

## **Week 16) April 13-19—Exodus 14-18—Miriam, Women Dancing with Tambourines**

### 1). Exodus 15:20-21—**Miriam** ~1400-1200 BC

Miriam is the first and most well-known prophetess among the Israelites. She was remembered as the premier female leader during the children of Israel's exodus from Egypt (Ex 15:20-21). She is best known as Moses's oldest sister. In the genealogical record of 1 Chr 6:3, Aaron and Moses are listed before Miriam, but that probably reflects the separation of gender more than their birth order. She is the daughter of two Levites: Amram and Jochebed, who were related as nephew and paternal aunt, or possibly cousins depending on the translation (Ex 6:20). The Bible focuses on her role as a sister and prophetess but does not mention if she were also a wife or mother (which is unusual among biblical unnamed women).

Miriam was raised in or near Goshen, in the northeastern Nile Delta region (Gen 45:10). By the time of her life, Goshen had become the large ghetto of Israelite slaves. Archaeologists have found a likely site of a densely populated large city built with mud-brick construction with narrow streets and alleys that was inhabited during the Egyptian Middle to New Kingdoms—or the timeline of late Genesis and early Exodus period.

**Young Girl.** Miriam is named in three scenes in the wilderness, and most likely was the unnamed big sister who followed her mother's reed basket down the Nile to guard her baby brother Moses (Ex 2:1-10). Her mother, Jochebed, knew of her responsibility and trusted her with this matter of life and death for the three-month-old baby boy. We also read of Miriam's bravery to speak to the Egyptian princess on behalf of her mother. Despite the pharaoh's ruling, Miriam made the arrangements for her mother to remain close to her son as a wet nurse—which probably lasted over two years.

Miriam is most often assumed to be the unnamed big sister of Moses. If that is correct, she would have been aware that her little brother, Moses, lived in pharaoh's court, and perhaps of the conditions why he fled to Midian at age forty (Act 7:23).

**Freedom from Egypt.** She probably knew of Aaron's efforts to find him in the desert decades later and perhaps heard him share the details of his call as a prophet when he returned to Goshen. Miriam was over eighty years old when Moses and Aaron attempted to negotiate with the pharaoh so that the Israelites could leave to worship in the wilderness (Ex 7:7). She would have lived through the ten plagues, including the importance of placing blood on the door and lintel of her dwelling. She may have eaten the first Passover with Moses and Aaron and others of her family. Miriam joined with the hundreds of thousands of Israelites who fled Egypt and escaped through the Red Sea. Yet she is not mentioned during any of these events.

The first scene where her name is mentioned is when the Israelites are safely out of reach from the Egyptian armies. God's miraculous hand closed the water over their enemies and they drowned. Moses began the celebration and "Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances" (Ex 15:20). Miriam led the women in dancing and sang: "Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea" (Ex 15:21). As her story unfolds, we see that she was beloved by many, and she worked with Moses to help the Israelites see God's miraculous blessings.

In the chaotic exodus from Egypt, the presence of timbrels (small hand drums) raises the question about priorities and preparation. Given the urgency of the departure—the Israelites left in such haste that their bread had no time to rise (Ex. 12:39)—how did multiple women bring or make musical instruments?

Several possibilities exist. First, the timbrel may have been considered essential equipment, as vital to worship as any other religious item the Israelites carried from Egypt. Ancient Near Eastern cultures regularly incorporated music into religious celebration, making instruments as necessary as priestly garments or sacred vessels. Second, these simple percussion instruments—typically consisting of a wooden hoop with animal skin stretched across it—could have been quickly fashioned from materials at hand, either in Egypt or even during the three-day journey to the Red Sea. Third, and perhaps most significantly, Miriam herself or others—chose to celebrate and thank God for their survival. She either anticipated their safe escape and victory or she creatively found the means to make instruments to celebrate God's triumph. The presence of these timbrels therefore testifies to Miriam's faith as much as to their musical tradition.

***Punished for murmuring with leprosy.*** The second scene where her name is mentioned comes weeks later. She would have been at the foot of Mt. Sinai when Moses ascended, at the preparing and raising of the sacred Tabernacle where her brother Aaron was anointed as the High Priest. But nothing is mentioned until she and Aaron murmur against Moses, "Does the LORD speak only through Moses?" they said. "Does He not also speak through us?" (Num 12:2). The problem was multifaceted, but the text explains that "Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married" (12:1). Was there a power struggle? Did the new wife not appreciate the leadership of Moses' siblings? Furthermore, the text does not say if Moses' first wife, Zipporah the Midianite, had died, or why the second wife was despised. With only her nationality mentioned, did they think she was not equal to their Levitical lineage? Yet modern revelation shows us that God directed Moses's marriages (D&C 132:1, 38).

God condemned both older siblings: "When there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" (Num 12:6-8, NIV).

Once God left in a cloud at the front of the Tabernacle, Miriam received the harsh punishment of leprosy. This suggests that she played a major role in their dissension. Other textual details support this: Miriam's name was first, the verb "spake" is in the feminine (יָרַבָּהּ, "and she said"), Aaron is only described as a follower, and the annoyance about the new wife is peculiarly feminine (*Pulpit Commentary*, Num 12:1).

Immediately Aaron asks Moses to plead for the healing of their sister, and God does. Miriam followed the protocol of leaving the camp for a week to make sure her skin condition did not spread. We are not told what she felt during that week of solitude, but the whole camp of Israel rejoiced when she returned, and they moved on (Num 12:15; Deu 24:9).

***Death.*** The last scene where Miriam is named is at her death. It is the first month, or Passover season again. It appears to be within a year or two of their entrance into their Promised Land. Moses had called the whole camp of Israel together again, but there was not enough water in the desert of Zin. Miriam was over 120 years old when she died (Num 20:1). Her death is only briefly mentioned to give attention to the younger generation of thirsty Israelites complaining to Moses. The drought was so devastating that we have no reference to mourning for Miriam's death. However, in a few months, when the camp journeyed from Kadesh to Mt. Hor, Aaron died, and they mourned for him "thirty days, even all the house of Israel" (Num 20:29).

***Miriam mentioned across scripture.*** Centuries later, the Prophet Micah remembered Miriam as a leader along with her brothers: "I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam" (Mic 6:4, NIV).

Miriam's name became a favorite for baby girls generations later as we find eight women in the NT called Mary, the Greek version of Miriam: Mary of Nazareth, Mary of Magdala, Mary of Bethany, Mary wife of Cleophas, Mary the mother of James and Joses, Mary of Jerusalem, Mary of Rome, and the other Mary. The name Miriam also appears in 1 Chr 4:17, in a genealogy list of Judah from the house of Caleb, but textual scholars assume it is a great-grandson.

## **2). Ex 15:20 — Women Dancing with Tambourines ~1400-1200 BC**

Miriam led “all the women” (including but not limited to girls 12 and over) in singing and dancing to celebrate God’s deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and their crossing of the Red Sea on dry ground: “Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances” (Ex 15:20). A timbrel, tambourine, or tabret is a handheld wooden frame or hoop with animal skin stretched across it like a drum.

The OT contains many examples of women, like Miriam, singing, dancing, and/or playing a musical instrument to celebrate victories or to praise God (e.g., Jdg 5:1; 11:34; 1 Sam 18:6-7; Jer 31:4). The Hebrew Bible mentions tambourines or timbrels seventeen times; five of those passages include the musicians—and all five are women. Interestingly, archaeologists working in the Eastern Mediterranean have found nearly forty terracotta figurines depicting hand drum players dating from 1200 to 550 BC—and virtually all are women (Myers, *Women*, 2020). These figurines show women playing hand drums with their “fingers or wrists” (Riley, 2014, 24).

Female musicians also played in the tabernacle and temple. For example, Psalms 68:24-25 records, “O God . . . in the sanctuary . . . damsels playing with timbrels” (See \*also Ps 149:1, 3; 150:1, 4). When King David brought the ark of the covenant to the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem, the text mentions music: “David and all the house of Israel played [music] before the Lord . . . on timbrels” (2 Sam 6:5).