knows what her power is. Don't sell her short.
- Look at this story not as Jesus liberating women, but as Jesus dealing with two independent women.
- Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened. Typically looked at as women in disciple position. Disciples ask questions. If Mary is a disciple she's not quite gone all the way yet.
- Martha is active. Text could be translated "distracted with much serving" from Greek *diakonos* (deacon). Is Luke talking about serving in official capacity in church? But deacon can also mean *table waiter*. Text does not mention food preparation.
- Luke's point may be if Jesus is sitting in your living room, he is the one who needs to be attended to.
- No indication that the other disciples are here. Just Jesus.
- Why didn't Martha speak directly to Mary? How often will children mediate through a parent rather than talk to each other?
- The better part: To be a disciple, you need to stop and listen first.
- Look at context. This story comes immediately after the story of the Good Samaritan, clearly about serving, about disrupting his daily tasks to help the guy in the ditch. Story after this has the disciples asking Jesus how to pray. Daily bread. Better portion may be to listen and then provide the food, thereby helping God.

Q.: Martha speaks to Jesus as equal?

A-J: John's Gospel tells us Jesus loves this family, so there may be connections. Martha's tone tells us Jesus is approachable, fully human. Big comfort to yell at God.

Q.: This almost looks like a little church.

A-J: So this is a model of a house church? Sure. Primary business would be listening to the Gospel.

Q.: Concern about this text saying it's OK to sit and listen and not act.

A-J: Think you can't read it that way because Good Samaritan comes just before. Mary and Martha are two sides of same coin—active and contemplative, listening and serving.

Q.: Jesus admonishes Martha but not Mary.

A-J: If I were Son of God, I'd go help Martha and bring Mary along.

Q.: Is Jesus liberating Mary and Martha from their patriarchal Jewish context?

A-J: He's liberating women, as well as men, toward a better form of service.

Q.: Perhaps Martha is burned out.

A-J: Think you're right. What is the one thing Mary has chosen? To be present to Jesus? To be able to listen? Might be best to identify with all three characters. Be a Mary; be a Martha; be a Jesus. Settle a family dispute and stay for dinner

On-Screen Question: Which is more important, listening or serving?

Additional Questions

1. Temptation in the Garden

1. Should blame be assigned to anyone?
2. Are the curses the way things are, the way things were, or the way things should be?
3. Why is the woman cursed in her body but in the case of the man, the ground is cursed?
4. Does the “fall” of Adam and Eve mean that humanity is in a broken relationship with God? With each other? With nature? How is healing to be accomplished? Is there any sense in which the story also recounts a “rise” (in human dignity, creativity, self-direction)?

2. The Sacrifice of Isaac

1. Why does god need to test Abraham? Does that mean God will also test us?
2. What effect does this have on the father/son relationship? Why would a parent ever want to sacrifice a child? Is this child abuse?
3. What is the function of the repeated refrain, “Here I am”?
4. How might this story be heard if it were told by Isaac? By Sarah? By Ishmael?
5. What are the connections between this story and the crucifixion of Jesus?

3. David and Bathsheba

1. Is Bathsheba a victim? David? Uriah?
2. The narrator identifies Uriah as a Hittite. Does ethnicity play a part in this story?
3. Is David a voyeur? A bad commander in chief? A rapist? An adulterer? A murderer?
4. What does Bathsheba want David to do when she sends word of her pregnancy?
5. What does this story suggest about the repercussions of adulterous relationships?

4. The Prodigal Son

1. With whom does the reader sympathize?
2. Christians have typically read the parable as allegory. What new interpretations arise if we read it as the account of a real family? Does the son repent? Does it matter?
3. Where is the mother in this story?
4. What happens to the younger son when the father dies?

5. The Canaanite Woman

1. Where is the Canaanite woman's daughter? How might our interpretations change if we considered her perspective?
2. Why do the disciples attempt to deter Jesus from attending to the woman?
3. Why does Jesus hesitate to heal the child? Why does he refer to the woman as a dog?
4. Jesus states he came only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (See Matt. 10:5b-6.) Is the church a new Israel? A true Israel? And if so, what should be the church's relationship with the Jews and Judaism?

6. Jesus with Mary and Martha

1. Luke states that Martha was distracted with much "serving." The Greek term is the basis of our word "deacon." Does the story have a lesson about church?
2. What is the "one thing" Mary has that is valued and cannot be taken from her?
3. Why does Mary never speak? If she did, what would she say? Why does Martha not speak directly to Mary but to Jesus?
4. With whom do you identify? Are you confused, disturbed, sympathetic to, or satisfied by their respective attitudes?
5. Is this text liberating for women? Men?