

# MIRIAM

## EXODUS 2:3-10; 15:20-21, NUMBERS 12, 20:1

Women in the Bible Series

### OPENING PRAYER

Lord, open our hearts to receive wisdom from you. Amen.

### EXEGESIS AND REFLECTION

According to scholars, Exodus, Genesis, Leviticus and Numbers are based on several sources and traditions and were compiled around the 6th century BCE. Exodus is the second book in the Hebrew Scriptures which gives an account of the period of Israelite slavery in Egypt – their resistance, escape, wanderings in the wilderness, return to the “promised land” and the covenant between God and God’s people. Miriam, with her brothers Moses and Aaron, led the Hebrew people throughout the forty years in the wilderness as they searched for a land to call home. The people of Israel were forced into exile. Theirs was a hard life and many yearned for the stability and settled life they had left back in Egypt. Water, food and other basic necessities were scarce. Living conditions were poor. Women would have been significant in these times of hardship and threat to community. They maintained family, safety and sanity and were resourceful in providing physical sustenance as well as spiritual nurture. Women were essential in ensuring the survival of their tribes and cultures and the protection of life forms in their eco-system. They also preserved rituals and ceremonies in worship and community life. The stories as we have them in the Bible were edited much later by male priests, but there are hints that women had a thriving cultural tradition of their own – most of which has unfortunately been lost because it was never recorded, as men’s stories were. Women played important roles, which included subverting the system and enabling the escape (Exodus 3.22). They helped to keep hope alive by organising and leading community celebrations, as they did upon safely crossing the sea (Ex 15.1-21).

It was in such a time when her people were enslaved in Egypt that Miriam emerged as a leader. She is named in a list of ancestors together with her brothers, Moses and Aaron (see Numbers 26.59 & 1 Chronicles 6.3). Miriam is believed to be the unnamed sister in the birth story of Moses (Exodus 2.4-7). As a child, she showed significant initiative, courage, wisdom and confidence, and was strategic and skilful when she cleverly worked with her mother to save her brother, Moses. Miriam watched over him and organised for him to be taken into Pharaoh’s house-hold. She was resourceful and organised for her mother to be Moses’ wet-nurse and care-giver. This is a well-known story, which shows that the survival of Moses was significantly supported by the courage and ingenuity of his mother and sister (Exodus 2. 1-10).

Miriam is the first person in the Bible to be called a prophet (Exodus 15:20) and is named as one of four women prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. The others were Deborah (Judges 4), Huldah (2 Kings 22.14-15), and the unnamed woman in Isaiah 8.3. Prophets were God’s spokespersons

who played leadership roles in religious or sacred matters and were known for addressing injustices in their societies. They were priests, poets, musicians, warriors and dancers. Prophets in the Bible spoke loudly and clearly about the real situations of people's painful suffering, brokenness and other injustices which they faced. They addressed issues of religious conflicts, empire and all forms of power abuse, economic exploitation, poverty and social injustices.

Miriam was a leader who was grounded in the struggle, resilience and cultural life of her ancestors. She was a poet, singer and a dancer. She had charisma and great ability to mobilise people. She was an essential prophet for her people during their escape from slavery and wanderings in the wilderness. Miriam led by example and with love and solidarity in her people's struggles. The community accepted her leadership and showed their loyalty and solidarity with her even when she was kept outside the camp for seven days (Numbers 12:14-15). Miriam is known for the victory song, the "Song of Miriam" (Ex 15.1-21), one of the oldest poetic verses in the Old Testament. Her song has been preserved as an important part of the ritual of celebration. Miriam's recognition as a respected leader in her community was not an overnight event. It was a growing process that began in the early years of her life. Her skills were recognised and used as gifts for her family and community. Her role as a leader for the whole community shows her acceptance by both men and women. The refusal of the entire community to journey on until Miriam was healed of her illness is another testimony to her standing. The reference to her in Micah 6.4 reconfirms her status identifies Yahweh's choice of Miriam to play an important role in saving the people of Israel.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Name significant woman leaders of your community, church and country. Share their stories and say what stands out and what is revolutionary.

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## CLOSING PRAYER

Sovereign God, you call us to serve as leaders in challenging situations where the rights of people are trampled upon. Help us to break down barriers of gender, race, sexual orientation, age, class and caste that all may have life in fullness. Amen.

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Women of the Old Testament Resource: <http://www.womeninthebible.net/1.7.Miriam.htm>