

WOMEN OF THE BIBLE 7

MIRIAM THE PROPHETESS



At her mother Yocheved's request, Miriam hid her baby brother Moses by the side of a river to evade the Pharaoh's order that newborn Hebrew boys be killed. She watched as the Pharaoh's daughter discovered the infant and decided to adopt him. Miriam then suggested that the princess take on a nurse for the child, and suggested Yocheved; as a result, Moses was raised to be familiar with his background as a Hebrew. (*Exodus 2:1-10*)

MIRIAM'S ACCOUNT

Miriam means '*prophetess*' or '*lady*'; Miriam was the revered sister of the tribal leader Moses, but she was also the acknowledged leader of all the women who fled from Egypt with their families.



MIRIAM PREPARING BASKET FOR INFANT MOSES; HER BROTHER.

It is considered by many that this poetic couplet is one of the oldest parts of the biblical account. She raised a Timbrel in her hand in joy. Later, she objected to the marriage of Moses to a Cushite woman, which made her guilty of speaking *Lashon hara* (*gossiping, or speaking negatively about someone*), for which she

was struck with **tzaraat**. After Aaron asked Moses to intercede for her, Moses uttered a five-word prayer: "*O Lord, make her well,*" and she recovered within seven days. (*Numbers 12*) A passage in Micah suggests she had one legacy with significant regard among later prophets: "*And I brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, and I sent before you Moses, and Aaron, and Miriam.*" (*Micah 6:4*)

Miriam saves her brother Moses

Exodus 2:1-10

Pharaoh ordered the drowning of all male Hebrew babies. It was his 'final solution'. Shiprah and Puah actively worked against this, doing all they could to help the little boys survive.

Shiprah and Puah, Bible Heroines

The Pharaoh in this story, thought to be Ramses II, grew concerned about the large number of foreign workers in Egypt. He decided to limit the Hebrew population by ordering midwives to kill male babies born to Hebrew women.

- ✚ Two of the midwives were woman called **Shiprah** and **Puah**. They would not co-operate with the Pharaoh's order, but instead let the babies live. When questioned, they said that the Hebrew women were vigorous and strong and gave birth before a mid-wife had time to arrive. In this way they circumvented the Pharaoh's command. He responded by ordering that all male babies be thrown into the Nile river.
- ✚ Moses about to be cast out onto the water of the Nile: **Miriam** watches over him! Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. She conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, **she got a papyrus basket for him, plastered it with bitumen and pitch, then put the child in it** and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.' Read Exodus 2:1-10

Marriage

Josephus in Antiquities of the Jews states that Miriam was the wife of Hur who is mentioned in Exodus as a close companion of Moses.

The Sickness [snow white] of Miriam

At Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses because of the Cushite (*Ethiopian*) woman whom he had married: *for he had married a Cushite woman. (Numbers 12:10-14)*

- Underlying this is a questioning of Moses' exclusive religious authority, since they consider themselves also to have been prophets.

They said, '*Was it only to Moses that God spoke? Did He not speak to us as well?*'

God hears and calls **all three** to the door of the tabernacle. When they arrive, God states to them that Moses has a much greater authority than Miriam and Aaron; indeed, He chooses to speak to Moses face to face, rather than merely through dreams. In anger, God subsequently visits a

punishment on Miriam, giving her tzaraat turning her “*leprous, like snow*”. According to the rules concerning tzaraat, Miriam must then live outside of the camp, in isolation, only being allowed back after Moses intercedes with God to heal her. Nevertheless, God insists that she still be punished for seven days.

- Tzaraat was an illness traditionally translated as "leprosy", but it may refer to something more like skin cancer or vitiligo. Jewish translations and the KJV use the phrase “*white as snow*” in *Num. 12:10*, but rather than white the implication of like snow may rather be flaky or wet with open sores.

Song of Miriam

Exodus 15:20, 21

19 When Pharaoh’s horses, chariots and horsemen[e] went into the sea, the Lord brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. 20 *Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing.* 21 *Miriam sang to them:*

*“Sing to the Lord,
for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea.”*

Water. This symbol of life was important in Miriam's story: she saved her brother from the waters of the Nile, she led the song of victory after the waters of the Clear water splashing into outstretched hands Red Sea parted, and God gave abundant water to the people, in the form of a spring, immediately after she died.



Janet Thomas
Founder/President/CEO
Bible Stories Theatre
www.biblestories theatre.org
info@biblestories theatre.org