

Study Fourteen: Miriam; Saviour, Prophetess and Great Leader

Miriam, Saviour, Keeper and Trainer of Moses

In the days when a Pharaoh hostile to Israel ruled Egypt, a daughter was born to a man from the house of Levi named Aram whose wife was Jochebed. Because the Israelites were proliferating in numbers, and were becoming a threat to Egypt. Pharaoh's edict was that all male children should be destroyed but female children should be spared. Jochebed had a male child whom she perceived to be very special, 'goodly', 'proper', 'special' (Exod. 2:2; Heb. 11:23). The mother made a special waterproof container and slipped it into the river Nile. Miriam bravely watched for what was to happen and when Pharaoh's daughter decided to save Moses, she presented herself and suggested that Jochebed should be the wet nurse-no small feat. In this way she saved Moses. Doubtless as the child grew-perhaps the couple of years to the time of weaning Miriam would have cared for, trained And taught her brother Moses.

Miriam a Leader and a Prophetess.

In Micah 6:4 God says to Israel, 'For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of bondage; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam.' These formed a triumvirate of leadership. Aaron was Moses' brother, and in some ways his record is not the best (cf. Exod. 32:1-35). Of Miriam we read little until the time Israel crossed the Red Sea and the army of Pharaoh perished in its waters. In Exodus 15:1-21 great rejoicing that followed this great miracle. Their has been called 'The Song of Moses' (cf. Rev. 15:3), but it is also called 'The Song of Miriam (Exod. 15:20) 'the Prophetess'. The Song may be looked upon as a prophetic word, but probably she has other history of prophetic utterances. In Numbers 12:1 this is her claim, that God speaks not only by Moses but by her, and by Aaron. That 'All the women went after her' in her timbrel playing seems to indicate she was a leader of the women. 'Sang to them' (Exod. 15:21) may mean prophesied but she was probably as a cantor and they sang with her. In any case she was an unusual woman, and when we remember she was over 80 then she is the cause for admiration. Her mother had sensed the nature of Moses, as it was 'by faith' she hid Moses in the rushes of the Nile.

Miriam and Aaron Attack Moses, Demeaning Him and His Office

Whatever may have been the ministry of Miriam in Israel, a ministry we feel certain was to the women of the great concourse of travelling people, we find something of her problem as a person in Numbers 12:1-16. Moses had married a Cushite woman and because of this Miriam attacked her brother, leader of the twelve tribes, 'Moses, the man of God'. Did Moses do wrong in marrying this Cushite woman? We do not know. We know of his wife Zipporah who he had married after the time he had fled from Egypt, at which time Moses would have been, age-wise, in his forties. She was the daughter of Jethro the priest of Midian and a descendant of Abraham, with whom Moses lived and worked. Her history is an interesting one, and one with which we cannot deal here (see Exod. 2:15-22; 4:20-26: 18: 2, 6f.). Some assume that Zipporah had died and that Moses had married again. In Habbakuk 3:7 we read, 'I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble', and some claim that 'Cushan' and 'Midian' are synonymous terms. Cush was a son of Ham, and father of Nimrod.

It was forbidden that an Israelite should marry a Canaanite, but that was the only prohibition.. The text does not say anything about the rightness or wrongness of Moses' marrying the Cushite woman who would probably have been black-skinned.

For Miriam this marriage-whether right or wrong-brought an attack. We could try to work out the reason for the attack but we would only be speculating. Obviously she thought the marriage was wrong and meant that Moses was no better a person than she and Aaron were, and no higher in the order of leadership God had given to the three (cf. Micah 6:4). Her charge was, 'Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?'

This accusation is somewhat strange, since Moses, taking the advice of Jethro his father-in-law had gathered seventy elders out of the tribes of Israel, and they had been anointed by the Holy Spirit for the task. Moses, then, had not jealously guarded his leadership, but had, indeed, shared it. It was true that Aaron and Miriam had prophesied but Miriam was now making the three leaders 'equal'. She was not under Moses in any sense. Aaron was obviously led by Miriam, perhaps because he was younger, but certainly because he was weaker. Exodus 32 shows how he let the people lead him in the matter of devising the golden calf and worshipping it.

Verse 3 states, 'Now Moses was very meek, more than men that were on the face of the earth'. God was angry with Miriam and Aaron and, having called the three leaders together, he taught them that whilst prophets usually received their message which they were to give via the medium of dreams and visions (cf. Jer. 23; Acts 2:14f.) yet Moses was unique in that God spoke to him 'mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of the Lord'. In Deuteronomy 4:15 Israel was told that it had heard God's word but had seen 'no form'. Moses *had* seen 'the form of God'-whatever that may mean. The conclusion is that Moses was in a unique category, and Miriam and Aaron had done wrong to class themselves on the level of Moses as God's ministers. Miriam was punished by being made 'leprous, white as snow'. This was a terrible punishment, and Aaron cried out, 'Oh, my lord, do not punish us for a sin that we have so foolishly committed. Do not let her be like one stillborn, whose flesh is half consumed when it comes out of its mother's womb' (NRSV). Moses cried to the LORD to heal her, but the LORD said that if her father had but spat on her face she would need seven days to clear that, and that she was to be for seven days out of the camp before being healed and re-admitted. Moses never forgot it, and in Deuteronomy 24:8-9, shortly before his death, he recalled Miriam's punishment, warning Israel against an outbreak of leprosy, perhaps as a judgement.

Conclusion To Our Study Of Miriam

What then do we make of the incident? Firstly, that Miriam had erred greatly in breaking the hierarchy of leadership, in seeking to level out the prophetic ministry, and in arrogating to herself a role equal to that of Moses. Whatever may have been the rightness or wrongness of Moses' marriage to the Cushite woman God's gifts and calling are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29), and must be understood, accepted and revered. Aaron was stung into addressing Moses as 'my lord' and recognising Miriam's punishment as warranted. In this sense God preserved the ministry of Moses. Secondly, God forgave Miriam because of Moses' intercession. In this He was gracious and Miriam was restored. After that we hear no more of her until her honourable burial (Num. 20:21). Miriam's place in the leadership was not cancelled, and doubtless she learned something of Moses' meekness. She was a remarkable woman: **Moses and Aaron owed** much to her, her prophetic ministry was valuable to Israel, as also her leadership of the women, like us she was fallible—a great lesson for us all to learn.