



MIRIAM



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She is the first prophetess mentioned in Scripture.*

BY MARTHA S. BERGEN

“THE SISTER OF MOSES!” If asked, this is probably how most people would describe the biblical person known as Miriam.¹ After all, she was indeed his sister—and Aaron’s too. While the amount of biblical material about her is relatively small when compared to Moses himself, she played an important role in Hebrew history. Though much of her life is obscure, the snapshots we do have reveal a great deal about her character and background. Hers was no ordinary family. Having levitical parents, her heritage placed her within Israel’s priestly tribe.

Miriam, as well as her brothers, was under divine mandate to lead Israel. God spoke through the prophet Micah confirming that she was among those He had sent as a leader or helper to Israel: “I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you....I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam” (Mic. 6:4, NIV). Though hers was a role different from her brothers’, she too was a leader of God’s people around the time of the exodus and wilderness wanderings.

Miriam to the Rescue

The first glimpse we have of Miriam is in Exodus 2. The text describes her familial background in light of her relationship to Moses and in the context of the Egyptians oppressing her people. Though unnamed here, the genealogical listing as part of the census in Numbers 26:59 leaves no doubt that their parents were Amram and Jochebed. Although Pharaoh had ordered all the Hebrew male children killed at birth, miraculously Moses was allowed to live. His mother managed to hide him for three months; afterward she sent him floating in a papyrus basket along the Nile River under the watchful eye of his older sister Miriam, in perhaps a last, desperate attempt to save his life.

Miriam watched as, ironically, Pharaoh’s own daughter discovered the child. Having observed what happened, Miriam bravely asked her if she could get a Hebrew woman to nurse him. In all likelihood the princess understood what was happening and allowed Miriam to get their mother. Thus, Miriam was instrumental in reuniting Jochebed and





Nile River at Beni Hasan in Egypt. For security reasons, Miriam watched her baby brother

as he floated in the Nile in the water-proof papyrus basket their mother had made.

Left: Basket made out of palm fibers, from Luxor, Egypt, dated about 1503–1473 B.C.

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Moses at a crucial time when he needed his birth mother. God worked through young Miriam to preserve the life of the one who was to be a great leader of His people.

Miriam the Musician and Prophetess

Miriam and Moses appear to be the musically gifted ones from this family based upon Exodus 15. Among the Hebrews, music had its place,² and it was especially significant for this occasion. After the grand and glorious event of the exodus, Moses and the Israelites sang, recounting God’s victorious work in the exodus and at the Red Sea. Miriam also took her leadership role among the women.³ Using the tambourine as her accompaniment, with all the women following suit, Miriam led them as she danced and sang a song of victory: “Sing to

the LORD, for He is highly exalted; He has thrown the horse and its rider into the sea” (v. 21, HCSB). Some believe “her brief song in these verses reflects her devotion to God and her thankfulness for his marvelous deliverance.”⁴ Others believe since Miriam repeated the words of Moses in verse 1, the women must have replicated the song in its entirety. Still others interpret the song to have been sung antiphonally, where both genders responded back and forth.⁵ However it was done, both the women and the men were recipients of God’s miraculous deliverance, and both erupted in ecstatic praise to God. Both needed to worship the One who was worthy of their praise and thanksgiving. Furthermore, both Miriam and Moses were God’s leaders for this time and occasion.

WHAT KIND OF TAMBOURINE?



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After the destruction of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, Miriam took up a tambourine and led the women of Israel in celebration: “Sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted; He has thrown the horse and its rider into the sea” (Ex. 15:21, HCSB). What kind of tambourine, though, did she use? Was it the freehanded instrument with rows of cymbals, or was it more like a hand drum?

Hebrew uses two different words to describe the two instruments. A *sistrum* typically accompanied ritual ceremonies and was associated with the Egyptian goddess Hathor. Small discs, each with a hole in the middle, hung from the rods. Although these were common in Egypt, this was not the instrument Miriam played.

Miriam played a *toph* (Hebrew for “tambourine” or “timbrel”), which is thought to have been a wooden or metal hand drum, covered on at least one side with ram or goat skin. A *toph* evidently had no cymbals or discs that jangled. The Hebrew term is onomatopoeic, imitating the instrument’s sound. *Toph* drums were the most common musical instruments in ancient times.

Shown are an Egyptian *sistrum* dated 2500 B.C. (right) and a terra-cotta figurine of a woman playing a *toph*, dated to the 9th cent. B.C. (left).

Sources: “Musical Instruments” in *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, ed. Walter A. Elwell and Philip W. Comfort (Wheaton IL: Tyndale House, 2001), 925; Ronald F. Youngblood, “תוף” (top, timbrel, tambourine) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980):2:978.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (5/9/14)

Verse 20 also refers to Miriam as “the prophetess.” A prophet or prophetess (a female prophet) was God’s spokesperson. As such, God spoke His message to Miriam and she conveyed it to others. She is the first prophetess mentioned in Scripture. Her leadership role, which this chapter highlights, shows this to be her finest hour.

Miriam’s Rebellion

Numbers 12 depicts Miriam in sharp contrast to what we saw in Exodus 15. While Exodus shows her to be a leader who models praise, joy, and thanksgiving, Numbers shows her to be rebellious, characterized by her anger, resentment, and jealousy. She audaciously spoke against her brother Moses, whom God said was “more...[humble] than any man on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3, HSCB). Her prideful remarks incited God’s anger, for in criticizing Moses she criticized God Himself. Moses was a prophet with whom God had spoken directly or “face to face” (Deut. 34:10), rather than by dreams and visions. Consumed with jealousy she, as did Aaron, lashed out against Moses asking, “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Hasn’t he also spoken through us, too?” (Num. 12:2, NLT). Indeed He had. Although they apparently resented Moses’ marriage to a Cushite woman, they seemingly used her as a pretense for their resentment. As a result of their criticism, God summoned the siblings to appear before Him at the tabernacle.

Right: Ring inscribed for the Pharaoh Men-kheper-Re (Thutmose III), gold and jasper. Placing the date of the Israelites’ departure at 1446, Thutmose III would have been the pharaoh of the exodus.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ CHICAGO FIELD MUSEUM (35/56/43)

God chided Miriam and Aaron for criticizing Moses. He then struck Miriam with leprosy as a consequence of her rebellion. He did not, however, afflict Aaron with leprosy. Perhaps Miriam had been the instigator of the ordeal. Notwithstanding, the pain of seeing his sister leprous caused Aaron to repent and cry out to Moses on her behalf: “Please, my lord, do not hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed. Do not let her be like a still-born infant” (vv. 11-12a, NIV). Moses prayed for Miriam’s healing, but she had to face the disgrace of being placed outside the camp for seven days.⁶ This meant she was isolated from the community, which resulted in shame and public humiliation. Based on 2 Kings 7:3-4, we can deduce she stayed outside the camp with others who were afflicted with skin diseases. Normally leprosy would have required her to be outside the camp for 14 days (Lev. 13:4-5);



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STOCK PHOTO

Above: Workmen's village at a city the ancient Egyptians called Djanet (modern name Medinet Habu, meaning City of Habu), Egypt. Workmen (or maybe slaves) lived in this complex northwest of Luxor.

Left: An African with a more advanced stage of leprosy. Persons living in biblical times used the term "leprosy" to describe any skin ailment.

mercifully, however, the Lord permitted her to return after 7 days. Returning would have required her to go through certain religious rituals before being restored to her previous position. The fact that the Israelites waited for her before moving on (v. 15) reveals something of the respect and level of leadership she held among the community. Her punishment, however, became a warning to the Israelites that sin has dire consequences (Deut 24:9).

Miriam's Death

Numbers 20:1 records Miriam's death. She is among only a handful of women whose deaths the Old Testament mentions.⁷ She died and was buried in the desert at Kadesh and, like her brothers, never had opportunity to enter the promised land. An examination of her life reveals that, like all who desire to follow God, two natures were at war within her. And when she chose to honor God, He used her as a leader to benefit her family and the Israelite community. The choice to honor God always benefits others, as well as ourselves. **B**

1. The exact meaning of Miriam's name is unclear. Suggestions include "God's gift," "beloved," "defiant," or "bitter." See R. Dean Register, "Miriam" in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1136.

2. Israelite women typically welcomed men who had been victorious in battle by dancing and using timbrels to celebrate their triumph. See Ephraim Stern, "Miriam" in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 12 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971).

3. Perhaps a precedent for women's ministry in the church today.

4. Glen S. Martin, *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers in Holman Old Testament Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 68-69.

5. John N. Oswalt, "Exodus" in *Genesis and Exodus in Cornerstone Biblical Commentary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), 399.

6. Had her father spit in her face, she would have received the same consequence (v. 14).

7. Sarah (Gen. 23:2); Deborah (Gen. 35:8); Rachel (Gen. 35:19); Judah's wife (Gen. 38:12); Levite's raped concubine (Judg. 19:28); Jezebel (2 Kings 9:33); Azubah (1 Chron. 2:19); and Ezekiel's wife (Ezek. 24:18).

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