

IX. Biblical Biographies from the Bible
Biblical Biographies: Who? Why? How?

“Portrait #8: Miriam”

Exodus 15:19–21

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This will be our last Biblical biography to study. I have purposefully tried to choose individuals that don't really get top billing in our preaching and teaching. Everyone knows about David but what about Nathan? Everyone knows about Moses but what about Miriam? So we are looking at some of these background characters. We looked at some of the 12 judges in the book of Judges who set up the transition from entering the Promised Land under Joshua to the establishment of the Promised Kingdom from Genesis 17. We have looked at Gideon, Deborah and then Samson in our last study. I am hoping these Biblical biographies are showing you the powerful work of the Gospel of Christ in the lives of these individuals as God worked in and through their lives. We also have been able to look at their warts, pimples and all as we have studied them. They are not cosmetically air-brushed in the Bible. God is so honest in His Word about those whom He has saved by grace. They are not presented as saints who have no evidence of sin but on the contrary we see not only the sin before they are converted but even the indwelling sin they deal with. In this study we will see no exception of this in the life of Miriam.

What was the name of the chosen mother of Jesus? It is Mary. Have you ever noticed in the New Testament that there seems to be an abundance of Marys? There is Mary wife of Cleopas, Mary Magdalene, the “other Mary” and if I have counted correctly there are seven in the Bible that I know of. Mary is the derivative name from Miriam. So we are actually looking at the woman of the Old Testament that many in the days that Jesus came, became the name that many chose to give to their daughters. Some would say this was done because there was a sense of expectancy/anticipation of the Messiah in the day the Messiah came and everyone wanted their daughter to be that chosen one who would bear the promise given to Eve that she would have a Seed, in which that Seed would be the victorious Messiah who would conquer His enemies. The one name that would have stood out concerning this anticipation of the Messiah in the Old Testament would have been Miriam.

In the Old Testament there were numerous types of Christ. Moses, Abraham and David were a type of Christ and the most profound type of Christ in the Old Testament would have been Moses. Why? Moses is a Prophet. Moses comes from the tribe of the priests which is Levi. Most was the leader, not formally but almost functioning like a king. He is the closest of the Old Testament types of the three offices that the Messiah would fulfill – Prophet, Priest and King. He is the first author of the Word inscripturated that points to the Word Incarnate, Christ and his sister was Miriam. So in some sense she begins to take on significance, not only because of what she did but because of her relationship to Moses.

Remember when John the Baptist is being asked if he's the Messiah? We see this in John 1:19–21 which says [19] *And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”* [20] *He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”* [21] *And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you **the Prophet**?” And he answered, “No.”* John was asked if he was the Prophet so Moses had this high standing and that automatically brings high standing to Aaron

and to Miriam. So she is highly esteemed out of the Old Testament as it's seen in all these names of Mary, how she is presented and valued.

So what is Miriam's origin? We will look at about three texts in this study concerning Miriam and we'll start with Exodus 2:1–4 says [1] *Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman. [2] The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months. [3] When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank. [4] And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him.*

Here we see that both Moses' father and mother were of the tribe of Levi and that his sister had a job to do when he was a baby. Now let me set this text in context. Here the people of God have gone into the 400 years of slavery and oppression as prophesied in Genesis 15. Pharaoh, the one who doesn't know anything about Joseph, a different one, sees God's people almost like a fifth column – untrustworthy and ones to be concerned about. Why? It is because they have some distant cousins that are just outside of Egypt making warlike moves against Egypt. These would be descendants from Abraham's son Ismael. Another reason is because they had become so numerous and so there was the fear from Pharaoh that if they were to rise up they could possibly destroy the Egyptians.

So Pharaoh was trying to establish some policies to control them. The first thing he established was infanticide that the Hebrew male child would be killed which in his mind would be the way to take care of future warriors and demoralize families but in the providence of God that didn't work because God had His own servants. God's servants were the midwives of the Hebrews who were so vigorous that they would have the child and had gone on. People tend to accuse the midwives of lying in this passage but there may be an element of truth to this. There are a couple of million people giving birth and a couple of midwives so how are you going to get around to all of them on time. They may have over scheduled a bit so they couldn't get there on time. The Egyptian midwives are honored and show up this way in the New Testament because they would not participate in the edict of infanticide.

Then Pharaoh goes from infanticide to genocide. His second policy is that when the male child is born, as soon as the midwife would see the male child they were to throw them into the Nile River. So these are the things Pharaoh is trying to do to control this population. So we see in this text that Moses is born and has been raised to a certain point. There is nothing else to do but trust the child to God's providence and they don't throw him into the Nile River but they place him into the Nile River in this ark-like basket that has been fashioned from the bulrushes. Then his sister is sent out to see what is going to happen to him. Next we will see her bravery as she intervenes which could be at the risk of her life. Here's what happens.

Exodus 2:5– says [5] *Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her young women walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it. [6] When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him (she was moved by the common grace of God to enact mercy for the child) and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." [7] Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" [8] And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So the girl went and called the child's mother. [9] And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. [10] When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named*

him Moses, “Because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.” This is looking at the derivation of the name Moses.

I want to give you a couple of thoughts on this text. We see the sovereign hand of God’s providence here for it’s not just anybody who finds Moses but it’s Pharaoh’s daughter. Not only is this daughter willing to disobey her father but she is in a position where it would be difficult for the father to reject what his daughter wants. She decides she wants this child but doesn’t want to be bothered nursing it so she requests the child at a certain time, perhaps those first initial years aren’t that much fun. Then up steps the sister of Moses with the idea of helping Pharaoh’s daughter find a woman to nurse the child for her in the initial years of his life. Miriam is basically setting up foster care for Moses by his own mother and the daughter of Pharaoh likes the idea. Not only is the decree of Pharaoh not going to be carried out but Moses will be raised by Pharaoh’s daughter’s finances that will undergird Moses’ family as his mother will nurse him, as the sister attends to him and the father says ‘where is this money coming from?’

Do you see what is happening here? Moses is going to grow up and God will call him to lead His people out by God’s strong hand and then Pharaoh drives them out. The Egyptians will pour forth the gold, silver and the clothing. The picture of the redemption of God’s people through the deliverer in his redemption and rescue and the plunder of the Egyptians doesn’t begin 80 years later for the plunder of the Egyptians begin right now as Pharaoh’s treasury is being used to undergird the raising of this child. The child will be raised by his mother and the family of Pharaoh will be supporting him even though an edict was given to take his life. When this Moses leads the people out there will be Egyptian resources that will be poured into the wagons of the people as they are leaving, from which a tabernacle will be built and they will be sustained on their journey to the Promised Land. God does amazing things in how He accomplishes His purposes.

The God who does this loves to use leadership. The sister of Moses is exercising leadership. All we were told of what she was to do was to watch and see what happens to her brother, but when the moment came she stepped up to a place of danger, personal vulnerability and exercises leadership that puts into motion what is going to be the education and the development of the young man, Moses, who will eventually become the man God uses to bring judgment upon Egypt and for the people of God to be set free to worship the Lord and taken to the Promised Land. So let’s find out more about this sister who is unnamed thus far in the text, by looking at Exodus 15.

By Exodus 15, the exodus has taken place after the plagues have been placed upon the Egyptians. The miracle of the parting of the Red Sea has been seen as the people of God are delivered from the Egyptians. When they get on the other side of the Sea they begin to worship the Lord and the song of Moses is given to us in Exodus 15:1–18, but as the song is being played we see there is a woman leader among them.

Exodus 15:19–21 says [19] *For when the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his horsemen went into the sea, the LORD brought back the waters of the sea upon them, but the people of Israel walked on dry ground in the midst of the sea. [20] Then 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. [21] And Miriam sang to them: “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown (hurled) into the sea.”*

Here is a sidebar on this. The people of Israel went through the Red Sea on dry ground and the Egyptian army followed them. Then the Lord brought the waters that were like a wall on both sides through which the people of God had been protected as they walked through on dry

ground, down and the waters covered over the Egyptians. So where is this hurling taking place, this throwing of the horse and rider? Yet that is what is said in Exodus 15. Later on in the Psalms the same language is going to be used – hurled or cast into the sea. In Hebrew cosmology, rivers and springs represent life and seas represent evil and its consequences – the roaring, foaming seas with its waves of destruction.

So when the demoniacs told Jesus to send them to the pigs in Mark 5 and Matthew 8, we kind of think Jesus is being a nice, southern gentleman by allowing that but really pigs are considered unclean animals that are sent over the slope into the sea, which is the door to the abyss of everlasting torment. That was a declaration of a sovereign God who is sending them to the judgment that the sins demand under the holy righteousness of God. They don't hide it for yes the waters covered them over but the language is hurling them because it was by the sovereign hand of God that Pharaoh's heart had been hardened to follow them into the sea. So there He was hurling the Egyptians into the sea and when the waters come over them He is bringing judgment upon them. What is the picture?

The picture is the Day of Judgment. I know a lot of people tend to say 'you didn't want God in life and hell is what you want which is separation from God in life, so now you get what you want' yet nobody will want hell. That is why the Bible says He 'casts/hurl/throw' them into the fiery furnace and they will not repent but they will gnash their teeth and cry out against the Lord. That is not remorse, that's a temper tantrum of rebellion. That is what is being pictured here. So this song isn't say it was a bad military decision to get caught in the middle of the sea, for this is the sovereign hand of God hurling them into His judgment that they were due. The amazing thing here is that is where we ought to be, but at the cross the wrath of God was hurled upon Jesus in our place and He drank that cup to bottom so that we could have everlasting life.

So in this Exodus 15 text we have Miriam identified as the sister of Aaron and Aaron is the brother of Moses. So why doesn't it say the sister of Moses? That will show up in another text but they are not doing it here because she is stepping up as a leader again and Aaron is leading the worship and praise of God with the song of Moses. So let's place the siblings. Here Moses is 80 years old and we know Miriam is the older sister. Aaron is 83 years old. If Miriam was old enough to negotiate with Pharaoh's daughter then she would have to be older than Aaron so we can conclude that of the three Miriam is the oldest. So at this moment Aaron is leading the people in worship and praise and Miriam steps up to lead the women out in the praise of God as the women follow her with tambourines and dancing, giving thanks to God for all that He has done.

I have a riddle for you. If Moses had been born after he lived he would never have been born. So what am I saying? So now let's look at Exodus 6 where we have the genealogy of Moses and Aaron. Exodus 6:16–20 says [16] *These are the names of the sons of Levi according to their generations: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari, the years of the life of Levi being 137 years.* [17] *The sons of Gershon: Libni and Shimei, by their clans.* [18] *The sons of Kohath: Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel, the years of the life of Kohath being 133 years.* [19] *The sons of Merari: Mahli and Mushi. These are the clans of the Levites according to their generations.* [20] *Amram took as his wife Jochebed his father's sister (in other words, he married his aunt), and she bore him Aaron and Moses, the years of the life of Amram being 137 years.* Now you have the answer to my riddle.

Moses was the first author of Scripture through which we not only get the moral law but the ceremonial law which introduced the law against incest. This would not have been allowed. So if somehow Moses had been born after he had lived he would never have been born because

when he lived he gave the law that ruled out of bounds his marriage up until that point. Before the law came that marriage was not out of bounds and you can go back to the Garden in Genesis where brothers were marrying sisters. So here we find out that Miriam, Moses and Aaron's parents are Amram and Jochebed and that they are both from the tribe of Levi.

So what have we learned about Miriam in Exodus 15? We have learned two things about her calling as she would serve the Lord. One, she is a leader and two she is a prophetess. In the Bible that is not a common calling. As far as I can see there are only three others in the Old Testament and two references in the New Testament. A prophetess is one whom God uses to speak forth truth but doesn't necessarily mean through one came canonical revelation. The prophetesses in the Old Testament are Deborah in the book of Judges, Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14) and one named Huldah (II Kings 22:14–20). Some prophetesses in the New Testament were Anna (Luke 2:36–38) and the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9–10).

Miriam, like every other leader we have studied in this series, has feet of clay but God's grace is glorious. Her feet of clay makes itself evident in the book of Numbers. The book of Numbers contain some various challenges against Moses' ministry and one of them came right from his own leadership team which was also his family.

Numbers 12:1–9 says *[1] Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. [2] And they said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it. [3] Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth. [4] And suddenly the LORD said to Moses and to Aaron and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting." And the three of them came out. [5] And the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam, and they both came forward. [6] And he said, "Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. [7] Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. [8] With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" [9] And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed.*

I'm not saying this out of self-protection because I'm a pastor but while we are never called to treat any leader as infallible or on the level with God, when God calls someone and His hand is upon them, one ought to always be careful how they speak about them and to them, for they are the Lord's anointed. Here in this text Miriam and Aaron have spoken about Moses and against Moses and God says to them 'why would you do that? Do you not know that this is a Prophet that I don't send visions to but I talk to him face to face, mouth to mouth? This is My servant Moses.'

Numbers 12:10–16 says *[10] When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous (a sign of judgment), like snow (already in the advance stages). And Aaron turned toward Miriam, and behold, she was leprous. [11] And Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned. (There is not only repentance but confession of sin, against Moses and the Lord) [12] Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother's womb." [13] And Moses cried to the LORD, "O God, please heal her—please." [14] But the LORD said to Moses, "If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut outside the camp seven days, and after that she may be brought in again." [15] So Miriam was shut outside the camp seven days, and the people did not set out on the march till Miriam was brought in again. [16] After that the people set out from Hazeroth, and camped in the wilderness of Paran.*

So judgment was brought upon them because of what they had done. The excuse was that Moses had married a Cushite woman. We don't know who this woman was although we have one possible idea. This is the only time she is mentioned but it could be his wife Zipporah although Zipporah was a Midianite, which were cousins who come through the line of Abraham but not in the covenantal line. Also in Habakkuk 3:7, Cushites and Midianites are handled together as one so it may be referring to Zipporah whom we know Moses married, when he was in the wilderness and became a tender of sheep from age 40 to age 80. She was the one who had gone back from him when he went to deliver the people from bondage because he had in obedience to God, circumcised his son. It may have been a wife after Zipporah who may not be on the scene any longer.

Yet we find out pretty quickly that, that was the excuse for the real issue was jealousy and envy. They said 'Why is everyone giving Moses such favor, didn't God speak to us? Why aren't we getting credit like Moses is getting credit?' So they manufactured a reason in order to rebel against Moses, which so often happens but God will not be fooled by our nuances and our wordsmiths. So He immediately brings them before Him and brings judgment upon them. Aaron confesses he has sinned and calls Moses 'lord' with no question of who is to be in authority by God's appointment. Aaron pleads for mercy not only for himself but also for his sister. Moses requires no cajoling at all for he is ready to intercede.

In fact, two times he asks the Lord to heal his sister. The Lord says He will heal her but not without some consequences. The people need to know that the Lord will not tolerate the rebellion against Him and the one He called to lead them. God can deal with His called ones but you the people may not. Lepers are typically shut away until they die but she was only shut away for seven days and then she would be healed.

So what is Miriam's legacy? Here are three thoughts about Miriam as we conclude this study. Number one is that Miriam is a great example of Godly female leadership. I understand her faltering and I will deal with that but in the course of what we see in Exodus 2, 5 and 15 we see her exercising in what we call complimentary leadership as she comes alongside Moses and Aaron to provide the leadership God has gifted her to do as a prophetess and leader as she leads the women. We need that today.

We not only need fathers of the faith but we need mothers of the faith, but we don't need the competition of female and male leadership where males attempt to do female leadership and females attempt to do male leadership. Not only are we created differently but we're gifted differently and certainly, leadership always has overlap. Yet there is something distinctive about the female leadership that God calls forth and you see it with Miriam where she takes worship to another level as she leads the women out with the tambourines and the dancing in the worship service as she begins to speak forth God's Word to them as a prophetess.

Secondly, Miriam is always laboring to find solutions in her leadership. What is the solution for Moses as a child, for her mother, and her father? She is constantly trying to find solutions to situations. Some people when they are in positions of leadership and teaching as Miriam was, many times they just create problems instead of solve problems. She solved problems. She came up with solutions.

Thirdly and finally, Miriam is a sinner saved by grace. She had at least one moment we know of where she wanted Moses' position and not the position that God had called her to. If getting Moses' position meant exposing her brother along with the conspiracy of Aaron, she was willing to do it, but thankfully in God's grace she and Aaron came to repentance and Moses in his compassion interceded for them so that they would be restored.

I want you to see constantly that every leader God calls He gives them strengths and weaknesses and that's why we need plurality of leadership. If you're a leader always be transparent and always be accountable. Don't develop another way of life, because it's so easy for Satan to get the foothold of jealousy, envy or self-importance. That's why it's so important to always be accountable to others. Then praise God as He would work in our lives so that we could walk in obedience to Him.

This is one of the reasons I'm glad God convicted me to be a Presbyterian. Now you don't have to be a Presbyterian to get to heaven, but through this God convicted me of the Biblical model of plurality of leadership and accountability because that's the blessing, not only for God's people, but it's the blessing for the leader lest they fall with feet of clay as a jar of clay. Let's pray.

Prayer:

God, thank You for the time we have been together in Your Word. Thank You for the privilege to unfold the Scriptures together by the Spirit of God and we pray only for the glory of God. Keep growing us, not simply with more knowledge about those in the Bible, but with lives changed because of what we see that You do with Your Word and Your Spirit in their lives, do it in ours for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.