

Transcript of Bible and Beyond Podcast Episode with Rev. Stephanie Duzant

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Announcer:

Welcome to the podcast, Early Christian Texts, the Bible and Beyond. We explore historical and spiritual questions about Jesus, gender, women, salvation, healing, and the meaning of life. Shirley Paulson is hosting a series of conversations with scholars who are able to unlock mysteries from extracanonical books, forgotten scriptures, so-called 'gnostic' gospels and the Bible. Hope you'll enjoy it. Here's our host, Shirley Paulson.

Shirley Paulson:

I am so excited to have Stephanie Duzant on the Bible And Beyond podcast today. She's going to bring us something new for just about everybody. Stephanie is an ordained itinerant elder with the New York Annual Conference African Methodist Episcopal Church, and she served as a chairperson of a Social Action Ministry and a Social Action Committee. She's a woman of color of Caribbean-American heritage who brings life experience and passion to her work in biblical and womanist studies. I don't know anybody else who is a woman of color and an ordained elder of the church and uses extracanonical texts as a basis for her mission with families and children. She'll definitely bring us a unique insight with her reading of these ancient texts. So welcome, Stephanie.

Stephanie Duzant:

Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Shirley Paulson:

Well, clearly you bring a very unique message to this conversation, Stephanie, and I'm eager to learn from you today. Your life experience is so instrumental to the work you're doing now. Do you want to tell us something of the contributing parts of your life that led to your current work?

Stephanie Duzant:

I come from family of religious people. My grandfather, my maternal grandfather, was a lay Moravian minister in Saint John in the U.S. Virgin Islands and his wife was a missionary. My paternal grandfather was a Seventh-day Adventist and an avid Bible reader. And, my paternal grandmother was a Catholic and so my father was Catholic. And, I was Christian in the Catholic church. So, I've had these various religious backgrounds and the Bible was intricate to all of those backgrounds. And so, I grew up in a Bible house.

Shirley Paulson:

No kidding. That's amazing.

Stephanie Duzant:

And so, growing up in a Bible house with everybody had different ideas about religion, but all coming from the same Bible. And then my grandmother, when I was a teenager, converted to Jehovah Witness.



And again, the Bible is important, although the Jehovah Witness religion, their Bible was slightly different. So, that only made me want to read the Bible for myself. And my father, also pound that in my head that you shouldn't just take what people tell you, you should read the Bible for yourself. And so, that's what made the Bible so interesting to me.

Shirley Paulson:

Wow. That's fascinating, Stephanie. It sounds like you really had a real reason to know the Bible for yourself with that kind of environment. You tell us that you focused on Biblical and womanist studies. I learned what woman is to me, is while I was in seminary, but I wasn't familiar with it before then. Can you tell us more about that term? How has it related to being a feminist, for example, and why are you participating in womanist theology?

Stephanie Duzant:

Well, the womanist piece, I did not realize until I went to seminary, that my mother was a womanist. The womanist piece comes from Alice Walker's definition of womanist, which is a four part definition. So, it talks about - in her definition - about community, about loving of self. And, I believe Alice Walker came up with the definition because of the issues that black women were having within the feminist movement. And so, the feminist movement was about equal rights for women, but mainly white women. And so, intersectionality plays a part in this, right? Because you're fighting for rights of women, but really the rights you're fighting for, black women are not going to be able to get that. And then, especially when you look at the suffragette movement before white women's right to vote, white women got that vote, but then it was also challenging black people's right to vote, right? And so, Blacks men's right to vote. And, so Black women were asked to choose. So, with Alice Walker's definition of womanism, we did not have to choose between being Black and being a woman. And so, she brings community into the definition. She brings the care of self as a black woman into the definition. She brings black woman, no matter who you are, right? No matter what shade you are, no matter if you're biracial or mixed, no matter the differences within your black womanist, womanist you're a womanist, right?

And, no matter your sexuality in your black womanist, you're a black woman. And so, I lean towards that because I was of Caribbean descent living in America, because of the various religions, because I saw myself in that definition, I was womanish, a little girl who has womanish ways, she talks about in her definition. And, I saw myself in that. And also, I saw that I didn't have to choose. In the feminist movement, it was about being a woman, but in womanist movement, it's about being a woman in community.

Shirley Paulson:

That's just fascinating. So Stephanie, what I really appreciate you sharing with us then is the way you've had to navigate between your Blackness and your womanist and the Bible, and that's an amazing kind of intersection when you have a heart full of ministry. So, let's tie it together a little bit here. You've been studying some specific texts from the Nag Hammadi Library also.

So, I thought you might shed some light on some questions I have about them. And so, let me first ask you about the Acts of Paul and Thecla. Maybe you can give us a really brief overview of that before you ask you the question that ties it together. So, what about the Acts of Paul and Thecla, what's that about, real quick?



Stephanie Duzant:

So, it's about a young woman, Thecla who in her society, her husband is picked for her, but she hears the teachings of Paul and then hearing the teachings of Paul, she hears the call to ministry.

Shirley Paulson:

So, this is like in the Bible times that Paul... From the Bible, right?

Stephanie Duzant:

That's Paul, the Apostle Paul in the Bible. She's a woman within the times of Paul. And she hears Paul teaching, and she sits outside the window, and she hears this teaching. And she hears the call to ministry, and she goes to Paul, and she wants to learn all she can. But she recognizes that in order to answer the call, she can't live the life that she has been born into. She doesn't want a part of that. She wants to spread the gospel. Her family's against it; her fiance is against it; but she stands firm and because she stands firm she's ostracized within the society. And not, just the ostracize, it's puts her life in danger.

Shirley Paulson:

Oh my goodness. Okay. Alright. So, there was a very dramatic part of that story where Thecla, now that she's left her family and everything, she's actually thrown to the wild animals for the purpose of destroying her. And, there's a ferocious lioness that charges her, but then it stops. And then, the lioness even protects her against the other wild animals. What's going on there? How do we make sense of this behavior of the female lion in the story of Thecla?

Stephanie Duzant:

I see that part of the story as femininity banding together, and also the image of a lion, right? Because Jesus is supposed to be the Lion of Judah. And so, it is the lioness, that protects her and saves her from the other wild beast. It's so dramatic and so metaphorical at the same time. And so, even in that story, the women who are in the arena are crying and are calling out to save Thecla as well. And so, it's this femininity that comes together, and as spirit of femininity. Not just human and an animal, or just women, but the whole Spirit and that the lion - right? - metaphorically, which is also "Jesus is the lion." So, Jesus can be the feminine as well, protecting her and dying to save her.

Shirley Paulson:

So, this lioness also dies to save Thecla?

Stephanie Duzant:

Exactly. Right.

Shirley Paulson:

Wow.

Stephanie Duzant:

That's powerful.



Shirley Paulson:

That's amazing. So, then you're finding that you can relate to a story that's not even in the Bible though. How do you do that? I mean, I know you had to work on the edges of things like the Bible itself, as well as the feminist movement and the womanist movement. But, how do you relate to a story that's not even in the Bible?

Stephanie Duzant:

Well, this is where you do the historical criticism, right? And, so look at... You take the fact that it was during biblical times, and you take the fact that within the story is the Apostle Paul, who is somebody important to Christianity, and so in the form of the church and the forming of the ideals of the church. So, to take this story, which is not in the Bible, it's still a part of it, the texts that are now sacred to us and it comes from that time. And so, that's how I look at it, biblically. And then, you do literary criticism, that it's a story. It's a story about heroes, and it's a story about faith. It's the story about standing firm to preach the gospel. It's a religious story, and so people can relate to that.

Shirley Paulson:

Yeah. Well and I can see how you relate to that, Stephanie, because you have been a rather strong woman in the world you had to live in and preaching the gospel where you are too. I think it's beautiful.

Shirley Paulson:

Look, can we move on to another book, *The Thunder*, Perfect Mind, which has also from the Nag Hammadi collection and has another female story. And, this time the author is identifying herself with, "I am this and that," and she sounds like another strong female voice, but I think it's a bit confusing. In other words, she says, for example, "I am she who is revered and adored and she who is reviled with contempt." So, okay Stephanie, who is she? And is she so self-contradictory?

Stephanie Duzant:

Well, she's a woman who has lived in a patriarchal society. It's clear she lived on the margin. It's clear she has self-awareness, as well as awareness of how the society wants to label her or give her this role. It's a powerful story. And so, when I read *The Thunder* years ago, it spoke so strongly to me, and it made me think of Emilie Townes' book on the womanist ethics and the cultural production of evil. And how, imagery of women by society to perpetuate its ideals, be them good or bad. And so, this woman in *The Thunder*, she recognizes that. I recognize what you say I am, but I recognize also who I really am. I recognize the negativities you put on me so that you can try to own the positivities within. I recognize who I am. And so, those "I am" statements are so powerful. I've used them in workshops with women.

Shirley Paulson:

Wow. So, am I hearing you correctly, Stephanie that you're saying that this kind of a text helps you to think about identity, that you hear the voices around you, but somehow within you, you know your own identity. Is that the way it's speaking to you? Am I putting something into there?

Stephanie Duzant:

No, exactly. Yeah. You have to be aware of who you are and who people say you are, to be clear about the truth within you. You have to do that.



Shirley Paulson:

So, obviously I've never read this as a feminist story. I mean, excuse me, as a womanist story, because I am not a Black woman. But I appreciate what you're telling me there, that there's a place for you to find an identity that isn't with either the mainstream or the societies, maybe patriarchal or even matriarchal order of things. But, but since you can find identity and be strong. Is that right? Am I right?

Stephanie Duzant:

You can find identity and be strong within your vulnerability at the same time and that's okay. You know. Like that's what make this so powerful, that you're vulnerable but within that vulnerable, there is a strength.

Shirley Paulson:

So then, can you tell us a little bit more about how a womanist looks at these, both of these texts, differently from, say, the white Eurocentric perspective, then?

Stephanie Duzant:

So, if a woman is reading a text, you're reading, not just what's said, but what's not said. You're reading, you're doing historical criticism. We're looking at the time, who is everybody in the room in the text, and so, once you do that, then what is the person saying that they're not saying, right. And so, when we looked at The Thunder and you read the "I am" statement, you can say, "Oh, well, what is she really saying?" She's saying what she's not saying. If that makes any sense. She's saying in a paradoxical way that I see what you've done. I've see the evil, I've seen the good, I've seen the indifference and I'm standing firm on who I am.

Shirley Paulson:

Wow. What about going back to Thecla, how do you see that, from a womanist perspective?

Stephanie Duzant:

So, the womanist perspective of Thecla is, you're looking at what she had to go through to answer the call, right? So, she has to go through the gender role. She has to go through the patriarchy. She has to go through the negativity. That's a fight to be who she is. She has to put her life on the line, right? You don't walk away, just say, "Wow! Look at Thecla, she won,!" No you wouldn't. A woman who's reading says, look at what these men tried to do to her, to try to control her beauty, try to control her femininity, try to control her voice, for ownership of themselves. Not allowing Thecla who she was called to be, who she knows she is, and what she has to do to become that, right? That the womanist reading.

Shirley Paulson:

Tell us a little bit more about what happens to her then, when she's saved from the beast. Does she sort of live happily ever after? Does she have to keep on fighting? What happens to her then?

Stephanie Duzant:

She does go on to live a long life to preach the gospel. We don't hear that she has a husband. She's chosen a life devoted to preaching the gospel, but it's not easy for her. She doesn't go off into the sunset



and live this rosy life, that's not what's happening to her. But I think she makes that choice, because she wanted to answer her call.

Shirley Paulson:

You know what I find fascinating about that, Stephanie, is that, today we can't start thinking about getting married or not getting married in the same way Thecla had to think about it, because, in her day it was like society expected you to get married because they needed to have children. And everybody, not just expected it socially, but it was a serious issue if you chose not to be married. Today, women feel more of that kind of strength to say, "Oh, I don't feel like getting married," but it was quite different back then on that subject, wasn't it?

Stephanie Duzant:

Right. And so, that's the power of the story because it takes a widow who had means to help Thecla, right? It takes a widow who had means, who had lost her own daughter, who now adopts that daughter, so it's now, "she is my daughter." And so, it takes a woman helping her to survive. There's a woman who comes in to help Thecla live in society because you're right, at that time, without the covering of a man, who are you in society, right? And, so it takes another woman to come in and say that, "I will take her under my wing, I will take Thecla in." If it wasn't for the older woman who takes her in, what would have happened to Thecla?

Shirley Paulson:

Wow. So there's a lioness and a woman who are there to help her. What a lovely expression of a quality of a woman, to be embracing and protecting and caring as well as the fact that she was cared for. That's fascinating, Stephanie. I want to bring you to another book that I'd like to hear your thoughts about. We frequently have discussed on the Bible and Beyond podcasts, *The Odes of Solomon*. And, I bet you could probably shed some light on this one, too.

There's one of the Odes, number 19, where I think the identity of male and female gets confusing. It's about the nourishing milk of breasts, but the gender associated with the milk of the breast is confusing to me. So, I'm going to just quote it here a little bit, and then you can tell me about it. It says,

"The Father is the One who has been milked and the Holy Spirit milked Him because His breasts had become full. The Holy Spirit opened Her chest and mixed the milk of the two breasts of the Father."

So again, does gender not matter? Or how do you read this from either a feminist or a womanist perspective?

Stephanie Duzant:

So, this is one of my favorite Odes.

Shirley Paulson:

Okay. I'm glad you're here's Stephanie. I don't get it. Tell me about it.

Stephanie Duzant:

It's power. It's turning gender upside done.

Shirley Paulson:



Yes, it is. That's true.

Stephanie Duzant:

Turning gender upside down. And so, the Odes are believed to be written between the second to the fourth century, by some scholar believed to come out of Syria, which was a cosmopolitan type of town, by folks who are throwing ideas up and down about Christianity, because it was so new. And so, when you read something like this, where the men have breast and the breasts are full, I've never been pregnant but I'm a social worker, so I've worked with women and families. And so, to know that a woman's breast is full that means she's not milking them. That means the milk is accumulating, right.

And so, to hear that the Father's breasts are full, and that it takes the Holy Spirit, which is now female, right? So, I grew up in a church where everything that has to do with God is male. The Father is male. The Son is male. The Holy Spirit is seen as male within the image of God. And so to now read a text, that says the male had full breasts. So number one, the male had breasts. Number two, the Holy Spirit is now female. And she, has to receive the milk from the breast of the Father. And to know that, in my Christian theology, that the Holy Spirit, always with you, is the comforter that leads, it guides you. That Holy Spirit now has the milk, that He was fed by the Father. This is gender turned upside down.

Shirley Paulson:

Right, it sure is. All right.

Stephanie Duzant:

So powerful in the 21st century, right? Where we now fight for the rights of transgender people, where we're now being more fluid with gender, to hear this now is so powerful that we all have to come to a space of relating to one another. We can't just assign roles to people and say, this is who women are, this is who men are because God is able to encompass everything. And God, is able to have breasts. The Father has breasts. How powerful is that! And, He doesn't just have breasts, He has breasts that can milk. That's powerful, so now we're taking God out of this box that we have put God into for so many centuries. Once we take God out of the box, we take ourselves out the box.

Shirley Paulson:

So, interesting, Stephanie. I'm hearing you use the word powerful many times as you're looking at these texts. And I want to ask you, the reason power is valuable to you is that, it is addressing the history of powerlessness of Black women. Am I right about that?

Stephanie Duzant:

Sure. So, the power that we're looking for right, is a power to survive, a power to live, a power to be safe, or to keep ourselves safe.

Shirley Paulson:

So, what I find interesting about that, is that you're finding power that overcomes the oppression, but you're not using power to overpower somebody else. You're using power to be valuable.

Stephanie Duzant:



Well, that's the beauty of womanism, because it's about community. You don't want the power just for yourself, I don't want the power to become rich and famous just for myself. I want the power so that my community will be better, my family will be better. It's not just for me and it's not just for women. It's the power that the men and women in my community are better, that the relations between men and women are better. And so, that's the beauty of womanism, it's about community.

Shirley Paulson:

Yes. So, I'm just wondering that if you could put in a nutshell, is this basically what you communicate to your congregation when you're preaching, is how womanism contributes to community? Is that kind of your basic theme? Or is there something else you want to say about that?

Stephanie Duzant:

Oh yeah. When I preach from a womanism perspective, it's always the lens looking at it from a Black woman's position, but not just looking how Black women can overcome, but how do Black women show up in the community and what can we do from our perspective to help better the community?

How can I show you my oppression as well as my empowerment, so that we can all be better? How can I show you my love for you as a Black woman, right? And so, that's powerful because it helps everybody. I can look at my oppression as a Black woman from a Black women perspective and see the oppression of other people.

Shirley Paulson:

Tell me then about, how do the men in your congregation respond to a womanist preaching? How do they respond to this?

Stephanie Duzant:

Well, for my community they responded well. I won't say every man is appreciative of it, but many Black men, Latino men had responded well to it, because when you're really preaching from the woman's perspective, you're preaching community. Now, some people may get defensive because sometimes it's not nice, right? Well, I shouldn't say not nice, but it's not good to hear some perspectives from a womanist perspective. So, it's not good to hear that David was a rapist. A lot of men don't want to hear that. A lot of men don't want to hear that Jesus called the Syrophenician woman a female dog. A lot of men don't want to hear that, and so some may be resistant of that.

Shirley Paulson:

Well, how does it help them? I'm curious, because I think that there's so much as you've used the term power here, there's a lot of good here for the whole congregation, but I want to hear you say a little bit more about how do men find something inspiring, then. If they can get over being offended by these things, what do they find inspiring?

Stephanie Duzant:

Well, I think that what they can find inspiring is that we live in a society where Black men and Black women have pitted against each other. And when you hear something from a womanist perspective, that says, we are all in this together, - and, I'm identifying my oppression, and I'm identifying your



oppression, and I'm also identifying how we need not to oppress each other in this community, but be together.

Shirley Paulson:

Oh, that's just so wonderful to hear. So, what do you envision then to come of these womanist studies of the extra-canonical texts, just as an overall picture. Is this your main theme or do you see an overall message that you think should come of these extra-canonical studies in particular?

Stephanie Duzant:

Well, I mean, I'm Biblical, I'm the whole Bible.

Shirley Paulson:

Okay. Yeah.

Stephanie Duzant:

But, what I appreciate about extra-canonical texts is that it brings a new freshness and it brings something to the canon that is not there. You don't see gender bending in the canon. You don't really see that.

Shirley Paulson:

Okay. You're right.

Stephanie Duzant:

It just brings a more personal relationship with God, a personal identity to Christianity that you don't really see in the canon that much. And, it speaks to a theology of folks who are having issues with Christianity right now. And so, that's why I think they are important. They important, that we should bring them to the table. It doesn't mean we have to throw away the canon, but it can enhance our theology and our understanding of our beliefs about theology.

Shirley Paulson:

Well, you know I think that's powerful too, Stephanie. If you could find a way to help people who are questioning and looking and love the Bible to actually love it more because they're finding both community and more understanding of the Bible, I think that's powerful.

Can I ask you if you have any final words that you'd like to encourage our listeners to think about or to do, because of your womanist work?

Stephanie Duzant:

I want to encourage people to read more womanist authors, to... When we look at these texts, to keep in mind that there are other people reading the texts, who go through situations that these texts speak too. They must be open to that, so that those of us who are in positions to preach and to teach and to write, would have a bigger lens to look with, so we could help unify ourselves instead of having division. To help use these texts in a more unifying way.

Shirley Paulson:



Oh, Stephanie, I think this is just wonderful. I'm so encouraged to hear this from you because you've opened my eyes, not only to your experience as a womanist, but also I think, it helps me to appreciate in a bigger way, the value of these texts, the way I can understand the Bible better as well as, what I can do to participate in the community like this. You do bring us together in community and I just love that. Thanks so much for being with us today, Stephanie, I just loved it.

Stephanie Duzant:

Thank you so much for asking me, Shirley. It was a pleasure to be here.

Announcer:

Thank you listeners for being with us today. Be sure to check out the details from this episode, from the show notes on the website, earlychristiantexts.com or just come browse around the website to find all the other resources provided for you there. We'd love to hear from you, so feel free to leave comments or questions on the Facebook page, at Early Christian Texts or tweet about it @EarlyXianTexts and be sure to come back next month for our next episode of Early Christian Texts, the Bible and Beyond.

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