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## Miriam, Deliverer of Her People

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I discuss the significance of Miriam in the story of the Exodus, suggesting that she is much more important than commonly recognized.

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## Transcript

Welcome back. In Micah chapter 6, verse 4, we read, For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. Today I want to talk about the character of Miriam.

She isn't actually someone that we read a great deal about in Scripture. She's only mentioned on four different occasions within the narrative of the Exodus. In chapter 2 of Exodus, she's involved with the rescue of the infant Moses.

In chapter 15, she leads the women in song after the crossing of the Red Sea. In Numbers chapter 12, with Aaron, she rebels against Moses. And in chapter 20, verse 1, she's described as dying in Numbers.

She's, apart from that, mentioned on a few other occasions in Scripture, in genealogies, such as in 1 Chronicles chapter 6, in Deuteronomy chapter 24, verse 9, she's mentioned in association with the law concerning leprosy, and then in this passage in Micah chapter 6. And it would seem, if we're to judge by the number of times someone is mentioned, and the amount of verses given to them, that she isn't that important a figure. But yet, the details that are given concerning her suggest that she is a very important figure. And they are tantalizing and interesting in what they suggest about her.

She has an important role in the rescue of the rescuer of the whole people. If it were not for Miriam at the events in the Nile, would Moses have ever been able to rescue the people? Probably not. She is the one who leads the women alongside Moses.

She's one who's described as a prophetess in chapter 15 of Exodus. She's the sister of Aaron and Moses. She claims equal status with Moses, or status alongside Moses, in Numbers chapter 12.

And then her death is mentioned in close proximity to the deaths of Aaron and Moses. The fact that we're told about her death suggests again that she is an important figure. She's described in the passage that I began with as having been sent before Israel by God.

So she's very clearly an important figure. A figure who has maybe a bit more about her than we might originally think. And if we're led purely by the amount of times that she's mentioned, maybe we misjudge her importance.

Like Melchizedek, she may be a character of tantalizing significance. Jewish tradition in particular has given great attention to the character of Miriam, and seen her as a character who is responsible for a lot more than we would initially think. The struck rock in Exodus chapter 17 is called the Well of Miriam, which is strange indeed.

I mean, why would it be called the Well of Miriam? Think about it. Miriam is not even mentioned in that passage. The last time that she's mentioned is in chapter 15, where she leads the women in song as they cross the Red Sea.

So why would the well be called the Well of Miriam when the water comes from the rock? The death of Miriam is connected with Israel's loss of water in Numbers chapter 20. Again, just because the events occur in such close proximity doesn't mean they're connected. Why would they think that they were connected? And then finally, people like Rashi have suggested that the ritual of the Red Heifer might be associated with the death of Miriam.

He only makes a loose connection that talks about the way in which the death of the righteous can atone in the same way as the ashes of the Red Heifer. But that association with Miriam is an interesting one. Why are they seeing such significance in this character

who is not mentioned that much? Why these particular forms of significance? These are not the things that we would expect to see alongside the character of Miriam.

Maybe we would expect a bit more of an emphasis upon her role at the Red Sea and the deliverance of Israel at that point. But why associate her with the provision of water in the wilderness? The only possible connection it would seem is the fact that she dies just before they run out of water. What is there besides that? So there's a puzzle here to be figured out.

Are we just to dismiss the tradition and say it's speculative and there's... they've just dreamed things up out of their imagination and put them into the text? It's quite possible that they have. But I'd suggest it's worth tarring with and seeing are they actually seeing something within the text that we should see too? Why is Miriam treated as such an important figure? Are there further biblical clues to be followed? I want us to take us back to the very beginning of the story when we meet Miriam for the first time. And in this story she's not even mentioned by name.

She's described as the sister of Moses. And the story is the deliverance of the infant Moses. Moses is placed in an ark of bulrushes covered with bitumen and pitch and it's put among the reeds by the side of the river.

And as the daughter of Pharaoh goes down to bathe she finds this ark and she finds the infant Moses. And at a distance Miriam, his sister, is watching. And she comes in at that critical moment and intervenes and says shall I find a nurse for the infant? And so she brings the infant to the actual mother of Moses and Moses is nursed by his mother.

And then he's raised as the son of the daughter of Pharaoh. So she has a very critical role within that story. She intervenes in a way that ensures that Moses will be connected to his mother.

And also maybe if the daughter of Pharaoh was wavering at that point it's the action of Miriam who actually suggests a specific course of action to take and provides for the actual means by which Moses can be raised and provided for. She settles things in a way that ensures that he is actually delivered. She watches from a distance and she provides a nurse by intervening at the key moment.

The second incident where we see her is the deliverance of Israel through the Red Sea and the defeat of the Egyptians and Pharaoh's army being drowned within the Red Sea. And afterwards she leads the women in song. And at that event she is quite a prominent character.

Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. And Miriam sang to them, sing to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously. The horse and his rider he has thrown into

the sea.

Miriam leads all the women in song. She seems to be along with Moses and Aaron. She seems to be a leader of the people.

So these are some significant features about her. But is there anything about those two events that maybe connect? I think there are. There are some immediate similarities that might come to mind.

In both occasions there is the instruction, or in the first occasion Miriam stands at a distance and watches. In the story of the crossing of the Red Sea Israel is told to stand still. And they're supposed to stand firm and see the salvation of the Lord which he will work for you today.

And so they have to be silent, stand at a distance and see what God will do for them. There's a similar sort of posture as Miriam takes. There's the Sea of Reeds.

They're delivered from the Red Sea or the Reed Sea. And as they're drawn from the Reed Sea, so Moses was drawn from the reeds by the water. There's a threat to Moses in the first occasion.

There's a threat to the whole of Israel. Moses gets his name as the one drawn out of the water. And Israel in this paradigmatic event is drawn out of the water too.

Both of them are connected with birth themes. Moses only receives his name after he's drawn from the water. It's associated with the larger birth narrative that surrounds it.

It's part of his birth. He doesn't truly become, he isn't truly born as it were, fully delivered until he's drawn out of the water. Israel is born through the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea.

It's one of the reasons why we have the law of the firstborn that's given just before the crossing of the Red Sea and in association with the Passover. The bloody doorposts, the doorposts are associated with birth, the opening of the womb, the birth of the firstborn, and then crossing through the narrow passage, crossing through this narrow passage and being delivered into a new situation. It's a new birth event.

And so the infant Israel is delivered just as the infant Moses was delivered. And Miriam at both occasions standing from a distance then sings in rejoicing at the second occasion. This is, these are a set of connections that present these events not just as detached occurrences but as one that foreshadows the later.

And in that occasion, Miriam's role is maybe prophetic in some way. Her role anticipates what will later occur, that Israel will be delivered in another way. What happens to Moses later happens to all of Israel and Miriam is associated with both deliverances.

So we've got those two incidents, those are the two initial incidents in the story of Miriam. There is a fourth and final incident which is her death and that occurs in Numbers chapter 20. Now why would we associate those two things? The death of Miriam and the fact that they run out of water.

Well, if you read what happens next, Moses strikes the rock. The place is called Meribah. Meribah, Kadesh and Den.

There are a number of questions that we might ask. Why is this the first water crisis that occurs for Israel since before Sinai? This is almost 40 years later. They've been in the wilderness all this time.

If there's one thing that we associate with the wilderness, it's lack of water. And yet they don't seem to have had a water crisis for 40 years. And now suddenly Miriam dies and there's a water crisis.

What is the connection? Why the rock? Why that particular rock being mentioned? Why is it called Meribah in the same way as we have an earlier Meribah? And I think as we look back, we'll see we've heard the story of a rock being struck before. In Exodus chapter 17, the rock that is struck is near Rephidim. And it's a place called Maser and Meribah because they contend with God at that place and they grumble.

And Moses strikes the rock and water comes from it. And the implication is that they were provided from the water that flowed out of that rock like a river presumably, not just a trickle, but a larger river flowing from that rock. They were provided for for 40 years from that source of water.

And then just as Miriam dies, the water dries up. At that point, it becomes a bit clearer why there might be some association between these two events. Israel has been provided from one source of water for almost 40 years.

And then just along with the death of Miriam, it dries up. Maybe that's not an accident. Maybe it's something that's associated.

And the rock event that happens immediately afterwards, when Moses strikes against God's command, the rock, a second time when he should have just spoken to it. Maybe that is an event that should be seen as parallel to the earlier rock striking and helps us to see that there's a continuation of that one rock as the source of provision for all those years. Now, incidentally, this is something that we see in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, where Paul describes the rock that followed them as being Christ.

Now, as you read through the Jewish tradition, it will refer to this myth of a traveling rock. And when Paul is using this, and when the Jewish tradition is speaking about this, not drawing this from nowhere, it has a good reason for saying this. Just as Moses, as Paul, has good reason to say that the rock that followed them was Christ.

There's a very good argument for why he says that the rock that followed them was Christ. If you're interested, just ask me and in my Curious Cat account, and I'll give an answer to that. But there are these two rock events.

The first rock that was struck near Rephidim, the rock at Meribah and Massah, provides for 40 years, presumably. Now, there are some earlier water crises. The earlier water crises are found in chapter 17.

We mentioned that, the striking of the rock at Massah and Meribah. And then that rock, that well that's formed there, is called the Well of Miriam. Now, perhaps it's because it dries up just as she dies.

But yet, why would we associate those two things? We've still only got the weakest of connections. That rock has provided water for almost 40 years and then dries up when Miriam dies. Why would we suggest that there was any stronger connection than just an incidental one? Why is the well called Miriam's? It's cutting off occurs at the same time as Miriam, but this does not seem to be a very strong basis.

There is one further water crisis event that occurs within the story of Exodus. And it occurs in chapter 15. At the very end of chapter 15, there's a crisis at a place called Marah.

They travel for three days and they find no water during that time. And then they find water and it's bitter. They can't drink it.

It's water presumably that has all sorts of minerals in it and it's just not fit for drinking. And so Moses, at the instruction of God, casts a log into the water and it's made sweet. And then on this particular occasion, they are tested by God.

Later on, they will test God at Maser and Meribah. And these two events maybe are paralleled with each other. The first is the testing of the bride, as it were.

Maybe this is connected with the bitter waters that are given to the woman suspected of adultery in chapter 5 of Numbers, that Israel is being tested. Will they be faithful and they will drink and will they prove faithful or not? But he casts a log into the water and it's made sweet. What is going on in that passage? As we look a bit more closely, it occurs immediately after Miriam sings her song following the crossing of the Red Sea.

But that seems to be a previous incident, unconnected with what happens immediately afterwards at Marah. But yet when we look a bit more closely, maybe there is a connection. Miriam's name means, quite possibly, bitter sea.

Others have suggested it means rebellion. And it's the same Hebrew consonants as it's Mem, Resh, Yud, Mem. And those consonants are also found in the story of the bitter water at Marah.

Marah, bitterness, is associated with bitterness. Miriam's name is associated with bitter sea, bitter waters again. What is it about Miriam and bitter waters? Well, maybe there's a play upon her name here.

The event occurs immediately after her song. And then the next event, water crisis, is the crisis of the striking of the rock at Meribah. And once again, there's a possible play upon the name of Miriam.

Meribah, Meriam. There's another Meribah later on in Numbers 20, which appears immediately after Miriam's death. So we have three water crises within the story of Exodus and Numbers, within the story of the Exodus more generally.

And each one of those seems to be playing upon Miriam's name in some way. The play is also within the text itself. The same letters, consonants in her name, are found in the description of the water as bitter.

In verse 23 of chapter 15 of Exodus. They came to Marah. They could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter.

Merim. And therefore it was named Marah. And so that connection with Miriam may be seen in the word that's used for bitterness.

Other things to notice that in the second Meribah instant, in Meribah near Kadesh, Moses calls the people Morim. Calls them rebels. In Numbers chapter 20, verse 10.

He says, Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock and said to them, Hear now you rebels. Shall we bring water for you out of this rock? So on both occasions we see the same consonants for Miriam's name. There seems to be a play upon Miriam's name.

Meribah or Meribah and Miriam. And then we see Marah, bitterness. And the Merim waters of Marah that are associated with that bitterness that we see in the character of Miriam.

Is there a connection here? Quite probably. Think about what Miriam does in Moses' rescue as an infant. One of the first things that she does is find him someone to drink from as an infant.

A nurse. She's the one who provides liquid sustenance for Moses. Women in scripture are associated with wells, particularly in the book of Genesis.

We see women and wells associated on several occasions. And here maybe there's an association with Miriam and the provision of water for this infant people. And then she has nursed them through the whole of the waters that she has provided or that are associated with her have provided for them for all this period of time.

And then she dies and the waters dry up. The fact that there's the play upon her name on these three occasions, these three water crises, suggests that even though she's not explicitly mentioned within those incidents, that she may be connected. She might be connected with them.

That she is the one who is connected with the provision of water in the wilderness. Now there's another event in Miriam's life. And this event is the third event that she occurs in, in the story of the Exodus.

And it's in Numbers chapter 12 when she rebels against Moses with Aaron. And when Moses marries, he's married a Cushite woman and she is, she speaks against Moses with Miriam or with Aaron at that point. And Moses, or God, intercedes or acts on behalf of Moses at that point.

And Miriam is judged. She's judged with leprosy and cast out of the camp for seven days. She turns leprous like snow.

And Aaron intercedes for her, oh my lord to Moses, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned. Let her not be as one dead whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother's womb. And then she ends up being shut outside the camp seven days and after that she's brought in again.

Miriam was shut outside the camp seven days and the people did not set out on the march till Miriam was brought in again. After that the people set out from Hazaroth and camped in the wilderness of Paran. So she is afflicted with leprosy and this seems to be an odd occurrence.

But yet there's another event that when she dies, another thing that's mentioned just before that, and I've mentioned this in passing, the ritual concerning the red heifer. And I suggest that maybe there's a connection. The red heifer is involved with a seven day ritual as well.

It's involved with being outside of the camp for that period of time, being unclean for seven days and that for those seven days you can't enter in and then at the end of that time they can enter in. And the ritual has elements within it that remind you very much of the ritual concerning leprosy. So the priest shall take cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet yarn and throw them into the fire burning the heifer.

And we see in the book of Leviticus chapter 14 that there is something very similar. That he takes two live clean birds, cedar wood, scarlet yarn and hyssop. And so there is a cleansing ritual and the cleansing ritual in chapter 19 of Numbers is for the dead body, the corpse.

And it's providing water of cleansing. So the whole ritual, this death of this red heifer, all the different elements that are associated with it and the elements that are associated



with leprosy earlier, all of those things are for the provision of water of cleansing so that they will be able to enter into the land. It's connected at this point not just with a vague assortment of rituals but with a particular moment in the narrative just before the death of Miriam and the death of Aaron and the death of Moses on the borders of the land just as they're about to enter in.

These three figures die. The key figures that have led them throughout that whole generation will die before they enter into the land. As you look through the law of Leviticus it would seem if we were going to put the law of the red heifer somewhere we'd probably put it in with the rest of the laws in Leviticus.

But the fact that it is found here suggests that it's maybe connected with the narrative in a closer way than we might think. Now why does it occur there? I suggest because it's connected with the death of Miriam. Miriam is the one that provides water.

She's the one who's the red heifer. Now why would she be the red heifer? The heifer is a female cow. We don't have female cows in the rituals for the most part.

We have male cows that represent the priests. But what does a female cow represent? A female cow presumably represents a woman who's associated with the priestly families. And so she's one who's the sister of Aaron, the high priest.

And so it would seem fitting that she's represented by a heifer. And it's the death of the red heifer along with the symbols associated with leprosy and a similar sort of ritual associated with leprosy that she is placed, that the heifer is burnt and prepared outside of the camp. And then this water is prepared and that water will enable them to enter into the camp.

But the fact that it occurs here just as they're about to enter into the promised land suggests that it's not just about this ritual for entering into the camp. It's a ritual for entering into the land as well. It's about that bigger story, that bigger picture.

And the death of Miriam, of Aaron and of Moses are necessary steps for the transition into the land. If you think about the law of the cities of refuge, they will not be delivered from the law from the cities of refuge until the death of the high priest. The death of the high priest represents a transition.

Likewise, the death of Miriam. Now, if Miriam in her life provided water and sustenance, she's the one that provided a nurse for Moses. She's the one whose name is associated with Mara and the provision of water there.

And the bitter waters made sweet. She's the one who's associated with Meribah and the waters of the rock that provided for them for 40 years and then dried up just as she died. And then with the second events at the second Meribah, maybe the waters of cleansing associated with the red heifer and the death of the red heifer, maybe those are

associated with Miriam too.

I'll leave that for you to think about. There's a lot more in the story of Miriam that is suggestive. And these are just explorations that I wouldn't put too much weight upon.

But I think there's something there. Thank you very much for listening. If you have any questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account.

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