


Exploring the enigma of Miriam, the woman Mary was called after

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In this article, the enigmatic figure of Miriam in the Pentateuch is examined. There are three instances (Ex 2:1–10; Ex 15:20–21; Nm 12:1–6) where Miriam plays a role in the history of the people of Israel as recorded in the Pentateuch. Each of these passages is investigated by paying attention to the literary features of each passages followed by an investigation of how Miriam is portrayed in each passage. Attention is devoted to the narrative structure of passages; literary devices detected, perspective and vocabulary among others. The relevant passages in the Pentateuch will be examined to point out the enigma of Miriam. The central question guiding this investigation is what do we gain from a literary reading combined with historical insights when reading these passages? Or, to put the same question in a different form, what is the picture of Miriam we gained from the texts she is mentioned in? Further, the question will be asked whether or not there are points of contact between Miriam from the Pentateuch and Mary from the gospels.

Contribution: Although there are little similarities between these two women other than sharing the same name, it remains something to note that Mary was named after Miriam. An appropriate way to formulate the relationship between Miriam of the Old Testament and Mary of the New Testament is that of contrast. Miriam and Mary can be juxtaposed to one another.

Keywords: narrative analysis; juxtaposition; Pentateuch; Exodus; Old Testament Theology; Miriam; Mary.

Introduction

It is a common knowledge that the name Mary [Μαρία] is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Miriam [מִרְיָם]. When reflecting on Mary, the mother of Jesus, it might be worthwhile and even appropriate to pay some attention to the woman whom Mary was called after.

There are three instances (Ex 2:1–10; Ex 15:20–21; Nm 12:1–6) where Miriam plays a role in the history of the people of Israel. Apart from these narratives in the Pentateuch, Miriam is also mentioned in Numbers 20:1 where it is stated that Miriam died and was buried. She is also mentioned in Deuteronomy 24:9 in connection with the leprosy she suffered from. In Numbers 26:59 and in I Chronicles 6:3, her name is mentioned together with Moses and Aaron as the children of Amram. In the latter prophets, she is once again mentioned again together with Moses and Aaron in Micha 6:4.

A brief overview of past interpretations and methodological considerations

It was a powerful statement by Phyllis Tribble, the prominent feminist Biblical scholar, that sparked a new interest in Miriam as a biblical figure. In a publication in 1989, she made the following statement: 'Buried within Scripture are bits and pieces of a story awaiting discovery. It highlights the woman Miriam' (Tribble 1994:167). Her statement was followed by several studies focusing on Miriam (Cobb 2011; Rapp 2002). Recent literature on the interpretation of the narratives where Miriam plays a role, reveals that scholars made use of a feminist lens in reading these narratives. Betsworth and Parker (2022:127) remarked that Exodus 2, for instance, is a text long embraced by feminist scholars.

In this article, the focus will mainly be on the literary features of the texts where Miriam plays an active role combined with a brief view on a possible historical setting. Any interpretation of a text starts with a meticulous reading of the text. Tolmie (2024) reiterated this basic point of departure again when he stated:

Before considering any further investigations, interpretation, or appropriation of the text, it is essential to thoroughly scrutinise the text itself – the textual terms that are used, the grammar, syntax, structure, and stylistic features. (p. 1)

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Attention will thus be given to the narrative structure of passages: literary devices detected; perspective; and vocabulary, among others. The central question guiding this investigation is what do we gain from a literary reading combined with historical insights when reading these passages? Or, to put the same question in a different form, what is the picture of Miriam we gained from the texts she is mentioned in? Further, the question will be asked whether or not there are points of contact between Miriam from the Pentateuch and Mary from the gospels.

Exodus 2:1–10

Literary perspectives on Exodus 2:1–10

Exodus 2:1–10 cannot be understood without reading the previous chapter. In fact, Exodus 1:1–2:10 should be seen as a unity of composition that has been carefully put together (Weimar 1996:181). The function of Exodus 1:1–2:10 is to serve as a book-opening to the rest of the narrative that will follow (Weimar 1996:197–200).

Exodus 2:1–10 is an artfully constructed story that started with a crisis (the life of a newborn Hebrew baby boy is at risk) and concluded with a happy ending (the baby boy grew up as the son of an Egyptian princess). The passage forms an inclusio through a proper name (Levi) mentioned at the beginning of the passage and then only at the end of the passage in verse 10 again (Moses).

The passage may be divided into three distinctive scenes (Ex 2:1–4; 5–8; 9–10). Exodus 2:1–4 serves as the introduction to the story. The main characters are an unnamed Levite girl who got married to an also unnamed Levite man. She got pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy. The mother of Moses is first described as a daughter [בת], then a woman [אשה] and eventually she became a mother. In view of the proclamation of the pharaoh to kill all Israelite baby boys, the mother devised a plan to save her son's life by placing him in a basket in the river Nile.

The second scene consists of Exodus 2:5–8. A new character enters the scene in verse 5. A daughter of the Egyptian pharaoh along with her servant maids came down to the river to take a bath. She saw the basket and sent one of her slave girls to get it. Upon opening the lid of the basket, they discovered a baby in the basket, crying. The princess felt sorry for the baby realising that it was one of the Hebrew baby boys destined to be thrown into the Nile to drown. At this point, the story took an interesting turn. The sister of the baby stepped forward and offered to get a Hebrew woman to take care of the child. The Egyptian princess thought it a good idea and ordered the girl to go and get the woman. The sister went off to call the woman who in fact was the mother of the child.

The third scene consists of Exodus 2:9–10. The princess ordered the woman to take the child and nurse him. Mother and child separated for a time, were thus reunited again. After a while when the baby was old enough, supposedly

after the boy was weaned, the mother returned him to the daughter of the Pharaoh, and he became her son by adopting him as her own. The naming of the child is important in the story because for the first time in this narrative, while all other characters remain anonymous, a character was given a name. Being the only character that has a name mean that it forms the climax of the passage, and that Moses is indeed the most important character in the narrative.

According to Davies (1992:99), the passage displays a chiasmic pattern:

- A The parents' marriage; the birth of Moses (vv. 1a-2b)
- B The mother hides him; puts him in a basket (vv. 2c-3e)
- C The sister positions herself (v. 4)
- D The princess finds him (vv. 5–6)
- C' The sister makes a proposal (vv. 7–8)
- B' The princess gives him to his mother to be nursed (vv. 9a-10b)
- A' The adoption and naming of Moses (v. 10c-f)

When focusing on the characters in the narrative, another chiasmic pattern can be distinguished:

- A A Levite man married a woman (v. 1)
- B A Levite woman gave birth (v. 2)
- C A son is born (v. 2)
- D A sister is put on lookout (v. 4)
- E An Egyptian princess entered the scene (vv. 5–6)
- D' A sister intervened (v. 7)
- C' The son's future is discussed (v. 7)
- B' The Levite woman returned to the scene (vv. 8–9)
- A' The baby boy is given a name (v. 10).

Miriam in Exodus 2:1–10

With Miriam put on watch, she was most probably informed by her mother about the current situation in Egypt and the plight of the Hebrews under a new Pharaoh. She is still a young child, perhaps a teenager, entrusted with the responsibility of looking after her baby brother whose life is in danger. After all, the baby boy was discovered by the daughter of the one who ordered the death of Hebrew boys. Miriam was a young Hebrew girl, part of a subdued group of people, suffering under the harshest of oppressive and life-threatening conditions, and yet she had the courage to address the daughter of the instigator of her people's oppression. Miriam went beyond what she initially intended to do. According to verse 4, she merely observed from a distance what might happen to her baby brother. Her plan was brave and innovative, but at the same time an enormous risk (Branch 2003:295–298; Durham 1987:116). Will the princess go against the will of her father and save the Hebrew baby from a certain death, or will she hand the child over to a soldier to be killed? Surely, a princess would have been able to find an Egyptian woman able to breastfeed a baby boy. Yet, Miriam suggested a Hebrew woman thereby ruling out an Egyptian nurse and the Egyptian princess fell for the plan. The proposal Miriam put to the princess is at once clever and risky: she did not offer an either-or possibility.

The only and the best option was to get a Hebrew woman who would have been able to breastfeed the baby.

What is more, Miriam withheld a crucial piece of information: the Hebrew woman Miriam had in mind, was in fact the mother of the baby! To withhold this information from the princess, was to the benefit of the mother in another way as she will be paid by the princess to nurse her own child. The deal was negotiated only between the young Miriam and the Egyptian princess. In this sense, Miriam took on a central role in the narrative. Trible (1994:166–186) highlights the huge cultural and class gap separating the Egyptian princess and the Hebrew mother was bridged by Miriam. The baby boy was raised by his own mother without any fear of being threatened or even killed by Egyptians because both mother and son now enjoyed royal protection.

Bellis (2007:86) is correct when she observed that without the mother of Moses, the Egyptian princess and Miriam, there would have been no Moses to liberate the people from the oppression in Egypt. Betsworth and Parker (2022:131) noted how this narrative crosses the boundaries of culture, religion, language, nationality and status.

Exodus 15:20–21

Literary perspectives on Exodus 15:20–21

Exodus 15:1–18 has been described as one of the finest pieces of ancient Hebrew poetry in the Bible (Osborn & Hatton 1999:Logos). Exodus 15:1–18 is a summary of the events described in the preceding Exodus 14. The defeat of the Pharaoh's army is mentioned (verses 4–5), but the emphasis is on YHWH as the mighty warrior (verse 3) who is majestic in power and who shattered the enemy (verse 6). Childs (1977:249) remarks in this regard: 'The poem praises God as the sole agent of salvation'.

Exodus 15:19 is once again a summary – this time in prose – of the victory song celebrating YHWH's victory over the Egyptian military forces. In verse 20, Miriam is mentioned and introduced as a prophetess and Aaron's sister. She took a tambourine and with women following her, started to sing a song which is almost a duplicate of Exodus 15:1.

Scholars (Rapp 2002; Cobb 2011) reading the poem from a feminist perspective advocated the possibility that the whole of the poem came from Miriam and was only later ascribed to Moses while preserving Miriam in a kind of a post-script. Miriam is the one who sung the hymn first, and only later it was ascribed to Moses (Trible 1994:170–172). The reason why it is considered more likely that Miriam is the author of the poem is that victory hymns is a genre more associated with female rather than male musicians. An alternative possibility is that the song of Miriam has to be considered as earlier than the song of Moses (Johnstone 2014:295).

The song of Miriam consists of two parts. The song commences with an imperative to sing to YHWH. The second part provides two reasons for the call to sing to YHWH.

YHWH is highly exalted and has thrown the horse and its rider into the sea. Literally translated, it is said 'being high he is high' denoting the notion of a triumphant victory. The fact that verse 21 is an almost exact repetition of verse 1, creates an inclusio, binding this chapter together as a unit.

Miriam in Exodus 15:20–21

There is an interesting link between Exodus 2:1–10 and Exodus 15:20–21. In Exodus 1–2, it was the Israelite baby boys who were killed in the river Nile. In Exodus 15, it is the Egyptian army that was killed by drowning in water, this time in the Red Sea. In both these events, Miriam was present. In Exodus 2, it was Miriam who was instrumental in the rescue of Moses from the waters of the river Nile. In Exodus 15, it is Miriam who led the women in song and dance to celebrate the people's rescue from the sea (Janzen 1992:219). It was Miriam who took a tambourine in her hand, the women followed and then it was Miriam again who took the lead in singing to them (Rapp 2002:208).

For the first (and only time) in Exodus, Miriam is called by her proper name. For the first (and only time), she is introduced as a prophetess. More correctly, following the Hebrew text, Miriam is introduced as the prophetess. Miriam is taking on a position as a prophetic functionary normally denied for women (Ackerman 2002:71). A few other women are also known as prophetesses in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible (Deborah in Jdg 4:4; Huldah in II Ki 22:14; II Chr 34:22; Noadiah in Neh 6:14 and Isaiah's wife in Is 6:3), and there is no indication that the function of female prophets is any different from their male counterparts (Rapp 2002:211). That Miriam is known as a prophetess is thus an affirmation of her role, status and well-established reputation in the Israelite community (Durham 1987:209; Evans 2021:208), even though we have no access to any of her prophecies. She is also introduced as the sister of Aaron. It is interesting to note that Miriam is not introduced as the sister of Moses, but as the sister of Aaron even though Aaron is not mentioned in Exodus 15.

What is important for the purpose of this article is that Miriam took on a leading role. She took a tambourine in her hand and led the women in the victory song that was sung after the people were miraculously rescued from the Egyptian army. Unlike other victory songs sung by women who celebrate and praise the brave warriors returning from the battleground (I Sm 18:6–7), Miriam's song is exclusively in praise of YHWH who is 'highly exalted' as it was he who hurled the horse and rider into the sea (verse 21). It is said explicitly that the women followed her with tambourines and dancing.

Numbers 12:1–6

Numbers 12:1–6 is a problematic passage in the book of Numbers, and is riddled with a multitude of questions that cannot be answered in an easy way. The accusation made by Miriam and supported by Aaron against Moses comes as a

surprise. The accusation itself is also problematic. While there was no complaint about the Midianite woman Moses married, there is now a problem with him marrying a Cushite woman. Is there perhaps a confusion between Moses' Midianite or Cushite wife? Does the Cushite wife refer to a second wife for Moses or did his Midianite wife pass away? Another problem that arises from the text is why and for what reason Miriam and Aaron would question the authority of Moses? Why the harsh punishment of Miriam while Aaron got away with no punishment at all? Consequently, many answers were given to the problems raised by this controversial text (Burns 1987; Cobb 2011; Rapp 2002), but space does not allow to discuss the problems identified by scholars.

Literary perspectives on Numbers 12:1–6

What is immediately noteworthy when reading this chapter is that Miriam is mentioned first followed by Aaron. The Hebrew text also makes it clear that it was Miriam who spoke as the second person feminine singular form is used (Reiss 2010:186). The passage consists of several parts. Verses 1–2 introduced a new matter: Miriam and Aaron are not happy about the marriage of Moses with a Cushite woman. Verse 3 forms a parenthesis emphasising the character of Moses accused of marrying a non-Israelite woman. Verses 4–9 form the main part of the passage. YHWH steps in upon hearing what Miriam has to say about Moses, and they were summoned to the Tent of Meeting. Scholars noted a chiasmic structure in verses 6–8. Verses 9–12 describe the punishment of Miriam who has been stricken with leprosy. Aaron pleaded with his brother Moses to intercede on their behalf. Verses 13–14 informed the reader about a dialogue between Moses and YHWH. Moses appealed to YHWH to heal his sister, and YHWH answered that she must be confined outside of the camp for seven days. Verses 15–16 concluded this event. Miriam adhered to be confined while the people waited upon her return to the camp before they moved on to the desert of Haran.

Miriam in Numbers 12:1–6

Miriam's authority as a prophetess is stated in verse 2 where she asked the question of whether God has spoken only through Moses. She replied to this question by asking another question: 'Hasn't he also spoken through us?' Miriam claims her authority as prophetess and therefore a mouthpiece of YHWH (Rapp 2002:72–74). Her authority is further established in verse 15 where it is said that the people did not move until she was brought back to the camp. Miriam fell silent after this incident. However, in Numbers 20:1, there is a short report that Miriam died and was buried. That her death and burial are mentioned is probably an indication of the status she still held in Israelite society after the event in Numbers 12.

Numbers 26:59; Deuteronomy 24:9; I Chronicles 6:3; Micha 6:4

Miriam is briefly mentioned in a few other texts in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible as well; but in these texts, she is

only mentioned without taking any active part in a narrative. Numbers 26:59 as well as I Chronicles 6:3 are part of a list of Levites where Miriam is mentioned alongside Aaron and Moses as the children of Amram. Deuteronomy 24:9 forms part of regulations concerning leprosy and serves then as a reminder of what happened to Miriam in Numbers 12:1–6. In Micha 6:4, Miriam is mentioned once again together with her brothers, Aaron and Moses.

Historical perspectives on Miriam in the Pentateuch

The narrative on Israel's redemption from Egypt was probably written down during the time of the Babylonian exile. Once again, the people of God found themselves on foreign soil, outside of the land once promised to them. To many of the exiles, God was absent. They have lost it all: the land once promised to them, the promise of an everlasting kingdom of David was no more, and the temple, YHWH's dwelling place in the midst of his people, was ruined. The narrative of the redemption from Egypt was appreciated as a hope-giving event for the exiled Judeans. Just as Israel was redeemed from the hardships of Egypt, they will once again be able to return to the land in a kind of second exodus. On the one hand, the events of Egypt could only have happened through the miraculous and mysterious ways in which YHWH works. On the other hand, it is equally true that YHWH made use of ordinary human beings to accomplish the deliverance of his people.

Miriam as an enigma

Reiss (2010:189) calls Miriam a striking personality in her own right. The conclusion Burns (1987:122) came to in her study of the biblical portrait of Miriam is that she was a leader: 'the primary and most consistent element in the portrait of Miriam which is yielded by the texts is that she was a leader in the Hebrew community'. In Exodus 2:1–10, it was Miriam who, as a mere teenager, took the lead in her engagement with an Egyptian princess and succeeded in rescuing her brother who turned out to be Moses. In Exodus 15, it was Miriam who took the lead and led the women in a victory song. In Numbers 12, it was Miriam who claims authority as a mediator of the Word of God (Burns 1987:122). What makes Miriam an enigma is not only her role in terms of leadership but the different spheres in which she took on a role of leadership.

Miriam and Mary

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was called after Miriam. Mary [Μαρία] is the Greek version of the Hebrew Miriam [מִרְיָם]. There is no link drawn in the New Testament between Miriam and Mary. Brown (1978:320–321) suggested a possible Old Testament symbolism between Mary in the Lucan account vis-à-vis the term 'Daughter of Zion' in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. Although there are little similarities between these two women other than sharing the same name, it remains something to note that Mary was

named after Miriam. Losch (2008:590) noted that Miriam was a popular name given to girls in the time of Mary. It is known for instance that Herod the Great had two wives with the name of Mariammne derived from Miriam in Hebrew (Losch 2008:590). An appropriate way to formulate the relationship between Miriam of the Old Testament and Mary of the New Testament is that of contrast. Miriam and Mary can be juxtaposed to one another:

- In the lives of both Miriam and Mary, Egypt played an important role. In the case of Miriam, Egypt was the place of suffering and oppression. In the case of Mary, Egypt was a place of refuge and safety.
- While Miriam was on her way from Egypt to the promised land, Mary had to travel from the promised land to Egypt and eventually come back again.
- While we are informed about the parents and siblings of Miriam, nothing is said about the family of Mary. We do not know who her parents were nor do we know anything about possible brothers and/or sisters she might have had.
- In both cases, the lives of newborn baby boys were at stake. In the case of Miriam, it was the Egyptian pharaoh who ordered the killing of infant boys, while in the case of Mary it was Herod who 'gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years and under' (Mt 2:16).
- There is no indication that Miriam was married, nor do we know of any children she might have had. Miriam is introduced as the sister of Aaron and not by her relationship to her husband which serves as an indication that she was not married and consequently did not have any children. Mary was engaged to Joseph and eventually got married. She is the mother of Jesus as well as other children (James, Joses, Simon and Jude) as reported in the New Testament (Mk 6:3; Mt 13:55).
- Both of the two women sang a song in praise of God. In the case of Miriam, it is a victory song where many other women were involved after the defeat of the Egyptian army. In the case of Mary, it is a song of praise (Lk 1:46–55) by an individual woman. However, the Magnificat is modelled on the canticle of Hannah in I Samuel 2 (Brown 1978:335) rather than Miriam's song in Exodus 15.
- Miriam is primarily portrayed as a leading figure. She once rescued none other than Moses; she dared to criticise Moses and was known as a prophetess and therefore she became a revered and respected leader. There is no indication of Mary playing any leading role as the mother of Jesus. Having said this, Mary, as her namesake in the Old Testament, must have been a woman with a strong personality. She accepts the message from the angel that she will get pregnant even though she was not married, with dignity (Lk 1:26–38). She took the initiative to go and visit Elizabeth (Lk 1:39–40). While pregnant, she endured the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem giving birth to her son in a stable. She was not only present at the crucifixion of Jesus, her son, she was, at the time of the crucifixion, probably a widow because there is no mention of Joseph. Widows were regarded as one of the vulnerable in society.

Conclusion

It seems that there are no obvious and important theological links between the two namesakes. The best we can conclude to, was that Mary was named after a known and respected female leading figure in the history of God's people in the Old Testament. There are some similarities between the two women but the differences between them are more than the similarities. The most important difference between them is that while nothing is said of Miriam being married or having children, Mary is the mother of Jesus.

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S.D.S is the sole author of this research article.

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