

# The faithful of old— studied by the young

## Miriam: the prophetess

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*Miriam was the oldest of an outstanding family. Under God's good hand she became the saviour of her younger brother, Moses, the supreme leader of Israel. Her older brother, Aaron, would become Moses' helper and later the first high priest for the nation. She led the nation in joyful celebration at the fall of Egypt at the Red Sea, and, apart from one lapse, supported Moses throughout the wilderness journey.*

**M**IRIAM MANAGES in a few verses to supply a lifetime's worth of lessons for the reader who decides to learn from her courage, faith and mistakes. Her most notable act of faith occurs when she is a young girl; she is unnamed, known only as "[Moses'] sister" (Ex. 2:4). Subsequent appearances of Miriam in the Biblical narrative are equally as memorable, and she fulfils her name of 'rebellious' (*Strong's* 4813), quite at odds with the maid we meet in Exodus 2. By looking closely at Miriam we find once again a character in the Bible with whom we can identify, possessing many of the same qualities as we do today: selfishness, pride and jealousy. We take consolation from the evidence of human nature in her behaviour; it reassures us that we are not so different from the people we use as our guides in our walk of faith. These characteristics, although appearing negative—and they certainly are—can be edifying if we look at them with a mind determined to find positive examples.

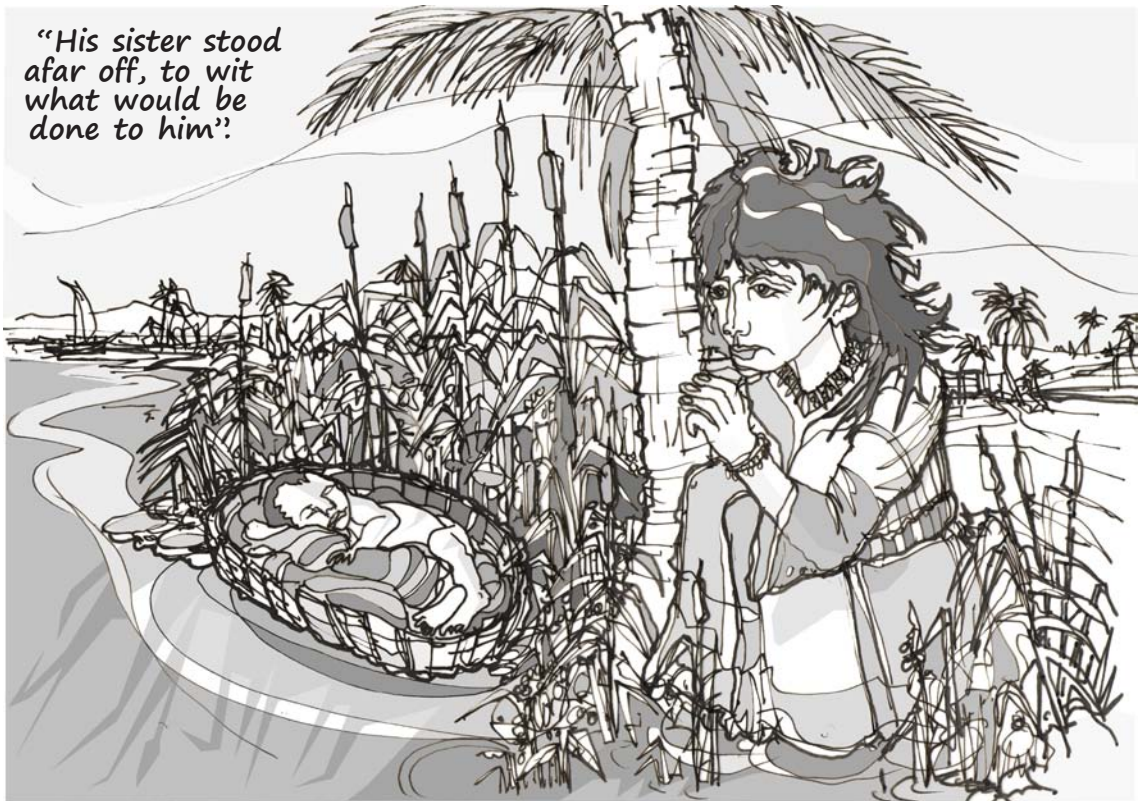
That Miriam remains anonymous in her introduction in Exodus 2 is significant for many reasons. However, it is unwise to think that Miriam is unnamed merely because she is unimportant or because we are supposed to ignore her until she comes into her own later in the Exodus account. I would suggest she is unnamed at this point because we do not need to know her name and the associations it may evoke. Reading this story, sisters can identify with the little maid watching

protectively over the small baby: "his sister stood afar off, to wit what would be done to him" (v. 4); and likewise with the young princess as she sees a vulnerable innocent: "she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him" (v. 6). Neither of these females has a name; they are simply a 'sister' and a 'daughter'. At the risk of reading too much into a simple fact, it is important to consider this as an emphasis on our roles as sisters and daughters, to watch carefully over those who need help, protect the vulnerable and fulfil a maternal role towards those who are motherless or lacking guidance.

### The influence of good example

Miriam had many examples of faithful people to look to in her life, and she had experience of strong women who stood up for their faith. The most significant was her mother Jochebed, who faithfully kept her son alive: "when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months" (v. 2); who entrusted him to the Lord in the basket; and who taught him when she weaned him as a young child.

Miriam would also have heard of, or witnessed, the response of Shiphrah and Puah to Pharaoh's decree to kill all male Hebrew babies: "the midwives feared God, and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men children alive" (1:17). Their defiance of this decree and consequent accounting for it to Pharaoh showed their dedication to God's will, as they greatly risked their lives in order to obey the Lord's command. Their reward, "God dealt well with the midwives . . . because the midwives feared God . . . He made them houses" (vv. 20,21), would have been duly noted by the people, who "multiplied, and waxed very mighty" (v. 20) as a consequence. This proof



that the Lord rewards those who diligently seek Him would have provided a firm foundation of faith for the young Miriam.

Likewise the actions of Pharaoh’s daughter would have made quite an impression; her sympathy towards a Hebrew child and her subsequent care of this boy evidenced a kind, maternal woman who was willing to risk punishment to protect an innocent. No doubt Pharaoh could have had her put to death for her disobedient actions.

Miriam also shows great courage in this episode: “Then said his sister to Pharaoh’s daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?” (2:7). She is a subordinate, and yet she boldly approaches the ruler’s daughter. The amenable response from Pharaoh’s daughter, and her instruction to Jochebed, “Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages” (v. 9), demonstrate her generosity, as does her raising of him as her son (v. 10).

During this exchange Miriam shows a discerning heart: “the maid went and called the child’s mother” (v. 8). In a situation of pressure Miriam acts with reflection; instead of choosing the clos-

est Hebrew woman to rescue Moses, she goes to find her mother and thus sets up the opportunity for Moses to gain his spiritual education. It is this approach we should adopt in our everyday lives; we need to consider the long-term repercussions of decisions we make, rather than grasping at straws or at the first alternative.

### **Miriam as a role model**

Of all the challenges and opposition faced by a believer in the modern world, it is the defined roles to be fulfilled by men and women that are one of the most difficult to explain and overcome. It is most important in the current climate for us to remember these roles we have been given; women are not marginalised, as we are led by the media, our peers and our tutors to believe. Yes, we do subscribe to a ‘gender stereotyping’, but why is this a negative?

Unlike Miriam, who had many examples of strong women in her own time to follow, many of us today are faced with feminist pressure and are encouraged towards female liberation from a patriarchal world view. Arguing effectively against such ideas without alienating nonbelievers is extremely difficult, but with examples of

women such as Miriam our task can be made considerably easier.

Miriam's situation is atypical, in her lack of husband and children, for such a prominent Biblical figure; even strong women such as Abigail and Ruth are brought to us in relation to their husbands. When Miriam rebels against Moses she is punished, reinforcing to the women around her that the male authority paradigm as put forth by God is not to be challenged; and, although she does not have a husband, Miriam is not without responsibility to and respect for male authority.

On the other hand, it is reassuring to remember that Miriam's lack of a husband or children does not devalue her in the eyes of God or, importantly, the eyes of the people; it is not a cause for scorn and derision as it frequently is today. Derogatory connotations associated with spinsterhood can make us lose sight of what the Apostle Paul counted as a great advantage: "I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I" (1 Cor. 7:8). In Micah 6 Miriam is mentioned with her brothers: "I brought

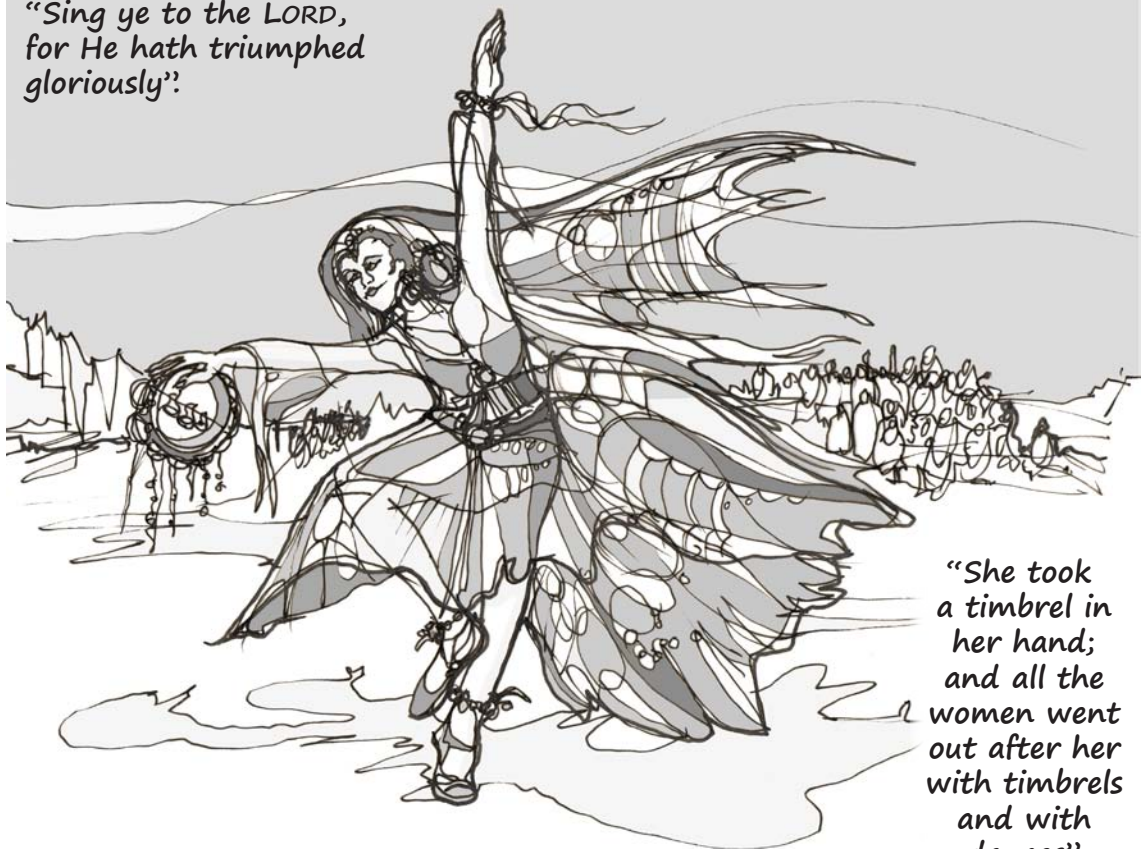
thee up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of servants; and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam" (v. 4). Miriam's work in the Lord was not restricted to the early maternal role of watching over Moses; she was "sent before" the children of Israel as an important figure to help lead the people to the Promised Land.

### Leading the celebrations

In Exodus 15 we have the first mention of Miriam by name. After Moses and the children of Israel sang unto the Lord, detailing the amazing things He had done for them on leaving Egypt—"for He hath triumphed gloriously" (v. 1)—Miriam led the women in celebration. It is here where Miriam takes centre stage, albeit briefly, for the second recorded time; she "took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances" (v. 20).

It is written that she was "Miriam the prophetess" (v. 20), a title given to just five other women in the Bible, of whom only three were faithful. On

*"Sing ye to the LORD,  
for He hath triumphed  
gloriously":*



*"She took  
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and with  
dances":*

closer inspection we find that the word “prophetess” (*Strong’s* 5031) means an ‘inspired woman, by implication a poetess, by association the wife of a prophet’. It is interesting to note, however, that the words Miriam sang were a direct quotation from Moses’ song: “Sing ye to the LORD, for He hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea” (vv. 21,1). Although she is described as ‘inspired’, and later refers to God having spoken through her (Num. 12:2), Miriam does not sing words of her own. As a woman in a high position within the camp of Israel she must be a role model for the other women. Here she is fulfilling that. She does not sing her own words, she agrees with and emphasises what Moses has sung, and she leads all the women in music and dancing in praise to God for His wondrous deeds.

### **Sibling rivalry**

Later in life Miriam and Aaron rebelled against Moses “because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married” (Num. 12:1); however, their grievances relate more to his position as leader. They said, “Hath the LORD indeed spoken only by Moses? hath He not spoken also by us?” (v. 2). They felt that they were as important as Moses, and perhaps they resented his position. Miriam was severely punished for this rebellion: “Miriam became leprous, white as snow” (v. 10); and she was put out of the camp: “let her be shut out from the camp seven days, and after that let her be received in again” (v. 14).

This illness made a very public example for the children of Israel; Miriam’s rebellion is punished in a way that clearly sends out the message that God is in control, and rebellion against His will is not to be tolerated. Her disobedience emphasises Miriam’s humanity and makes it very easy for us to identify with her, for who has not resented or felt the perceived unfairness of a situation? The fact that it was against her brother is particularly poignant; it must have been difficult to maintain a distinction between Moses as her fleshly brother and Moses as God’s appointed leader of the children of Israel. Sibling rivalry has always been common in the Bible—Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau—as it is common among us today. It is admirable that Miriam and Aaron managed to work closely with each other and with Moses for many years, concentrating on their fraternity within the faith rather than their fleshly family ties.

Miriam’s punishment is a double punishment. She suffers the social stigma of being banished

from the camp until she is healed, and her punishment also punishes Aaron. As the high priest, Aaron would be unclean and imperfect if he became leprous, and as such he could no longer perform his duties as priest; so he escapes leprosy. Thus he would have to put his sister out of the camp knowing full well that he should be with her; his suffering would be the mental anguish at his sister’s position and his own apparent lack of punishment. Aaron pleads with Moses immediately upon seeing Miriam’s leprosy: “Alas, my lord, I beseech thee . . . Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother’s womb” (vv. 11,12).

Moses also feels deeply about Miriam’s punishment; he responds to Aaron’s plea with one of his own: “Moses cried unto the LORD, saying, Heal her now, O God, I beseech Thee” (v. 13). After seven days the punishment is complete and Miriam is whole again. It is particularly interesting to note that the camp did not move on during this time: “the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in” (v. 15). I do not think for a moment that any of the Israelites would have been left behind unprotected or alone. However, it shows Miriam’s significance that the camp does not begin their next journey without her. She is deemed sufficiently important to have the journey delayed for seven days until she is healed.

### **A noteworthy example**

It is noteworthy that Miriam is one of the few prominent women who provide an example for the women of Israel over a prolonged period of time; many of the women in the Bible have only one great event of their life recorded. Like Moses and Aaron, Miriam never set foot in the Promised Land; she died in the desert of Zin, and was buried in Kadesh (20:1). The meaning of Kadesh is ‘sanctuary’ (*Strong’s* 6946). This carries with it the idea that Miriam is kept in a sanctuary awaiting the return of the Lord Jesus Christ and the resurrection of the faithful.

There are no further details surrounding Miriam’s death; we are not told if she was old and frail or whether she was not allowed to see the Promised Land this side of the Kingdom because she had disobeyed God in the wilderness. Whichever circumstance it was does not affect our view of Miriam. Her following of God throughout her life is a wonderful example of a deeply human woman who, facing many hardships, continued to struggle to reach the Promised Land and give glory to God for what He had done.