

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 18 August 2013

No. T0794

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Women of faith: Miriam

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are beginning a new series of four talks on *Women of Faith*. My subject today, is Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. The other women of faith in this series will be Rahab, Deborah and Jehoshabeath. You will, no doubt, notice that they are all ladies whose lives are recorded in the Old Testament. A shallow glance at Miriam's life in the few biblical references that concern her might seem to suggest that there was not much faith exhibited by Miriam, especially if we concentrate solely on the incident recorded in Numbers 12:1-16. I shall seek to show that, owing to her relationship with Moses and Aaron, Miriam was an important figure in the history of the redemption of the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt.

The last reference in the Bible to Miriam will be the first that I will quote this morning, and it is found in Micah 6:4. I shall, as usual, be reading from the Authorised or King James version of 1611: "*For 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*" (Micah 6:4).

From this we see that these two brothers and their sister are linked together in the events that all the prophets and biblical writers consider to be the great liberating action of God, when He brought them from slavery in Egypt to the land that had been promised to Abraham (Genesis 15:1-21). This tremendous event, which is usually considered to be the most significant in the whole history of Israel, can be seen as the beginning of the national identity with the land that is now their home. It is obvious from Micah 6:4, that Miriam, being chosen of God, was a prime figure, along with Moses and Aaron, in the exodus from Egypt and from the domination of Pharaoh. As such, she must have an important place in the history of Israel.

To look at the first references to Miriam, though she is not actually named, we must turn to Exodus 2:4-6. The context is the baby Moses, in an ark of bulrushes, being hidden amongst the reeds at the river's brink. "*And his sister stood afar off, to wit what would be done to him. And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it. And when she had opened it, she saw the child: and, behold, the baby wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews' children*" (Exodus 2:4-6).

Hebrews 11, that great chapter of the faithful, states that "*Moses was hidden by his parents for three months, because, by faith, they could see that he was special and they were not afraid of the king's edict*", (Hebrews 11:23), which you may recall, was that all male Hebrew babies were to be killed. I would suggest that Miriam was continuing in the pathway of faith that so marked her parents, for she obviously did not expect Moses to die in the river as so many other Hebrew boys had because of the cruel command (see Exodus 1:8-22). Miriam's faith in God, and love for her brother, was manifest on this occasion, for the Scripture states that she stood nearby to see what would happen to her baby brother.

Perhaps you read these events on the riverbank differently, yet I suggest that the behaviour of Miriam confirms that she had faith, for her actions show how she preserved the life of her tiny brother by making it possible for Moses' mother to become his nurse. I am confident that she believed the LORD would intervene in some way to save Moses' life. Let us read Exodus 2:7-9: "*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? And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages. And the woman took the child, and nursed it.*"

Miriam's part in the preserving the life of Moses is crucial for she enabled the real mother of Moses to become his nurse. I would suggest again that if the writer of Hebrews commends the faith of the parents of Moses, because they hid him and were not afraid of the king, then Miriam, too, demonstrates her faith by the same tokens.

More words are recorded about Miriam in Numbers 12 than anywhere else in Scripture, so, as we are looking at women of faith, we must look at these verses. In some ways, it would be easier for me to ignore them, as Miriam does not emerge in a very good light. The Israelites are approaching the borders of the promised land, when Miriam and Aaron have a controversy with Moses. Let us read Numbers 12:1-2 to see how Scripture records the event: "*And*

Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married: for he had married an Ethiopian woman. And they said, Hath the LORD indeed spoken only by Moses? Hath he not spoken also by us? And the LORD heard it."

There is one question here that I shall not be discussing in any depth and that is the identity of the Ethiopian woman. Was it Zipporah, or had she died leaving Moses to take a new wife? As I said, we shall not be discussing that for it seems to me that Miriam and Aaron used it as a pretext to contend with Moses. The real quarrel that Miriam had was whether God only spoke through Moses. I say Miriam as it would appear that she was the prime mover in the quarrel. Even the concern that Miriam had about God speaking through both her and Aaron would point to the fact that she was a believer in the living God. One would not be concerned about being the channel through whom God speaks if there was no faith and belief in God.

That God did speak through Miriam is clarified for us in Exodus 15:20: *"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."*

There it is stated plainly that she was a prophetess. The controversy centres on Miriam being concerned, even envious, that Moses seemed to be God's favourite. Consequently, to use another person's words, "this is a classic example of sibling rivalry - but not among children. These are adults who adopt the tactics of children in the schoolyard." We can read the response of God to the attack on His servant Moses in Numbers 12:5 then Numbers 12:9-11 *"And the LORD came down in the pillar of the cloud, and stood in the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam: and they both came forth ... And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them; and he departed. And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous. And Aaron said unto Moses, Alas, my lord, I beseech thee, lay not the sin upon us, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned"* (Numbers 12:5, 9-11).

What are we to make of this incident when we are discussing women of faith? She was not judged by God because she had no faith, but rather because she had sinned. How many of us, true believers in the Lord Jesus though we be, do not fall into one of the many traps that the enemy lays for us. We do not live up to our calling and consequently let our Lord down. It was petty jealousy and envy that made Miriam cast aspersions upon God's great servant. This incident became a warning to later generations of the Israelites, as we can read in Deuteronomy 24:9: *"Remember what the LORD thy God did unto Miriam by the way, after that ye were come forth out of Egypt."*

This is as much a warning to us who have faith in the Lord Jesus, as it was to God's earthly people. Even in 2013, God disciplines His children, as we can read in Hebrews 12:6: *"For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth."* As the writer goes on to say, in Hebrews 12:10, this discipline, or child training, is to make us *"... partakers of his holiness."*

Before we continue, can I welcome anyone who has just joined us and inform you that you are listening to a broadcast from the *Truth for Today* team, where we are discussing Miriam, the sister of Moses, in the first of a series entitled "Women of Faith".

We turn now to a Scripture that gives us an outline of Miriam's understanding of God. This is also a crucial question for each one of us this morning. If you are asked about your faith, what words would you use to describe the God in whom you trust? We can learn how Miriam viewed God from the song that she sang, along with Moses. We have already read Exodus 15:20 that speaks of Miriam singing, with a timbrel in her hand, and leading other women of Israel in a dance. We will read now Exodus 15:21: *"And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea."* The triumph mentioned here is the defeat of Pharaoh's army at the crossing of the Red Sea.

Though Exodus 15:21 only mentions the triumph, I am going to look at the complete song that is contained in Exodus 15:1-19. This would be sung by Miriam, along with all the children of Israel, and from an examination we can see something of Miriam's God and her response. We shall start with Exodus 15:2: *"The LORD is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he is my God, and I will glorify him; my father's God, and I will exalt him."*

If you are reading this, along with me, from the Authorised Version, you will notice that I have read the alternative meaning of *"I will glorify him"* instead of the Authorised Version's, *"I will prepare him an habitation"*, as this reading is preferred by Ellicott, and Darby, as well as the modern scholars. Notice the five attributes of God that Exodus 15:2 brings to the fore:

- “my strength”,
- “my song”,
- “my salvation”,
- “my God”, and
- “my father’s God”.

If we substitute Miriam for “my”, then we can grasp a little of what God was to her. No wonder she could sing that she wished to glorify and exalt Him. The phrase, “my father’s God”, refers to the LORD being the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Miriam is conscious of the rich history of her forefathers.

Exodus 15:3-5 are concerned with the great crisis that God had brought them through, when the armies of Pharaoh were closing in on them. The repetitions of the words that appertain to the sea, in Exodus 15:3-5, help us to grasp the importance of the deliverance to the Israelites. That sea, which blocked their way, became the instrument of their deliverance, when the Egyptian armies tried to follow them (see Exodus 14:28). Surely, we can stop at this point and repeat the lines of a Christian hymn, that is not so well known, yet expresses a truth that is the spiritual counterpart of Miriam’s song:

*“The Lord is risen: the Red Sea’s judgment flood
Is passed in Him, who bought us with His blood.
The Lord is risen: we stand beyond the doom
Of all our sin, through Jesus’ empty tomb.*

*The Lord is risen: with Him we also rose,
And in His grave see vanquished all our foes.
The Lord is risen: beyond the judgment-land,
In Him, in resurrection life we stand.”*

William Patton Mackay (1839-1885)

I trust that all listening this morning know something of the salvation of God, secured through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. If we do, we can sing even more joyfully than did Miriam.

Exodus 15:6 uses the statement, “*Thy right hand, O LORD, is become glorious in power*” as a metaphor describing the omnipotence of God. A similar statement is used in Exodus 15:7, “*And in the greatness of thine excellency thou hast overthrown them that rose up against thee.*” Here the word “overthrown” has the thought of a building being demolished, thus emphasising the total victory of God over those who opposed Him. In Exodus 15:9 Miriam, along with the rest of the singers, narrates the self-confident boastings of the Egyptians, as they followed the fleeing, erstwhile slaves: “*I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; my lust shall be satisfied upon them; I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.*”

Compare this vaunting pride in their military prowess with the consequences of their chase into the Sea of Reeds, as we can read in Exodus 15:8-10: “*And with the blast of thy nostrils the waters were gathered together, the floods stood upright as an heap, and the depths were congealed in the heart of the sea ... Thou didst blow with thy wind, and the sea covered them; they sank as lead in the mighty waters.*”

Great gratitude and joy would fill the heart of Miriam when she saw that her fellow Israelites were free to journey onwards. Here the eye of faith assigns the strong, east wind, mentioned in Exodus 14:21, to the “*blast of thy nostrils*” and “*thou didst blow.*” Miriam, as a woman of faith, could see beyond the natural world to acknowledge the intervention of God. With the statements, “*the depths were congealed*” (Exodus 15:8) and “*they sank like lead in the mighty waters*” (Exodus 15:10), Israel was confessing the power of God.

There now follows, in Exodus 15:11, the theological implications of what they had witnessed: “*Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?*” What we notice first, from Exodus 15:11, is that God has no equal. “*Who is like unto you?*” is a conclusion repeated many times as we go through Scripture. Psalm 35:10, Psalm 71:19, Psalm 89:6 and Micah 7:18 are just a few texts we could refer to if we had time. When Miriam was initiated into this truth she believed something that we too must believe for the Lord Jesus is incomparable. Notice, also, that Miriam’s God is “*majestic in holiness*” (Exodus 15:11), and “*awesome in glorious deeds*” (Exodus 15:11), to quote the English Standard Version.

I trust, as we go through these verses, that we are clearly outlining some of the features of the God of Miriam, for we are rapidly approaching the end of our time together this morning, and must draw the talk to a conclusion. Before we finish, however, we shall summarise Exodus 15:12-18 by noting that this section gives prominence to three great

actions of God, namely the victory at the Red Sea or Sea of Reeds (Exodus 15:12), His guiding presence in the wilderness (Exodus 15:13-14) and the final destination of God's holy habitation (Exodus 15:15-18).

We cannot finish without reading Exodus 15:17-18: *"Thou shalt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, in the place, O LORD, which thou hast made for thee to dwell in, in the sanctuary, O LORD, which thy hands have established. The LORD shall reign for ever and ever."*

There we have it. Miriam was confident that there would be a place where God's name would be honoured, and that her God had the power and wisdom to bring these things to pass. She had just witnessed an astounding act of redemption that would pass into the annals of the nation's collective memory, causing praise and worship to arise from the acts of devotion.

Miriam had faith in the living God, as we have seen, from her youth through to her adult life. She had an understanding of God that never seemed to cause her to doubt. We have discussed the event when she criticised Moses, God's servant, and was judged of God for so doing (Numbers 12:1-16). Even this did not alter or affect her living belief in the God of her fathers.

When I was first given Miriam as a subject for a talk, I wondered if Miriam, with so few Biblical references about her, was a worthy subject for *Truth for Today*. Now I know differently, for as I meditated upon the Scriptures that we have read together this morning, I realised that Miriam should be esteemed for she is grand. She helped to preserve the life of a baby (Exodus 2:4-10), who became a major figure on the pages of Scripture. She was the link that allowed the true mother of Moses to nurse him on behalf of Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 2:7-8). It would not be too much to claim that she led the singing of what is the first psalm recorded in the Bible, a psalm that celebrates the deliverance of the Israelites from the forces of Egypt (Exodus 15:1-18). All in all, Miriam is a worthy subject for a talk on a woman of faith. She remains resplendent in the history of Israel.

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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