

MIRIAM

The Prophetess

In the Torah, Miriam is referred to as “Miriam the Prophetess,” and the Talmud names her as one of the seven major prophets of Israel. Miriam became a great heroine to the Jews and, by Maccabean times, her name was one of the most common given to girls. So, who is Miriam and what is her story?

Miriam was the daughter of Abram and Jochebed and the older sister of Moses and Aaron. When Jochebed made the heart-... wrenching decision to save her baby by setting him afloat on the Nile, his sister Miriam was charged with watching the ark to see what happened to the baby Moses. After secretly watching Pharaoh's daughter take the baby, Miriam boldly went to her and offered to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the child. The princess agreed, and Miriam introduced her to Jochebed who thus was hired to nurse her own son. (Exodus2: 1-10) Years later when God called upon Moses to lead his people out of bondage, Miriam stood steadfastly by his side. She became identified as a prophetess and Aaron's sister. Her name appears again in the Bible after the Red Sea closed on Pharaoh's army and drowned them. Miriam gathered together the women and they danced with tambourines in celebration. They sang one of the oldest poems in the Bible; “Sing to the Lord for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider have been hurled into the sea.” (Exodus 15:21)

Miriam is mentioned a third time in the Bible (Numbers12: 1-15). The Hebrews complained and grumbled against Moses because of their difficulties in the wilderness. They were also upset because Moses married a woman of Cush (Ethiopia). Miriam and Aaron attempted to usurp some of Moses' power by claiming to have equal authority with him. Moses was acceptable to this because he was overburdened, but God was not pleased. A cloud descended over their tent as God confronted Miriam and Aaron affirming that it was through Moses, not them that he spoke. When the cloud lifted Miriam was white with leprosy. Aaron and Moses both pleaded for her. God relented but left her a leper for seven days saying:”If her father had spit in her face would she not have been in disgrace for seven days?”We may wonder why Aaron was not similarly punished. Perhaps it was that she was perceived as the ring - leader or maybe Aaron's duties as high priests were too important. We will never know. The Scriptures do not reveal Miriam's attitude of heart during her banishment but it is safe to assume that she repented. The last we hear of Miriam is that she died and was buried at Kadesh Barnea, not far from where Hagar, another slave woman, had encountered an angel in the wilderness so many years earlier. Like her brothers Moses and Aaron, she died shortly before the Israelites ended their 40-year journey in the desert and she, too, was prevented from entering the Promised Land.

Miriam is one of the great heroes of our faith. Herself a Prophetess, she exhorted and encouraged God's people as they journeyed toward the Promise Land. Yet, strong though she was, she sinned against God and suffered a punishment designed to bring her to repentance.

Reflection: Even when we are forgiven, we often have to pay a price for our sin. What sin have you had to pay a penalty for and how do you feel about that now?

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