

Buried in the Desert: Miriam Seen
Through the Eyes of a *Mujerista*

Table of Contents

Introduction and the Story of Miriam.....	Page 3
Reimagining Miriam.....	Page 4
Miriam Through the Eyes of an Immigrant.....	Page 7
Conclusion.....	Page 9
Bibliography.....	Page 10

Introduction

Miriam is a name commonly known in the Hebrew bible due to her status as Moses's and Aaron's sister. Through time she has been the subject of many feminists' analyses which focused more on the person of Miriam rather than her relation to Moses and Aaron. These analyses center greatly on her being one of the first female prophetesses in the Hebrew bible and how one can re-imagine her image to fit in modern form. This paper will not seek to critique these analyses, rather it will try to answer the question: How can she matter to a group of Latina women? The paper will analyze the current understandings and from that form a new understanding through a *Mujerista* lens. This new analysis is needed because the story of Miriam is one which can bring great inspiration, joy, and understanding to the Latina women reading her story and for others to understand the struggles of a Latina woman.

The story of Miriam

The reader is first introduced to Miriam in Exodus as she places baby Moses in the river in order to save his life. Her name is not stated in the first encounter, but she is later identified as, "Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister."¹ The next time Miriam is mentioned is her speaking out against the Cushite woman whom Moses married. YHWH punishes her for speaking out against Moses, making her ill for seven days before healing her. During this time the people did not move and waited for her to heal before they continued their travel in the dessert. The final time we hear of Miriam is when she passes away. She dies without ever reaching the promised land and her body is buried in the wilderness. Out of the three siblings, she was the first to die.

Miriam is also briefly mentioned in the Book of Micah. Micah 6:4 reads, "In fact, [YHWH] brought you up from the land of Egypt, I redeemed you from the house of bondage, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam."² This affirms that Miriam was sent by YHWH and solidifies her position as a female prophetess. The passage also highlights and affirms Miriam's

¹ Jewish Publication Society of America, *Tanakh: The holy scriptures, the new JPS translation according to the traditional Hebrew text = Tanakh* (Philadelphia, Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985) (Exodus 15:20-21)

² Ibid. (Micah 6:4)

importance to the history of the people of Ancient Israel. Miriam is also mentioned throughout the rest of the Hebrew bible and the New Testament. These passages briefly refer to her in relationship to her parenthood and siblings or evokes her story from Exodus.

Miriam is also mentioned in the Midrash, commentary of Rabbis on part(s) of the Hebrew scriptures. The Midrash is a collection of the commentaries and often the authors are trying to explain or fill in gaps in the original texts. These writings are a separate entity from the Hebrew Bible, but some would consider the stories in the Midrash to be as true as the stories in the Hebrew Bible. In the Midrash, she is portrayed as one of the women who helped hide children from the Pharaoh and she is also someone who helps the poor and needy.³ Furthermore, she is responsible for helping her mom and dad get back together again which leads to the birth of Moses. Miriam is also portrayed to be more outspoken than what can be seen in the Hebrew Bible alone. She condemns the Pharaoh for his actions and confronts her parents when she disagrees with them. It is interesting to note that much attention is given to Miriam in the Midrash. This points to her holding a high level of importance in the Rabbis' eyes. Miriam Sherman, who has a Doctor of Philosophy in History believes the reason Miriam was so important to the Rabbis is because she was the bringer of the Well (water/life).⁴ Through this personification people held Miriam in high esteem and wrote of her to continue her legacy.

Reimagining Miriam

The story of Miriam can be considered brief, especially if one starts comparing her to the other characters in the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, many people have taken an interest in the person of Miriam and have written on her through a feminist lens. These writings all have one theme in common and that is they are placing Miriam as her own being. She is not simply the sister of Aaron and Moses, she is a female prophetess, a leader, and a beloved person in her

³ Norman Finkelstein, "TOTAL MIDRASH," *Religion & Literature* 43, no. 2 (2011) (Midrash 1)

⁴ Miriam Sherman, "A Well in Search of an Owner Using Novel Assertions to Assess Miriam's Disproportionate Elaboration among Women in the Midrashim of Late Antiquity," PDF, XXII (2006), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9zx60786>

community. The character of Miriam is vaster than most people realize, and her impact can be great if people are willing to listen.

When reading, “A Paradoxical Prophet: Jewish Women Poets Re-Imagine Miriam” by Enid Dame, one can already tell how complex the character of Miriam can be. Dame writes,

In traditional (rabbinic) midrash, she is both a praised, competent heroine, and a troubling presence. Miriam both sustains her people and makes them nervous. This dual set of reactions suggests that she is an off-center figure, an example of the ambivalence people—especially men—feel toward a powerful woman, particularly one who does not try to disguise or belittle her powers.⁵

Enid uses poetry written on Miriam as well as her personal Jewish background to create her own vision of Miriam and what she represents. For Dame, Miriam is a strong and independent woman who lived in a world of intersectionality. To try and categorize her as one being would be wrong and would just be another “male” reading of her story. Instead, she urges the reader to view Miriam as a, “powerful female force in her own right— singer, choreographer, prophet, big sister— operating at the vital moment when the Jewish family coalesced into a Nation.”⁶ Miriam is not just Moses’s and Aaron’s sister, she is not the female version of them either, rather she is her own person capable of being independent and daring.

Meanwhile, Jennifer Gubkin, a doctoral student at the University of Southern California in the Department of Religion and Social Ethics, writes of her struggles in coming to terms with the cruelty which Miriam experiences. In her article titled, “If Miriam Never Danced . . . A Question for Feminist Midrash,” Gubkin asks, “How does the silencing of Miriam function in this text?”⁷ The text being Exodus and Numbers. Gubkin strays away from projecting her voice onto Miriam and vice versa. Instead, Gubkin tries to find the voice of Miriam in the text. By the end of her article she comes to a dilemma. There is no happy ending for Miriam. She is constantly

⁵ Enid Dame, “A Paradoxical Prophet: Jewish Women Poets Re-Imagine Miriam.: Bridges: A Jewish Feminist Journal.” 12, no. 1 (2007)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jennifer Gubkin, “If Miriam Never Danced . . . A Question for Feminist Midrash,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 14, no. 1 (1995), doi:10.1353/sho.1995.0119

othered or punished more severely (as was the case with her illness) than her male counterparts. In the same breath, Gubkin admits that this is due to the time in which Miriam lived, where women were silenced and punished if they did not obey. Gubkin does not provide a final answer in her analysis of Miriam but she does state that two things must be analyzed before more is written on this topic,

First, from historical analysis and literary theory we learn that our own representations of facts produce the facts perceived. Thus, as rabbinic writers of the Midrash knew, how we write about the text determines the text. Second, from feminist theory comes the insight that speaking in universals commits a violence against the particular.⁸

Gubkin does not want the story of Miriam to be one of oppression but at the same time she does not wish to force her own narrative upon Miriam. She instead chooses this middle ground.

Another interpretation of who Miriam is can be found in the article, "The berated politicians: Other ways of reading Miriam, Michal, Jezebel and Athaliah in the Old Testament in relation to political and gender quandary in Sub-Saharan Africa, Kenya and Uganda as case studies" by Wabyanga Robert Kuloba. In this version Miriam is viewed as a political figure. An emphasis is placed on her defiance and willingness to speak out against anything she deems as incorrect. Kuloba notes that it often seems as if YHWH is telling Miriam, "yes you are also a leader, but you are not a man...You are a woman and should not challenge or equate yourself to men! If men challenge each other like Aaron has done, you should be modest and decent in your conduct... So because you have played a man and challenged male authority, you are more guilty than Aaron and alone should you suffer leprosy."⁹ Kuloba notes that Miriam is made aware that although she has status, she is still at the bottom of the pyramid due to her gender.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Wabyanga R. Kuloba, "The berated politicians [electronic resource]: Other ways of reading Miriam, Michal, Jezebel and Athaliah in the Old Testament in relation to political and gender quandary in Sub-Saharan Africa, Kenya and Uganda as case studies" (Thesis (Ph.D.), University of Glasgow, 2011), <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/2936/> (pg. 170)

Kuloba views the seven days of sickness as a form of humiliation which Miriam must endure, purely because she is female; this claim is made because Aaron also spoke out against the Cushite woman but was not punished with severity as Miriam was. Kubloba then ties this to the, “African female politicians who have suffered public humiliations like Nagayi Nabila Sempala who was undressed in Uganda by government authorities and Wangari Maathai who was indecently assaulted by Kenyan government authorities.”¹⁰ Through this reading of Miriam, one can see how Miriam’s story can be a representation of African female nationalists and politicians. Their plights are similar and the punishments they suffer are unfair.

In the book, “The Miriam tradition: Teaching embodied Torah” by Cia Sautter the physicality of Miriam is explored. Sautter views Miriam as a symbol of prayer through dance. Miriam was known to lead women and children in prayer through dance and song. In fact, Exodus 15:20-21 (one of the first mentions of Miriam) states, “Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels. And Miriam chanted for them,”¹¹ For Sautter, this tradition is important to remember because often, “religious scholars seemingly forgot Sephardic women’s community leadership.”¹² Instead, if we are to accept this tradition once again, it would cause an inclusivity of prayer tradition and bring back female leadership in this field. Sautter believes we should not hide or be embarrassed of prayer and instead follow Miriam’s example of embodying prayer.

Miriam Through the Eyes of an Immigrant

Upon reading these interpretations, I see Miriam as being a strong and independent woman who worked hard to overcome the social structures forced upon her. There is also great value in her leadership skills through prayer and her actions to those in need. Yet none of the interpretations made Miriam present in a Latina woman context and thus the question main continued: How can she matter to a group of Latina women?

¹⁰ Ibid. (pg. 171)

¹¹ Jewish Publication Society of America, *Tanakh*

¹² Cia Sautter, *The Miriam tradition: Teaching embodied Torah* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010)

This is when I came across *mujerista* theology and thus I started looking at Miriam through this lens. Isasi-Díaz, the person who coined the term Mujerista theology, describes this theology as follows: “the lived-experience of Hispanic Women is the source of *mujerista* theology, our theological articulation must start with an analysis of our ethnicity, of who we are and how we understand ourselves.”¹³ It is thanks to Isasi’s form of theology, that I started shifting the way I thought about Miriam. First, I had to look at my own identity and lived experience in hopes of seeing Miriam there.

I grew up within an immigrant community in the south side of Chicago. I myself was an illegal citizen till DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) was implemented. Although my ethnicity is Hispanic, I found my lived experience to be in limbo. I do not truly belong anywhere as I am no longer an immigrant, but I am not a first-generation citizen either. In this context of my lived experience I also did not see nor was I inspired by the story of Miriam. In the same breath, the story of Miriam seemed so familiar to me yet so far away. So, I looked further into my memory of the time before I was in the U.S.A. It was here that I remembered my earliest childhood memory: crossing the Arizona desert on foot with my mother at age 3.

My mother and I crossed the dessert multiple times, each time getting caught and sent back to Mexico. My earliest memory is of my mom holding me at night as I cried. The coyotes howled loudly at night and it terrified me due to the stories I had heard about them eating people, I was also hungry and thirsty, but I remember my fear of the coyotes outweighing everything else. As I cried, a man yelled at my mother to keep me quiet before we were found by either border patrol or the coyotes. As the mans yelling freighted me further, I cried louder. This prompted the man and the *Sicario* (our guide in this desert) to threatened to duct tape my mouth. As they started reaching for the tape and me, my mother held me close and started singing. It calmed me down enough so that I stopped crying and focused on the stars. I don’t remember falling asleep that night, but I remember my moms’ soft cries as she finished her song and held me close.

¹³ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En la lucha = In the struggle: Elaborating a *mujerista* theology* / Ada María Isasi-Díaz, 10th anniversary ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; [Northam Roundhouse, 2004], 30

This is where I see Miriam. Yes, Miriam is a strong woman fighting against society, but she is also human. She grieves with her people and yearns to protect them often through song and prayer. Miriam can be seen in the strength of a mother, sister, aunt, etc. as they cross the border(s) with children and protect them from those trying to bring them harm. Miriam can be seen as a representation of the women who are crossing the Mexico-US border and the problems they have to face.

Conclusion

Miriam as seen through a *Mujerista* lens is a woman crossing the border and protecting those she loves as she crosses. Much like Dame, I find Miriam to be a powerful woman who challenges the status quo. This can be seen when the women cross the border in hopes of a brighter future. As Gubkin sees the oppression of Miriam in Exodus, I see how the women are oppressed as they make the journey across the border. Similar to Kuloba, I see Miriam reflected in Latina women and the humiliation they face when they travel across the desert, often their bodies are taken advantage of and/or go through extreme horrors. Like Sautter, who finds Miriam in dance, I find Miriam in the songs the women sing as they traverse dangerous landscapes, and in the comforting songs they sing at night. I see Miriam in a lot of the interpretations discussed above and accept them in my interpretation while also seeing Miriam's humanity and weakness.

For me, Miriam will always be in the desert, with the women who bravely cross with their family, unsure of the future and possessing a strength only known through them. She is the embodiment of the struggles the women at the border face and is the representation of hope in making it through the desert. She is also willing to never escape the desert as long as those she cares for make it out. Miriam is a symbol of the *Mujerista*, our fight, our struggle, and our stories in the desert.

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