

Miriam

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,

on May 5, 2019, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.

Scripture: Exodus 2:1-10, 15:19-21 and Numbers 12:1-15, 20:1

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In literature, both ancient and modern, there are basically two types of characters. There are characters who are primarily plot devices—those who are stuck in a scene to serve a purpose, allowing the story to continue on its set trajectory. They might provide a witness to the action, or support the main character; they might be a target of the action or illuminate some quality of the main character. They might themselves be well-rounded and interesting, but they serve to move the plot forward in a forward motion.

Then there are “story pivots”. A story pivot is a character that is critical to the narrative arc of the story. As the name suggests, the action spins around them in some way and the plot is sent in a new direction because of them. Essentially, a story pivot is a character without whom the story wouldn’t happen.

“In ancient literature, almost all story pivot characters are divine, male or both, [and] what female story pivots there are, tend to be the cause of any trouble.”¹ Mythological literature is a good example of trouble-inducing female story pivots. Think for example of Helen of Troy, who was the cause for the war between the Greeks and the Trojans. Or think about Pandora. She was told not to open the box, but she did anyway, and it sure stirred up trouble for all of humanity.

Eve, whom Pastor Jeff preached about last week, is another example of a story pivot who, at least at first seems to be the cause of trouble—she was told not to eat the fruit, but she did it anyway, and it sure stirred up trouble for all of humanity. But there are positive female story pivots in ancient literature, although they may be somewhat hidden, buried under have years of negative interpretation that have been layered on top of them. Miriam is one of these.

This sermon about Miriam is the second in a series that Pastor Jeff, Joy Barnitz, and I are preaching during the season of Easter. In these sermons, we hope to reintroduce you to some of the key women in the Bible—all of them story pivots—and reinterpret their stories through new lenses, and, hopefully, find ways that their stories can add meaning to our own spiritual journeys.

One of the complications we have in approaching biblical texts is the fact that, whether we realize it or not, we each use different lenses to interpret scripture. Sometimes, we’re aware of the lens we’re using, but often we’re not aware of it at all.

One of the lenses we use every single time we read the Bible and that is often hidden to us is the lens of translation. Any translation is a type of lens, because it is one or more steps away from the original language, and because translators make judgment calls and editorial decisions as they choose the words they think best communicate a concept from one language to another.

¹ Judith Knighton, “Story Pivots and Plot Devices,” The Joyful Papist Blog, entry posted December 7, 2011, <https://joyfulpapist.wordpress.com/2011/12/07/story-pivots-and-plot-devices/> (accessed May 1, 2019).

Another sneaky lens is the patriarchal lens. Patriarchy is so embedded in our culture and has been for most of recorded Western history that we don't realize we're seeing a text through this lens. And this is why patriarchy has been so hard to destroy as the dominant social construct. Because we are so steeped in it, it is difficult to see the world in any other way.

Finally, one thing most casual readers of the Bible do not necessarily know is that the books of the Hebrew Bible—and the New Testament, for that matter, have been significantly redacted by ancient editors. Just as getting our hands on an unredacted Mueller report is nigh unto impossible, it is impossible to know exactly what was in the unedited versions of these ancient stories. We just don't know what bits and pieces of stories ended up on the cutting room floor as ancient editors compiled texts into a more unified whole. The very text we're reading has already been given to us with a particular lens. The divergent voices of the marginalized, the voices of those the ancient editors thought unimportant or dangerous, have already been removed or buried in obscurity.

For many years, the lens I have most often used to interpret the Bible is the lens of feminism. Like a lot of feminist readers of the Bible, I “often come to biblical texts with an awareness of the gap between my feminist values and the text’s worldview.”² At certain times in my life—particularly in my twenties after a college education—that gap was so large that I wasn't sure I could participate in the Christian faith anymore.

But here's the secret that I didn't really learn until much later: It's okay to read the Bible using a new lens. Those ancient editors did it, which is how we got the patriarchal versions of these stories that we have. And Jesus himself did it. Throughout the gospels he's interpreting the ancient texts and received wisdom in new ways. When he says, “you have heard it said, . . . but I say,” he's giving a new interpretation. It's part of what got him in trouble with both the religious and Roman authorities.

Reading the Bible with a new lens can be tricky. It's sometimes tempting to read into a text something that isn't there. But, as the pioneering feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible puts it, “‘Reinterpretation does not mean making the Bible say whatever the reader wants it to say.’ Rather, by recognizing the “diversity of Scripture,” [a new interpretation] is able to draw out marginalized voices and generate new readings.”³ With close reading, careful scholarship, and a different lens, we can bring Miriam and others like her out of the patriarchal shadows where they have been hidden. I believe that Miriam is actually much more important to the Exodus narrative than traditional interpretations offer.

When we first see Miriam, she is by the Nile, watching over the baby Moses as he floats on the river in his basket. She is part of a group of five women without whom the story of Moses wouldn't have happened. In the beginning of the book of Exodus, the Pharaoh, worried that the population of Hebrew slaves is growing too large, orders the midwives that tend the Hebrew women that all boy babies born to them should not be allowed to live. These strong women essentially refuse to do the Pharaoh's bidding, and they allow the boys to live.

² Wendy Zierler, “Re-encountering Miriam,” *The Torah*, entry posted June 20, 2016, <https://thetorah.com/re-encountering-miriam/> (accessed on May 2, 2019).

³ *Ibid.*

Next is the Pharaoh's daughter, who was likely aware that her father wanted the Israelite boys slaughtered. Yet she fishes one of them out of the river and keeps him, rather than turning him over to authorities, killing him herself, or leaving him in the river to succumb to the elements. Miriam, watching over her brother, then steps in to offer the royal daughter her own mother as a wet nurse from Moses, and she and her mother become the fourth and fifth in a chain of women who change the trajectory of the story for good.

Taken separately, these small acts seem unimportant. But seen together they provide a commentary on the power of women to overcome patriarchal authority. In their acts of defiance, risking their own safety, they choose the power of life and love. Biblical scholar Phyllis Tribble noted that "If Pharaoh had recognized the power of women, he might well have reversed his decree and had daughters killed rather than sons."⁴

Miriam's next appearance is as an adult, at the edge of the Red Sea. Here, she is called a prophet—the first woman to be named so in the Bible. She leads the women in a song and dance as they celebrate their escape from Egypt and the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the sea. Her song, "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; / horse and rider he has thrown into the sea,"⁵ echoes the beginning of a longer poem that happens just before this, in which Moses sings a song celebrating Pharaoh's defeat.

Many scholars are confident that this longer song of Moses was actually originally the song sung by Miriam. It is believed that those ancient editors, with their particular patriarchal lens, took the song out of Miriam's mouth and elevated Moses by placing it in his. Which just goes to show that the patriarchal practice of men claiming women's ideas as their own started really, really early.

The image of Miriam and the women singing and dancing with instruments echoes throughout the Hebrew texts, as the psalms and other books record the people's celebratory praise of God:

"Your solemn processions are seen, O God,
the processions of my God, my King, into the sanctuary—
the singers in front, the musicians last,
between them girls playing tambourines" (Psalm 68)

Raise a song, sound the tambourine,
the sweet lyre with the harp. (Psalm 81)

Praise God with tambourine and dance;
praise God with strings and pipe! (Psalm 150)

⁴ Phyllis Tribble, "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows," in *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 168.

⁵ Exodus 15:21 (NRSV)

The many references to the importance of song and dance in worship and praise, and the likelihood that she was the original singer of the song of Moses, hint that Miriam may have far more important to her community than the text wants to admit. Some scholars suggest that she was actually the people's primary worship leader.

In the next appearance of Miriam, we see her in a conflict with her brother Moses, and she is punished by God for speaking up. A side note about the "leprosy" that the passage describes her having. What the bible calls "leprosy" is not necessarily the disease we call leprosy, or Hansen's disease. It could be one of a whole category of various skin afflictions. A traditional interpretation for this part of her story is that she is a symbol of the disobedient people of Israel, who will rebel against Moses and form a back-to-Egypt committee immediately after this passage, and Moses will have to intercede on their behalf, so God doesn't destroy them. But one thing hints at how important she is to the community, and further suggests that she was a key leader for them: the people refuse to move on until she is restored to their community.

In Jewish tradition, biblical interpretation or commentary is known as *midrash*. It can be in the form of scholarly discourse, but it can also be in the form of a creative story that illuminates something new about a text. Here is a modern *midrash* about this passage from feminist Jewish scholar Wendy Zierler that reinterprets the story of Miriam's disease:

Before she could utter another word, a dark cloud appeared and rumbled above them like a rebuke. When the cloud lifted, as suddenly as it appeared, the skin on Miriam's arm was stricken with snow-white scales. In panic and confusion, Aaron banished her from the camp. For days, Miriam sat outside, seething in her exile, her arm a scaly blaze of white fire. Then, late on the seventh day, alone and looking uneasy, Moses appeared. Miriam remained silent, her eyes glaring. Moses looked at her arm and hesitatingly began to speak:

"You know, sister. I never wanted this post. I tried to tell the voice in the burning bush that I was not suited for this. But God insisted and told me to make snakes out of sticks. The voice in the burning bush said, 'If you want to see My powers as expressed in you, put your hand into your bosom and then pull it out.' And there it was before me: covered with snowy scales! Don't you see? God has now spoken to you too from a cloud. Beware of what you ask for, my sister. For God has answered you and etched the power of prophecy onto your skin. Now you too can bear the burden of this people, whom I have neither fathered nor mothered, but nevertheless, carry on my back."

Miriam looked down at her arm, and behold, the scales were healed. Her arm tingling, she followed her brother back to the camp. Reverently, the people waited as she gathered her things, and took her place at the head of the line.⁶

Finally, we see the last mention of Miriam, her death in the desert. It seems odd and out of place and doesn't seem to connect with the discussions of purity codes that come before it. She is not

⁶ Zierler, *Ibid*.

mentioned again in the narrative. But what happens immediately after her death is interesting. The very next verse reads: “Now there was no water for the congregation.”⁷

There are lots of ways to read this. It could be read merely as the introduction of the next story in the narrative. God tells Moses to strike a rock with his staff, and the rock gushes forth with water for the people and their livestock.

But, wearing my feminist lens, I prefer to hear an implied “and” between the phrases: “Miriam died there, and was buried there, and now there was no water for the congregation.” Miriam was this community’s life force, a powerful leader whose power and wisdom helped them escape from slavery, helped them find their way in the wilderness, and helped them celebrate God with dancing and praise. When she is gone, it is though they live in a parched desert with no water.

From out of the shadows, Miriam emerges as the strong leader she truly is. As one of the five women instrumental in saving the life of the baby Moses, she is a story pivot for the Exodus saga. She may be buried under layers of ancient editing and patriarchal interpretation, but in these few brief references to her, we can see that she is a leader of the people, and “a prophet in her own right. She led the women in the song of triumph after the Egyptians’ pursuit ended in failure. She asked questions and challenged her younger brother’s [...] leadership. [And] In the end, when she died, a spring came from her burial place to give water to the thirsty people.”⁸ Amen.

⁷ Numbers 20:2 (NRSV)

⁸ Knighton, *Ibid.*