

MIRIAM – Exodus 2:4-8; 15:20-21; Numbers 12:1-16 – Kathleen McVey
Main Points with Discussion Questions

Kathleen was drawn to Miriam because she was a prophet, a leader of her people, a musician, composer, and performer. All of these roles were evident when Miriam led the Hebrew women in singing and dancing following the destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. Miriam's song is a celebration of the vindication of God's people and the triumph of God's justice.

Miriam in the Pentateuch (first five books of the Hebrew Bible; the Torah)

- Miriam appears in three distinct roles. Her first role (in Exodus 2:4-8) is as the protective big sister of the infant Moses. She watches from a distance as her brother lies hidden in a basket of reeds at the riverbank. When the daughter of Pharaoh discovers baby Moses, his sister (nameless here) volunteers to find a Hebrew wet nurse. Later we learn that the sister's name is Miriam, and that she has another brother, Aaron.
- The second portrayal – the main focus of this presentation – is Miriam as a prophet and leader of the people, alongside Moses and Aaron. In this role, Miriam appears in Exodus 15:20-21, singing and leading the women as they dance and play tambourines to celebrate God's triumph over Pharaoh's forces. We read:
Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.'
- In Numbers 12, we see Miriam as a bit of a rebel. Both she and her brother Aaron question Moses' exclusive prophetic authority. Miriam asks, *Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us [Miriam and Aaron] also?* (Numbers 12:2) God, speaking from the pillar of cloud, rebukes them and affirms Moses' unique role. As punishment, Miriam is afflicted with a skin disease (Aaron receives no punishment). However, Aaron begs Moses, who in turn, speaks to God on Miriam's behalf, and after the prescribed seven days of quarantine, she is restored to the community. No more words or deeds of Miriam's are mentioned until her death and burial at Kadesh – briefly noted in Numbers 20:1.
- Later traditions, both within the Bible and beyond it, affirm and elaborate each of these three themes: Miriam as vigilant, **protective older sister**; as **prophet singing, dancing and playing in celebration of God's work of liberation and justice**, and as **rebellious leader, punished for questioning Moses' preeminence**, yet, perhaps, continuing to serve her community as a conduit of divine favor.

A closer look at Miriam as a singing, dancing and playing prophet - celebrating God's work of liberation and justice (Exodus 15:20-21 and later interpretations)

- Miriam first appears by name in the story of the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 15:20-21. She is identified as “the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister.” She leads the Hebrew women in singing, dancing and playing the tambourine. Though the word “prophet” is not defined here, Miriam is the first biblical woman to bear this title. Her song consists of a single couplet, following eighteen verses of the “Song of the Sea” (attributed to Moses). The longer song elaborates themes of holy war and salvation couched in a dramatic description of the Red Sea crossing.
- Since Miriam’s song is a repetition of the beginning of the longer song, is Miriam only giving us a feminine echo – with the significant additions of tambourines and dance? If so, this might seem like a diminished kind of leadership.
- However, behind this and other references to Miriam – many scholars discern earlier oral traditions which present Miriam as the equal of Moses and Aaron. These earlier traditions were gradually pushed into the background by the time we meet Miriam here in Exodus. For example, an echo of the earlier tradition is heard in Micah 6:4, where God asserts, *I brought you up out from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, **and Miriam.***
- These earlier traditions point to the possibility that the entire song of Exodus 15 was *Miriam’s*, or that the longer version was later expanded from her short couplet.

Questions for discussion

- How important is music in your life? In your experience of worship?
- Why do you think that so much of human history is preserved through the medium of music? (Think of ballads, national anthems, hymns, the Psalms, chants, pop music, show tunes, love songs, funeral dirges, opera, birthday, graduations, and wedding music)
- Why do you think Miriam is called a prophet? Recall that prophets are those who speak God’s word to God’s people. (Hint: read the longer version of the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15:1-18).

Miriam at Qumran (site of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls)

(written between the 3rd-1st centuries BCE, the Dead Sea Scrolls include the most ancient biblical manuscripts. They were hidden in 11 caves in the Judean desert surrounding the Dead Sea in 68 BCE to protect them from advancing Roman armies. In 1947, the first of the scrolls were discovered by a Bedouin shepherd boy. The Princeton Theological Seminary Dead Sea Scroll Project has been at work since 1985 locating, preserving, translating and publishing scrolls and fragments from the Qumran caves).

- Among the manuscripts discovered at Qumran, Miriam is mentioned in seven fragments. In one fragment, her song is presented in an expanded form in language similar to that of Exodus. Scholar George Brooke characterizes this fragment as “the long-lost song of Miriam.” He asserts that it belongs to “a genre of women’s songs that not only celebrates God’s victories, but in which God accomplishes this [victory]. . . through the weak and downtrodden; God’s victory is shame for the proud, the arrogant and the mighty - and victory belongs to the powerless.”
- Dead Sea Scrolls scholar, Hanna Tervanotko, draws similar conclusions. She judges that the “seven lines of earlier unknown material” – additional words to Miriam’s Song found in scroll fragment 4Q365 - are NOT [as some have thought] “a remake of the Song of Moses of Exod. 15:1-19. Instead, the Song of Miriam preserved in 4Q365 indicates that different versions of the song attributed to the figure of Miriam circulated in early Judaism...”
- What might this expanded version of Miriam’s song mean? Several things: these fragments strengthen the picture of Miriam, and show that she was considered an appropriate character to deliver the expanded theological message [there is a lot of information about who God is and how God is at work in Exodus 15:1-19]. Perhaps the scrolls support the notion that among some groups, Miriam never lost her stature as a prophet and leader of the people OR that her image was lifted up again during times when she and her message seemed most relevant.

Early Christian and Byzantine views of Miriam

- From the beginning, Christians embraced Miriam as a model. The mother of Jesus, Mary, has in fact, the same name as Miriam. Her song of praise and gratitude – the Magnificat – as recorded in Luke 1:46-55, is modeled both on Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2.1-10 and on Miriam’s song in Exodus 15:20-21. Like both Miriam and Hannah, the mother of Jesus celebrates in song the uplifting of the weak and the downfall of the strong: *for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name...He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*
- In many different times and places Christians have continued to look to Miriam’s example of female leadership of the people of God. Kathleen presents two ancient examples below.
- Jacob of Serug, was a 6th century bishop of the Syriac-speaking church. He wrote many hymns, one of which is a defense of women’s choirs. Why would one need to defend women’s singing in church? At the time some church leaders contended that by singing in the liturgy, women were, in effect, teaching men. As they saw it, female singing violated 1 Timothy 2.11-12, *Let a woman (or wife) learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man (or her husband); she is to*

keep silent. To counteract this view Jacob invokes the example of his predecessor, St. Ephrem, who established women’s choirs and composed songs for them to sing. Jacob compares Ephrem to Moses in dozens of verses and in a reprise of Exodus 15, explicitly emphasizes women’s inclusion in God’s saving act of deliverance. Jacob’s defense of women’s choirs provides a sweeping declaration of the equality of women with men in the People of God – one that is built on the example of Miriam’s actions and song.

- Our second example comes from a Byzantine manuscript known as the *Khludov Psalter* (Constantinople, 9th century). It shows Miriam, elegantly attired, with flowing locks and adorned with jewelry, playing cymbals raised above her head, and dancing gracefully. Looking toward the parted sea, she encourages Moses (identifiable by his staff) and the people to complete their passage to safety. She has all the trappings of a refined and confident leader – and her attentive followers include women and men of all ages – even Moses himself. The adjacent text is Exodus 15: 1b-8 without the usual mention of Moses. The image clearly shows Miriam front and center – such that we might imagine that the entire song of Exodus 15 is hers.



ᾄσωμεν τῷ Κυρίῳ, ἐνδόξως γὰρ δεδόξασται·

Let us sing to the Lord, for he is very greatly glorified:

Ἴππον καὶ ἀναβάτην ἔρριψεν εἰς θάλασσαν. βοηθὸς καὶ σκεπαστὴς ἐγένετό μοι εἰς σωτηρίαν·

Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. He was to me a helper and protector for salvation:

Οὗτός μου Θεός, καὶ δοξάσω αὐτόν, Θεὸς τοῦ πατρὸς μου, καὶ ὑψώσω αὐτόν.

This is my God and I will glorify him; my father’s God, and I will exalt him.

Κύριος συντριβῶν πολέμους, Κύριος ὄνομα αὐτοῦ. ἄρματα Φαραὼ καὶ τὴν δύναμιν αὐτοῦ ἔρριψεν εἰς θάλασσαν,

The Lord bringing wars to nought*, the Lord [is] his name. He has cast the chariots of Pharaoh and his host into the sea,

Ἐπιλέκτους ἀναβάτας τριστάτας κατεπόντισεν ἐν ἐρυθρᾷ θαλάσῃ, πόντω ἐκάλυψεν αὐτούς, κατέδυσαν εἰς βυθὸν ὡσεὶ λίθος.

The chosen mounted captains: they were swallowed up in the Red Sea. He covered them with the sea: they sank to the depth like a stone.

Ἡ δεξιὰ σου, Κύριε, δεδόξασται ἐν ἰσχύϊ· ἡ δεξιὰ σου χεὶρ, Κύριε, ἔθραυσεν ἔχθρους, καὶ τῷ πλήθει τῆς δόξης σου συνέτριψας τοὺς ὑπεναντίους·

Thy right hand, O God, has been glorified in strength; thy right hand, O God, has broken the enemies. And in the abundance of thy glory thou hast broken the adversaries to pieces:

Ἄπέστειλας τὴν ὀργὴν σου καὶ κατέφαγεν αὐτούς ὡς καλάμην. καὶ διὰ πνεύματος τοῦ θυμοῦ σου διέστη τὸ ὕδωρ·

Thou sentest forth thy wrath, it devoured them as stubble. And by the breath of thine anger the water parted asunder;

Ἐπάγη ὡσεὶ τεῖχος τὰ ὕδατα, ἐπάγη

Congealed as a wall were the waters; congealed

Exodus 15: 1b-8b *Septuagint* version

*Not as the Hebrew, "The Lord is a warrior."

Some historical background on this image:

The *Khludov Psalter* is a polemical manuscript, fashioned and illustrated as a defense of icons and the devotion to them, in the mid-ninth century in Constantinople. The context was a centuries-long conflict, known as the Iconoclastic Controversy, which shook Byzantine Christianity to its core. On one side, the Iconoclasts – or “image breakers” - opposed all religious images on Scriptural and theological grounds, and they destroyed those images in the belief that God’s favor would come to them in battle with their enemies. Some bishops were

prominent in leading this faction, but especially important were emperors who were military leaders. On the other side, the Iconodules – “lovers or worshippers of images”- who believed that God approved of the use of images in worship. Bishops and theologians formulated Scriptural and theological arguments for their views as well. But they were led by empresses, allied with ordinary women, and monks. The controversy raged for about 150 years and included bloody persecutions punctuating the seating and unseating of patriarchs in Constantinople. This manuscript was produced at the end of the conflict by the side led by the women at a time when a new celebration was introduced to the liturgical calendar. Empress Theodora introduced a new feast - Orthodoxy Sunday - a celebration of the restoration and ongoing veneration of religious images in the church and in society at large. Evidently, the image of Miriam’s celebratory leadership was the perfect symbol of that victory – so much so that she, for once, eclipses Moses.

Miriam’s significance still

Miriam is an attractive and challenging figure – clearly loved by many and appropriated differently according to the concerns and intentions of her admirers. One thing is clear. Hers is a prophetic voice both for women’s leadership and for God’s exaltation of the poor and weak over the rich and powerful. That is a voice needed today as much as ever.

Questions for discussion

- Of the three roles that Miriam plays in the Hebrew Bible - **protective older sister, prophet singing, dancing and playing in celebration of God’s work of liberation and justice**, and **rebellious leader punished for questioning Moses’ preeminence** – with which do you most resonate and why?
- What captures your attention in Miriam’s story as a whole?
- Why do you think the figure of Miriam continued to be important - even millennia after her death?
- If Miriam were sitting across from you now, what questions would you ask her?
- If Miriam were alive today, what movements might she join? (Poor People’s March, National Association of Church Musicians, Women’s Rabbinic Network) – let your imagination run wild!
- If you named your daughter Miriam, what would you tell her about her biblical namesake?