

Stephanie Nance
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God's Women Then & Now

MIRIAM

When asked about the prophetess Miriam, many people identify her as Moses' sister at the Nile River or the woman struck by God with leprosy for challenging Moses. The full story of Miriam is often forgotten. Miriam's story can easily be overshadowed by the story of Moses and the mighty deliverance of God's people from the oppressive hands of the Egyptians. Like any leader, Miriam had strengths and weaknesses. Great men of God like David, Moses, and Elijah are remembered and celebrated for their leadership abilities and faith in God. Miriam, however, is often remembered for her mistake in challenging Moses and not for her strong leadership role in Israel's history and powerful proclamation of God's faithfulness. It is vital that Miriam's story be uncovered and told in fullness so that both men and women will know that God used women to lead in the past and continues to use them today.

Unlike modern day heroes of faith, the life of Miriam is not recorded in an autobiography she left behind or a biography written by a close friend. Unfortunately, history is not left with any of her journals detailing the treasure of lessons learned during her life and ministry. All that we have and all that we know of Miriam is found in a few narrative passages in the Pentateuch, a couple of lineage passages, and a proclamation of God through a prophet. What is interesting is that "Miriam is the only woman in the Bible whose recorded story spans childhood to death."¹ Although there is not an abundance of texts detailing Miriam's life, what is there tells the story of an inspirational leader who women can admire and emulate.

¹Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice & Us* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 193.

Miriam the Child: Exodus 2:1-10

Miriam is a young girl when we first capture a glimpse of her in Exodus 2:1-10 at the beginning of the Moses narrative. Although she is not mentioned by name in this narrative, from the unfolding of the Moses story in Exodus and Numbers, scholars generally conclude that Miriam is the sister who assists Pharaoh's daughter with baby Moses. Numbers 26:59 confirms that Jochebed bore three children: Aaron, Moses, and Miriam. Miriam is probably the oldest of the children. It is unknown how much older she is than Moses, but Aaron is said to be three years older than Moses. Since Miriam is old enough to speak to Pharaoh's daughter and take the lead in a complicated situation, Miriam would definitely be older than Aaron. It is likely that Miriam is at least seven years old when we find her by the Nile River watching baby Moses.

Miriam's childhood must have been a difficult one. As a Hebrew in slavery to the Egyptians, she knew the feeling of bondage too well. Hearing the cries of her fellow Hebrews as they were treated harshly and lived in oppression, Miriam knew that anyone falling into the hands of the Egyptians, especially Pharaoh, would not be treated well. When the order came from Pharaoh to throw all of the newborn Hebrew boys into the Nile, Miriam must have been terrified at the thought of losing her brother. As she listened to the screams of mothers as newborn sons were ripped from their arms and thrown into the river, Miriam worked diligently to help her mother hide baby Moses from both the Egyptians and other Hebrews. If it got out that Moses was being hidden, Miriam's whole family could have been killed. At three months old, however, Moses became too active and vocal to keep hidden any longer. God would have to intervene if Moses was to be saved.

Jochebed knew that her son was special, but she would now have to completely trust God to protect him. By watching her mother lovingly wrap her brother in a blanket, place him in a basket, and hide him along the Nile, young Miriam learns the ultimate lesson in trusting Yahweh.

Hidden, Miriam watches from a distance to see what will happen to Moses. When Pharaoh's daughter discovers the baby, we learn from Miriam's interaction with the young woman that God's hand is upon Miriam in a powerful way. Miriam is quick to use her leadership skills to help guide the situation to an ingenious solution. Clearly, Miriam is no ordinary girl. God used her sharp skills to save the life of Israel's future deliverer. Miriam's leadership skills not only played a vital role in delivering her brother from the hands of the murderous Pharaoh, but God would use them once again when her fellow Hebrews are finally delivered from the hands of Pharaoh.

Miriam the Prophetess: Exodus 15:19-21

The narrator fades Miriam from the scene for several years as Moses lives the privileged life of an Egyptian in Pharaoh's palace, revolts against the people who raised him, murders, flees to the desert, and then is summonsed by God to return to Egypt and deliver the Hebrews from slavery. The narrator tells of the ups and downs of Moses leading God's people out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. After Moses and the Hebrews watch the mighty miracle of God divide the waters for them to walk through and then swallow the Egyptians, they respond in song to celebrate God's victory. It is at this point that Miriam once again appears in the story. This time the narrator gives more detail on the identity of Miriam. Here we first learn her name is Miriam, and she is identified as both a prophetess and as Aaron's sister.

Miriam emerges onto the scene as a vibrant worship leader. She leads powerfully in song, dance, and drumming in exuberant worship to God. All the women follow her lead in worship and celebration. It is important to realize that although the narrator has been silent about Miriam, it does not mean that she had no role up to this point in the story of Israel. For Miriam to burst onto the scene with such authority, she would have been recognized as a leader before this particular scene in the narrative. Miriam would have demonstrated that God spoke through her

on many occasions leading up to and during the exodus. Although the narrator faded her from the narrative to focus on Moses during this period, God did not fade her out. God clearly placed Miriam in a leadership role during the years on which the narrative is silent.

It is clear in this passage that Aaron and Miriam are brother and sister. Why the narrator does not mention that she is also Moses sister is not known. Some take this to mean that Miriam is not Moses' sister. Because both Number 26:59 and 1 Chronicles 6:3 records that the three were siblings, it can be assumed that they were. It helps to keep in mind that "Old Testament narrative as a rule introduces facts only when relevant to the story."² The narrator, for some reason, did not find it pertinent to the story to tell of Miriam's relation to Moses. Miriam's leadership role, however, is not dependent upon being the sister of Moses. God's call of leadership upon her life stands on its own.

Exodus 15 is the only passage in the Bible to proclaim Miriam as a prophet. Many scholars take this to mean that she is not a prophet. The absence of a divine oracle delivered by Miriam is one of the reasons that many call her status as a prophet into question. The lack of a recorded prophetic oracle, however, does not necessarily mean Miriam did not ever deliver one on God's behalf. The narrator left many important details of Miriam's life and ministry out of Scripture. When a skilled narrator of literature and witness of history proclaim Miriam as a prophet, then we should take it seriously even though the details of her ministry as a prophet may not be completely seen and understood.

It is possible, however, that the narrator did record a prophetic act by Miriam. "As is generally the case when a prophet is introduced, prophetic action follows prophetic

²Alan R. Cole, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series: Exodus* (England: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 57.

introduction.”³ If this is true, Miriam’s song, dance, and drumming should be seen as a prophetic act. Prophecy with song and instruments are connected in 1 Samuel 10 and 1 Chronicles 25. Miriam is one of many singing prophets in the Bible. Prophets express God’s message through various ways. “The main driving force behind every prophet’s expression was the revelation of God’s nature to His people and the will of God for His people in their temporal situation.”⁴ Miriam’s celebration clearly expresses and proclaims the nature of God’s saving ability. Through her song, dance, and drumming, Miriam prophetically leads the women in a proclamation of God’s victorious character.

Miriam’s action here is very similar to what is seen in many war victory passages. This, however, cannot be taken as a typical celebration of victory as seen in Judges 11:34 and 1 Samuel 18:6. These passages show women celebrating victorious male warriors when they return from battle. Miriam, a prophetess, is celebrating the victorious Divine Warrior of Israel. Miriam joyfully leads in movement through dance and sounds with the drums that would resemble the sights and sounds of the battle. This reminded God’s people of the battles through which God faithfully brought them. Miriam’s song, dance, and drumming were a cultic re-enactment that generations of worshippers would repeat.⁵ It was a proclamation of God’s character of faithfulness of past and future battles and difficulties. This was a prophetic act.

Miriam Corrected: Numbers 12

The Numbers 12 narrative is the longest account recorded of Miriam. Because of the negativity of the passage involving Moses, Miriam’s great leadership skills have too often been overshadowed by this less than flattering portrait of her. There are several issues going on in this

³Ibid., 80.

⁴Ernest B. Gentile, *Your Sons & Daughters Shall Prophecy: Prophetic Gifts in Ministry Today* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1999), 100.

⁵Rita J. Burns, *Has The Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam* (Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1987), 31.

passage. Details are not given to fully understand all of the issues, but the main point of this passage is that Moses is the prominent leader who God appointed over His people, and that is not up for negotiation.

In this passage, the narrator shows a side of Miriam that too often overtakes great leaders. Miriam is jealous of God's hand upon Moses' ministry. There also seems to be a possible racist attitude on her part toward Moses' new Cushite wife. Whatever the issues were, it brought out the worst in Miriam. She began to speak against Moses which led her to start complaining about Moses being recognized as God's spokesperson. Miriam lets it be known that God also uses her to proclaim His word. She appears to be upset that she is not being acknowledged for it on the same level that Moses is acknowledged. At this point, God shows up and calls Moses, Aaron, and Miriam before Him. God makes it clear to Miriam that Moses is His prophet, and she is not to speak against His servant.

God struck Miriam with leprosy for challenging Moses' authority. "Miriam is the first biblical case of scaly skin disease as a devastating, socially stigmatizing divine punishment by which outer decay reflects inner moral leprosy".⁶ There is no doubt that this is a humiliating position for a prophetess like Miriam. The fact that it takes the intercession of Moses to bend God's ear did not help given that Miriam was in the situation because of her desire to have Moses' level of authority. Miriam must have walked away from the situation very humble and knowing that although God had a special leadership role for her, it was not with the level of authority that Moses carried.

Miriam's important place as a leader among God's people is testified to when the people did not move on until Miriam returns from her seven days outside the camp. No doubt, Moses also had something to do with this. Even with the sibling rivalry in this passage and possibly at

⁶Roy Gane, *The NIV Application Commentary: Leviticus, Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 593.

other times, Miriam was dearly loved by Moses. Not only did he plead with God for Miriam's healing, he also stopped the journey of God's people to wait on her. Despite their differences, Moses saw Miriam as a vital member of his leadership team. He would not move on without her.

This passage should not overshadow the life and leadership role of Miriam. All the male leaders of the Bible who are highly esteemed have blots on their portraits as well. Miriam, just like David, Moses, and Elijah, was not perfect. Although this incident is recorded in Deuteronomy 24:8-9 as a reminder to Israel, Miriam must have learned her lesson since Israel continued to regard her in high esteem as evidenced in Numbers 20:1 and Micah 6:4. Leaders today must take this important lesson from Miriam's life. It is by God's sovereign will that He chooses leaders, and leaders must guard against jealousy and challenging another leader's authority.

Miriam's Death & Legacy: Numbers 20:1

In Numbers 20:1, Miriam's death is recorded without much detail or fanfare. We do not know how long she lived or what caused her death. However, the very fact that her death is noted testifies of Miriam's leadership role in the community.

The fact that Miriam's death and burial were recorded at all is striking. Whereas other figures in the wilderness community (Hur, Eldad and Medad, Moses' wife and father-in-law, etc.) disappeared without mention, the notice of Num 20:1b seems to be at least an implicit witness that Miriam was a figure of some significance whose memory was valued in Israelite tradition.⁷

Even after her death, Miriam was honored throughout Israel as newborn girls were given her name to keep the history of Miriam alive. "The canonical and cultural witness to her legacy is the great number of women who bore her name in the New Testament, in Palestinian Aramaic

⁷Rita J. Burns, *Has The Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam* (Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1987), 120.

inscriptions, in the literature of the communities at Qumran, and in contemporary times.”⁸ If Israel had been left with a negative view of Miriam, future generations would not have kept her legacy alive through her name. Although many scholars have overlooked her contribution to leading Israel, Hebrew women throughout time have never forgotten. For that reason, we should not forget her either.

Miriam Commissioned by God: Micah 6:4

Just when the readers of the Old Testament think that Miriam is long gone, God recalls her through the prophet Micah. God reminds Israel of His faithfulness to them by reciting the names of the leaders he sent them in the past. In Micah 6:4, Miriam is mentioned by God as being sent with Moses and Aaron. It is surprising to see Miriam’s name reappear, but this short account should not be overlooked. God confirms Miriam’s role in history through Micah.

“If the neglect of the over towering figure of the Pentateuch outside Pentateuchal traditions is surprising, then all the more so is the fact that Miriam is even mentioned at all outside the Pentateuch since she appears with such infrequency within the Pentateuch itself.”⁹ By mentioning her name, God confirms that Miriam’s place in early Israelite community had been passed down to later generations. God did not need to explain who she was because His people would know her story well. This also confirms that God’s leadership call upon her life was intentional. Miriam, in addition to Moses and Aaron, served as a leader divinely commissioned by God to lead His people

⁸Wilda C. Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 85.

⁹Rita J. Burns, *Has The Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam* (Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1987), 107.

Conclusion

In conclusion, consider the fact that Miriam is the first woman introduced in the Old Testament whose story does not center around marriage and family. Miriam “stands before us in an absolutely unsexual relation; there is neither marriage nor proposal nor courtship. From dawn to dark she remains with us in single blessedness. Her interests are not matrimonial; they are national. Her mission is not domestic; it is patriotic.”¹⁰ It is possible that Miriam was married, but the fact that the narrator does not introduce her as the wife to a certain man most likely indicates she was single. If married, it indicates that her husband was not in a leadership role above her or alongside her. We do not have the details of her life to be certain of her marital status. What is known, however, is that God’s purpose for Miriam went beyond marriage and family to a national leadership role over His chosen people. This is the story that God and the narrator saw important enough to tell throughout history. For this reason, Miriam continues to shine as an example that God can and does call women into leadership roles.

¹⁰George Matheson, *Portraits of Bible Women* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1986), 124.

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