



# Miriamic presence in pandemic times

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Are you familiar with the story of Miriam in Numbers 12? An episode that reads as a heated and traumatic encounter with Moses, Aaron and God might well lead us towards something entirely more hopeful, suggests Karen Eliassen. 'How could such an experience of crisis, emotional upheaval, disease and isolation set Miriam on a path towards a sabbath-like consolation?'

A threesome of great characters dominates the second (Exodus) and fourth (Numbers) books of the Hebrew Scriptures: Moses, Aaron and Miriam – although some might not immediately appreciate Miriam's place up there alongside Moses and Aaron. We have heard of Mosaic law and Aaronic priesthood, but who has ever heard of Miriamic anything? Even if such a thing is out there, is it scripturally kosher? And even if kosher, how is that at all relevant to us scripture readers today, caught up as we are in a 21<sup>st</sup> century pandemic?

Well, I have heard of something called 'Miriamic presence', and I am convinced that such a concept is scripturally kosher ... and I want to make a case for its relevance to us here and now. Like Miriam and her people, we too find ourselves a-wandering in a wilderness.

The most obvious scriptural text to turn to if we want to explore what Miriamic presence might encompass is Numbers 12, the story of Miriam's wilderness bout of leprosy, or more modernly put, her bout of 'a harmful skin disease'.<sup>1</sup> In Numbers 12 we find a gripping story about Moses, Aaron and Miriam all hotly engaging with each other, and with God, in a complex mix of power struggle, emotional outbursts,



disease, isolation – and even spitting. Add to this already compelling mix the timeless ur-issues of gender and prayer, and the juicy ingredients are all there to be squeezed for contemporary pandemic relevance.

So where have I heard of Miriamic presence? In the writings of one of the earliest and most influential feminist voices in Hebrew

Scripture scholarship, Phyllis Trible.<sup>2</sup> There is a double-edged take on the word 'presence' in Trible's usage, as on the one hand Miriam's textual presence within all of the Scriptures themselves, and on the other hand Miriam's character's presence to her people within the wilderness story. There is far more to both these edges than first meets the eye, something that did not escape rabbinic readers through the centuries. They creatively engaged in developing a number of traditions about Miriam, the heftiest of which involved a special well. Miriam's well was imagined to be like a portable rock with holes that acted like a spring when the people needed water. When Miriam died, the rabbis duly noted, the people promptly, very promptly, ran out of water (Numbers 20:1-2): Miriam's living presence had been a source of water for the people in the direst of waterless conditions. For me the question now looms, what does such a sense of

a Miriamic presence have to do with what happens to Miriam in Numbers 12? What does it have to do with her bout of 'a harmful skin disease' and her seven-day isolation outside the camp? The events of Numbers 12 take place at the very beginning of the wilderness wanderings, so Miriam and her people are facing an almost 40-year-long haul ahead. Perhaps there is some aspect of Miriam's experience of disease and isolation that prepares her for what is still to come. In surmising such a link, I am going to indulge in some old-fashioned intertextuality.

A reference to Miriam in Deuteronomy is the first text to visit intertextually, and it is a reference by virtue of which the relevance of Numbers 12 soars to a whole new level. The reference is one of a handful of exhortations from God to 'remember' (translating that theologically important Hebrew word, *zakhar*) a particular event. So, in Deuteronomy 24:9 we read: 'Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on your way out of Egypt.' This verse appears right on the heels of a warning to be careful when someone has 'a harmful skin disease', so it may seem an obvious assumption to make that what God did to Miriam was punish her with this disease. Such an assumption on God's behalf about direct cause and effect rankled wildly down the rabbinic centuries: of course God punished Miriam, because in God's eyes she deserved to be punished. And it is still rankling away in feminist writings: of course God punished Miriam, because it is men telling a story about an outspoken woman – and for that reason she didn't deserve it. The Numbers 12 text itself makes no 'punishment' claims about what God did to Miriam. What God did, as things heated up in Numbers 12, was speak, get angry and depart. Then, the cloud lifted, and the Hebrew text in its minimalist way simply notes: *hinei* (meaning 'behold') ... 'Miriam had a harmful skin disease'. The relationship between cause and effect is left fully to the reader's imagination, and that makes me as a reader consider moving away from any 'punishment' assumptions.

In questioning the understanding that whatever God 'did to Miriam on her way out of Egypt' was punishment, it is worth taking note of the overall events-company the Miriam-event keeps. Here is briefly what those other events, the ones God asks his people to remember, look like: The first comes in Exodus 20:8, that Israel is to remember the Sabbath; the next one is in Deuteronomy 5:15, where Israel is to remember that God brought them out of slavery in Egypt; next comes Deuteronomy 8:2, in which Israel is to remember the way God led them for forty years in the wilderness; then our Deuteronomy verse on remembering what God did to Miriam; next in Deuteronomy 32:7, Moses the man of God exhorts Israel to remember their past, cheered as it has been, all the way back to creation; and lastly, in Esther 9:28, the Jews are asked to remember to keep two days of Purim every year, in celebration of how Esther and Mordecai saved the Jews from the Persians. These texts all suggest an events-company of consolation and cause for celebration: how God was there with his people throughout everything, doing great deeds when needed. It is this kind of event that God insists his people remember – not angry punishments, but joyful sabbaths.

Miriam's inclusion in such company should jog a serious rethink about what happened to her in Numbers 12, and about the meaning of her seven-day isolation outside the camp in the wake of her disease. Can we even begin to imagine how on earth such an experience of crisis, emotional upheaval, disease and isolation could set Miriam on a path towards a sabbath-like consolation? Taking the rabbis' tales of Miriam's well to heart can prod us a long way towards such a radical rethink. It is as if something happened to Miriam in Numbers 12, something that helped her get in deep touch with that 'presence' the future would require of her. A 'Miriamic presence' sent by God to his people in need, just as was the Mosaic law and the Aaronic priesthood.

Another intertextual example relating to Miriam's disease further supports such a move away from any 'punishment' mode of understanding her experience. Miriam's disease turns her 'white as snow', a metaphoric coupling found in two other places in the Hebrew Scriptures. The first is part of the story of Naaman's disease in 2 Kings 5, at the end of which the prophet Elisha curses his thieving servant Gehazi, leaving the man diseased and 'white as snow'. This is a case of explicit punishment, but it does not involve God, only an angry prophet and a thief. The second story does involve God, but not punishment. In Exodus 4:6, God makes Moses' hand diseased, turning it 'white as snow', and then proceeds to heal it. Moses is subjected to this brief experience of disease as he is trying to gear himself into returning to Egypt, and God presents it as 'proof' of what is possible. But Moses remains sceptical and anxious, making God angry. When God brings disease that is 'white as snow' on his servants – be it Moses or Miriam – tempers flare all round because the huge challenge ahead is a matter of life and death for God's people.

There are legitimate reasons for why Miriam properly belongs with Moses and Aaron, not as a peripheral tag-on but as equally a servant of God. However those reasons were understood, they did not escape the final redactors of the Hebrew Scriptures. So memorable was this threesome in the ancient Hebrew imagination that it survived intact in two surprising places elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures: Micah and First Chronicles. In Micah 6:4, God reminds his people (whom he accuses of having tired of him): 'I brought you from the land of Egypt. I freed you from slavery. I sent Moses, Aaron and Miriam to you.'<sup>3</sup> Next to no women from Israel's past found their way into the prophetic collection as a whole. There is Sarah as mother in Isaiah 51:2; there is Rachel weeping for her children in Jeremiah 31:15; and then there is Miriam in Micah. Extraordinarily, refreshingly, the scriptural Miriam is not a mother – she is not even a wife.<sup>4</sup> She comes to us as a woman

complete unto herself in her relationship with God and with her people, her communal life-sustaining function not to birth sons but to do something else. To be something else, maybe – a Miriamic presence? This aspect of Miriam as someone who is not a mother nor a wife, but as someone sent by God along with Moses and Aaron, is reiterated in First Chronicles 6:3. Here the chronicler includes Miriam under the Hebrew *benei* (sons) somewhat oddly, because in genealogies female children are usually separated out as daughters: 'Amram's *benei* were Aaron, Moses and Miriam.' Amram is of course the grandson of one of the original twelve, Levi, and Miriam is the only female listed here in the whole of Levi's genealogy (in contrast to the chronicler's Judah-genealogy, where a good number of women are listed, although always as either mother or wife).

All of these background observations suggest that whatever it was about Miriam that made her so essential and therefore memorable to her people, she stood out in a way that she can stand out for us today. Imagine this outstanding Miriam still alive to us, imagine her not being punished for past behaviour or being side-lined in a power struggle; imagine her instead being prepared for what lies ahead. This Miriam knows a thing or two about speaking out truly in a crisis; knows a thing or two about disease and isolation; she knows a thing or two about drawing on God-given consolation in dire times; and she also knows that whatever lies ahead, it cannot be a return to Egypt. Knowing these things helps make her a life-sustaining presence for wilderness people, in possession of a portable well. We are now a wilderness people, and we need a 'Miriamic presence' to survive. Do we have a prayer for Miriam as she prepares for what lies ahead, as she prepares to become that presence? Moses had a terrific prayer for Miriam in Numbers 12:13, a prayer that is as short and simple and powerful as prayers come. It could be our prayer: 'God, please heal her!'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All Scriptural texts are taken from wonderfully clear 2002 translation, *The International Children's Bible*.

**Numbers 12** Miriam and Aaron Speak Against Moses' Wife

<sup>12</sup> Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses, who had married a Cushite. <sup>2</sup> They said to themselves, "Is Moses the only one the Lord speaks through? Doesn't he speak through us?" And the Lord heard this.

<sup>3</sup> (Now Moses was very humble. He was the least proud person on earth.)

<sup>4</sup> So the Lord suddenly spoke to Moses, Aaron and Miriam. He said, "All three of you come to the Meeting Tent now." So they went. <sup>5</sup> The Lord came down in a pillar of cloud. He stood at the entrance to the Tent. He called to Aaron and Miriam, and they both came near. <sup>6</sup> He said, "Listen to my words: When a prophet is among you, I, the Lord, will show myself to him in visions. I will speak to him in dreams.

<sup>7</sup> But this is not true with my servant Moses. I trust him to lead all my people.

<sup>8</sup> I speak face to face with him. I speak clearly, not with hidden meanings. He has even seen the form of the Lord. You should be afraid to speak against my servant Moses."

<sup>9</sup> The Lord was very angry with them, but he left.

<sup>10</sup> The cloud lifted from the Tent. Then Aaron turned toward Miriam. She was as white as snow. She had a harmful skin disease.

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<sup>11</sup> Aaron said to Moses, "Please, my master, forgive us for our foolish sin. <sup>12</sup> Don't let her be like a baby who is born dead. (Sometimes a baby is born with half of its flesh eaten away.)"

<sup>13</sup> So Moses cried out to the Lord, "God, please heal her!"

<sup>14</sup> The Lord answered Moses, "If her father had spit in her face, she would have been shamed for seven days. So put her outside the camp for seven days. After that, she may come back." <sup>15</sup> So Miriam was shut outside of the camp for seven days. And the people did not move on until she came back.

<sup>16</sup> After that, the people left Hazeroth. And they camped in the Desert of Paran.

<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Trible, 'Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows' in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy, First Series*, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield Academic Press, 1994). This book, and the second series, has many other interesting essays about Miriam.

<sup>3</sup> Another rabbinic appreciation of Miriam from midrash was the conviction that Miriam, like Moses and Aaron, was in death kissed by God.

<sup>4</sup> An unbearable situation for all those rabbis commenting on Miriam down the centuries. They married her off to Caleb, he of spies fame (Numbers 13).

<sup>5</sup> It seems relevant that the God who heals announces himself as such in Exodus 15:26, where in the immediate aftermath of the Red Sea the lack of water or its bitterness both threaten the people's survival. Some suggest that Miriam's name may derive from the Hebrew root for bitter. Then again, it may derive from an Egyptian word meaning beloved. Both are worth appropriating, I think.