

NEGLECTED CHARACTERS OF THE BIBLE: MIRIAM

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
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Exodus 2:1-10; 15:19-21
Numbers 12:1-14; 20:1

Today's sermon is my last in the series this summer on neglected characters of the Bible. We've been focusing on some of the "little people" in Scripture, who are rarely the subject of sermons. Today's "little person" is Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. If you know anything about Miriam, you may well object that she is hardly a little person. And you would be right, in that Miriam was one of the greatest leaders of early Israel, the first woman to be given the title of "prophet" and a dynamic personality who enjoyed unparalleled popularity and influence among the people of Israel.

Yet it is easy to miss Miriam if you don't pay close attention. Her "face time" in the Bible is hardly commensurate with the figure she seems to have cut during her lifetime. It is almost as though someone has deliberately played down her role in the founding of the nation of Israel—rewritten history to minimize her role. Traces of Miriam's story remain, but they are buried in bits and pieces, scattered through the Scripture. We have read the bulk of those fragments in our lessons this morning. Let's look at them in turn.

The first bit of Miriam's story is buried in the familiar tale of Moses in the bulrushes. You remember it. The Hebrews have become slaves in Egypt and the Pharaoh, concerned that they are having too many babies—as immigrants will sometimes do—has ordered that all Hebrew boy babies be killed by throwing them into the Nile River. When Moses is born, his mother cannot bear to obey, so she places her son in a papyrus basket—an "ark of bulrushes," the old King James version called it—and hides him among the reeds along the river bank. In one of those ironies the Hebrew Bible loves, it is Pharaoh's daughter who finds the baby in the basket when she comes down to the river to bathe. The princess takes pity on him and saves him—thwarting the will of her powerful father, and ultimately raising Moses as her own son. Straddling the worlds of royal court and slave quarters, Moses will be used by God to challenge Pharaoh to "let my people go" and lead the great Exodus of Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land.

It is easy to miss Miriam in this story, because she is not named. She is there, however, on that frightening day when Moses' mother, Jochebed, leaves him bobbing in the papyrus basket on the Nile. The Bible says merely, "His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him."¹ Miriam can't be much more than a child herself, but we soon see her self-possession and quick wit. The moment Pharaoh's daughter discovers the hidden baby, little Miriam boldly approaches the princess and offers to find her a Hebrew nurse for the infant. Pharaoh's daughter agrees, and who does Miriam bring her? None other than Moses' own mother. So, thanks to Miriam, little Moses grows up with both a mother's love and a princess's protection and patronage. It is Miriam who takes

¹ Exodus 2:4.

the initiative to shape the destiny of her younger brother, the baby who will become Israel's greatest spiritual leader.

This little fragment, buried in Exodus chapter 2, shows Miriam to be a model of discretion and timing. Wiser than her years, she negotiates, mediates and leads. As Old Testament scholar Phyllis Trible has observed, "If Pharaoh had recognized the power of women [like Miriam], he might well have reversed his decree and had daughters killed rather than sons."²

Miriam now disappears from the Exodus story for 13 chapters and eighty years. The Bible's focus is on Moses, occasionally assisted by his brother Aaron. Again, I imagine you remember what happens: Moses grows up in the royal court, resented, we may presume, by his own people. One day he kills an Egyptian overseer who is abusing a Hebrew slave and goes into exile in the land of Midian to escape punishment by the Egyptians. Many years later, Moses is still in Midian, tending his father-in-law's sheep, when God appears to him in a burning bush and commissions him to go to Pharaoh in God's name. He is to liberate the people of Israel from their slavery and lead them to a homeland of their own. Moses resists, but God turns aside his every excuse, not least that he is "slow of speech and slow of tongue,"³ promising that his brother Aaron "shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you."⁴ And so Moses and Aaron lock horns with Pharaoh and unleash a series of plagues on the Egyptians and finally lead the children of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob out of their bondage in Egypt and toward deliverance. But, as the Israelites depart, Pharaoh decides to pursue them, with all his armies and his chariots, to drag them back. It is a classic chase scene. The people are trapped, with the Red Sea in front of them and the Egyptian soldiers quickly closing in from behind. There appears to be no way out. And then God has Moses stretch out his hand over the sea and divide it, so that the people can cross over the dry sea bed and escape. The chariots and the army are in hot pursuit. They're right behind them as the Hebrews reach the far shore and then—Moses waves his hand again and the waters of the sea fall back in place and the entire Egyptian army is swallowed up and drowned.

Now this is one of the most triumphant moments in the entire Hebrew Bible. It is the culmination of the God's fundamental saving act, the seminal event in the founding of Israel as God's chosen people. And Miriam is there. She leads an ecstatic victory dance of the Israelite women, right there on the far shore of the Red Sea. And she sings to them a hymn of praise that becomes known as the Song of Miriam. It is generally considered to be some of the oldest poetry in the Bible: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."⁵

It is curious that Miriam reappears in such a prominent public role after having been so completely absent from the events leading up to this victory celebration. What is even more curious is that she is introduced here in Exodus 15—given a name for the first time in the Bible—as "the prophet Miriam." People are not called "prophet" casually in the Hebrew Bible. Miriam is the first woman in all Israel to be called a prophet. Not even

² Phyllis Trible, "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 168-169.

³ Exodus 4:10.

⁴ Exodus 4:16.

⁵ Exodus 15:21.

her brother Moses has been called a “prophet” at this point in the story. In fact, the sibling relationship between Miriam and Moses isn’t acknowledged here. Instead, Miriam is called “the sister of Aaron.” “Altogether the line ‘Miriam the prophet, sister of Aaron’ introduces her in a special way.”⁶

Contemporary biblical scholars like Phyllis Trible have speculated that Miriam’s role in the events leading up to the Exodus may have been far greater than Scripture records. Certainly, it is plausible that this resourceful and charismatic woman would have played a role in rallying the slave community behind her long-exiled brother Moses when he charged back into town after having got religion at the burning bush. People were called prophets by the people of Israel when they were understood to be reliable mouthpieces for God. If Miriam was remembered as a prophet present at the creation of the nation, she must have been a powerful interpreter of God’s liberating action among her people.

Why, then, does the Bible not say more about her? Why do we hear about Moses and Aaron, but not Miriam? We cannot know for sure. It’s worth remembering, though, that the Bible as we have it did not emerge from whole cloth. It was compiled by human beings from what we believe were diverse sources and traditions, over a very long period of time. The text itself bears evidence that the successive editors of the Bible shaped the tradition to elevate Moses in every way, probably at the expense of other early leaders like Miriam.

One way we see this shaping, for example, is in this 15th chapter of Exodus. Immediately preceding the Song of Miriam, there is a longer and more elaborate song attributed to Moses that also celebrates the Lord’s deliverance of the people through the sea.⁷ We didn’t read it this morning, but do take a look at it yourself later. Scholars generally agree that the Moses version was composed after the fact and is actually based on the Song of Miriam. The fact that Miriam’s Song remains in Exodus 15 at all is seen as evidence of its antiquity and its authority. In other words, the tradition about “the prophet Miriam” was so tenacious that later editors who wanted to keep the spotlight on Moses could not eliminate her role in the Exodus completely. Unable to squelch the Miriam tradition altogether, the editors appended the Song of Miriam in truncated form to their preferred version featuring Moses. They kept Miriam but diminished her importance.

Keep this possibility in mind as we move on to the third major remnant of Miriam’s story, in Numbers, chapter 12. The Book of Numbers, in the Hebrew Bible is known by the name *b^emidbar*, which means, “in the wilderness.” You may remember, the runaway slaves who listened to Miriam’s Song on the far shore of the Red Sea, journey on from there into the wilderness, where they will spend forty years. This time in the wilderness is a time of complaint and confusion and conflict. Moving from site to site, the people of Israel murmur, indeed rebel. When the going gets tough, they’re ready to forsake God and freedom and rush back to Egypt, where (they remember fondly) at least their masters fed them. God alternates between gracious acts and kindled anger. Nothing happens in an orderly way. We might say today there is a crisis of leadership.

⁶ Trible, 171.

⁷ Exodus 15:1-18.

By the time we get to Numbers chapter 12, Moses is overwhelmed. “Caught between the demands of the people and the blazing anger of the Lord, he protests [to God]...‘Did I conceive all this people? Did I bring them forth that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries the suckling child...?’ I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me.”⁸ So Moses seeks a new kind of leadership, a shared responsibility. At first, [God] appears to consent, ordering him to choose ‘seventy elders’ upon whom some of Moses’ spirit will rest that they too may bear the burden of the people.⁹ Moses complies, [but the seventy remain subordinate to him and so timid that the plan never really gets off the ground.]¹⁰ Then two men, not of the seventy, begin to prophesy independently of Moses, and there is controversy about whether this should be allowed. A power struggle rages.

And it is now that Miriam enters into the fray. Miriam and Aaron join forces against Moses. Miriam leads and Aaron supports her—in rebellion against Moses’ authority. They question Moses’ priestly credentials—his adherence to the purity code—because he has married a foreigner. And they challenge his supreme authority. “Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses?” they ask. “Has he not spoken through us also?”¹¹

It’s not an unreasonable question. After all, as “the prophet,” Miriam has already spoken for God at the sea and no doubt before that. Now in the wilderness she seeks an equal sharing of prophetic leadership.

According to the Bible, the Lord rebuffs Miriam. Furious, God confronts the rebels in a pillar of cloud and defines their brother’s unique status: “With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord.”¹² God answers the issue of leadership and authority by declaring a hierarchy of prophecy. Moses stands peerless at the top. So much for egalitarian prophecy. No one may attack Moses, it seems: “Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses,” God demands. “And the nostril of the Lord burned against them and God left.”¹³

As punishment, Miriam is struck with scales like snow; red hot anger becomes a cold white skin disease. Aaron is untouched, but he implores that Miriam be spared. Aaron appeals to Moses—not God!—bowing to his supremacy in the hierarchy. Moses complies with Aaron’s request: “O God, please, heal her!”¹⁴ God tempers but does not remove the punishment. Miriam is confined outside the camp for seven days. She is then restored to the community—deemed “clean” according to the Holiness Code—but never again to her former status. Miriam remains a marked woman, indeed, a warning for generations to come. You don’t challenge the Lord’s anointed. Even as they are about to enter the Promised Land years later, the people will be reminded: “Remember what the LORD your God did to Miriam on the way as you came forth out of Egypt.”¹⁵

⁸ Numbers 11:12, 14.

⁹ Numbers 11:16-25.

¹⁰ Tribble, 171-174.

¹¹ Numbers 12:2.

¹² Numbers 12:6.

¹³ Numbers 12:8-9.

¹⁴ Numbers 12:13.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 24:9 RSV.

“The vendetta continues unto her death. Miriam never speaks again [in the Bible], nor is she spoken to. In fact, for a time she vanishes entirely from the wilderness narrative. Then, just preceding her obituary [in Numbers chapter 20] comes a lengthy section of ritual [rules and regulations].¹⁶ The announcement of Miriam’s death immediately follows one rule alluding to leprosy and another] emphasizing the uncleanness of the dead: ‘The Israelites, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.’ [This is] no ordinary obituary [Dr. Tribble suggests,] but rather the culmination of the [campaign] against Miriam. If reasons for the attack are difficult to discern, the threat that she represented to the cultic establishment is abundantly evident. And that threat testifies to her prominence, power and prestige in early Israel. So important was this woman that detractors tabooed her to death, seeking to bury her forever in disgrace.”¹⁷

When all is said and done, what are we to make of Miriam? Traditional interpreters conclude that she was a gifted leader whose pride went before her fall and disgrace. By challenging Moses, she was rebelling against God and particularly against God’s sovereign right to work in history in unexpected ways, outside the control of human structures. Equality may be a strong human value, for example, but God can and does sometimes favor some of God’s servants over others. In other words, Moses was unique not because he merited it by some objective standard, but simply because God elected to treat him that way. That is the shadow side of grace.

Feminist scholars have challenged this time-honored view of Miriam. To be sure, the dominant story line of the Bible itself goes to great lengths to exalt Moses at the expense of Miriam. Yet the fragments about Miriam that remain in Scripture give a sense of her stature among the people of Israel and the special devotion which they had toward her. “From the start Miriam works on behalf of the people. Her role in delivering one of them, Moses, [from the bulrushes,] expands to leadership of all Israel at the sea. Thus a certain poignancy attends the closing narration of the leprosy account. She has been excluded from the camp for seven days. But [the Bible says] ‘the people did not set out on the march till Miriam was brought in again.’¹⁸ No matter that the Lord has decreed the supreme leadership of Moses; no matter that the divine anger has already shown its power against the will of the people; no matter that the white-scaled Miriam stands before them as proof of divine indictment and continuing intimidation; no matter. The people do not set out on the march till Miriam is brought back again. Those whom she has served do not forsake her in the time of tribulation. They wait. Never do they assail her as on various occasions they attack Aaron, Moses and God. And their allegiance survives [right up to] her death. [Miriam’s terse obituary] contains no less than three references emphasizing the presence of the whole people of Israel when she dies and is buried in Kadesh. The steadfast devotion of the people to Miriam indicates [there is more going on here] than the official story allows...

“The priesthood [who wrote these early books of the Bible may have] repudiated Miriam, [but the people did not forget her.] Six hundred years later, the prophet Micah

¹⁶ Numbers 19:1-22.

¹⁷ Tribble, 179.

¹⁸ Numbers 12.15 RSV.

stated boldly what others worked hard to deny, that in early Israel, Miriam belonged to a trinity of leadership. “Hear what the Lords says,” proclaimed Micah, “For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.”¹⁹

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.

¹⁹ Micah 6:4.