

Miriam in Numbers 12

Denise Pimpinella

*Department of Theology and Religious Studies
Villanova University*

The biblical figure of Miriam is a textual enigma in the Pentateuch, appearing by name in only five short references.¹ These references, Ex 15:20-21; Num 12:1-16; Num 20:1; Num 26:59; and Deut 24:8-9, identify Miriam as a sister, a prophet, a musician, a leader (specifically of women) and a leper. Later in the Old Testament, Miriam is named twice more in 1Chr 6:3 and Micah 6:4. These two passages acknowledge her role as daughter/sister and her position as leader of the Israelites in the wilderness. In all seven of these passages, Miriam is mentioned in a cursory or deemphasized manner. She remains peripheral and without textual depth, making it remarkable that she is included at all. It would be simple to write her out of Ex15: 20-21 entirely because, as scholars agree, much of her contribution has already been reassigned to Moses.² Furthermore, her death could go unrecorded in Num 20:1 given that it is barely mentioned at all. Accordingly, she could be written out of the genealogies (Num 26:59 and 1 Chr6:3) with ease since many other women already go unrecorded. And if, prior to Micah she is not mentioned, Micah cannot logically use her as evidence to call the Israelites back to God.

Yet Numbers 12 and therefore Deut 24:8-9, which is dependent on Num 12, are more difficult to erase. Here, in Miriam's longest cameo appearance of the Old Testament, her authority appears to be discredited and her leprosy becomes a warning against speaking out for later generations of Israelites. Numbers 12 offers the best glimpse of the depth of Miriam's character. In this passage, each of Miriam's roles during the Israelites' wilderness wanderings, with

¹ The sister of Moses mentioned in Ex 2:4-10 is generally accepted to be Miriam, yet due to the length of the paper and the fact that she remains an unnamed sister, I have chosen to exclude Ex 2 as evidence of Miriam's character. For more information, see essays in Part III: 'Miriam: On Being a Sister,' of *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner, no. 6 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 171-ff.

² Phyllis Trible, "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows," *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner, no. 6 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 171-2. Also see Carol Meyers' defense in "Miriam the Musician," *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner, no. 6 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 207-230.

the exception of musician, is given validation.³ Hence, Numbers 12 with its conflicted presentation takes center stage in the following discussion. After a textual analysis, secondary sources concerning Miriam's roles and Numbers 12 will be presented and, lastly, conclusions regarding the role Miriam played during the wilderness wanderings will be offered.

NUM 12:1-16⁴

- 1: While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married (for he had indeed married a Cushite woman);
- 2: and they said, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the Lord heard it.
- 3: Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth.
- 4: Suddenly the Lord said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting." So the three of them came out.
- 5: Then 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:
 When there are prophets among you,
 I the LORD make myself known to them in visions:
 I speak to them in dreams.
- 7: Not so with my servant Moses;
 he is entrusted with all my house.
- 8: With him I speak face to face—clearly, 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.

³ Fager writes that this is "a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a later patriarchal attempt to discredit Miriam as a legitimate leader, but on the other hand, it shows that she was a serious threat to the absolute control of the male ruler." Jeffery A. Fager, "Miriam and Deborah," *The Bible Today* 32, no. 6 (November 1994): 384.

⁴ The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

- 10: When the cloud went away from over the tent, Miriam had become leprous, as white as snow. And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she was leprous.
- 11: Then Aaron said to Moses, "Oh my lord, do not punish us for a sin that we have so foolishly committed.
- 12: So not let her be like one stillborn, whose flesh is half consumed when it comes out of its mother's womb."
- 13: And Moses cried to the LORD, "O God, please heal her."
- 14: But the LORD said to Moses, "If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and after that she may be brought in again."
- 15: So Miriam was shut out of the camp for seven days; and the people did not set out on the march until Miriam had been brought in again.
- 16: After that the people set out from Hazeroth, and camped in the wilderness of Paran.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Numbers 12 is a fragmented text that elicits investigation into its inconsistent and unclear presentation. For example, verse 1 states that Moses' Cushite wife is the focus of the disagreement between Moses and his siblings. However, Moses' Cushite wife is unidentified in the text and her connection to Miriam and Aaron's prophetic authority remains unclear. Similarly, both Aaron and Miriam confront Moses in verses 1 and 2, but Miriam alone is struck with leprosy in verse 10. Also, it is unclear whether the author of verses 6-8 intends to discredit both Miriam and Aaron's prophetic authority, only Miriam's, or simply create a hierarchy of authority within the triad. Lastly, why would the people disobey God for seven days and wait for Miriam if her punishment was justified or if she was guilty of overstepping her place?⁵

There are two basic scholarly opinions concerning the composition of the text. The first, presented by Rita Burns, argues that verses 2-9 are a distinct

⁵ Graetz lists seven questions that arise from the text. This is a selective reworking of her questions with the omission of questions 2, 3 and 5 and a reworking of questions 6 and 7. Naomi Graetz, "Did Miriam Talk Too Much?" *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner, no. 6 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 232.

narrative from verses 1, and 10f.f.⁶ The theme of verses 2-9 is Moses' singular oracular authority, and Burns believes the main objective of these verses is to make a statement about his authority, not about Miriam or Aaron.⁷ She notes that within these verses is evidence of a brief drama: "The conflict is abruptly initiated (v. 2); the transition to the Tent (vv. 4-5); the defense states its case (vv. 6-8); and the conflict is abruptly resolved (v. 9)."⁸ Further, there is evidence that verses 6-8 are an independent unit within verses 2-9. Citing Noth, Burns draws attention to the "elevated style" of verses 6-8.⁹ The poetic stanzas maintained in NRSV translation of the text supports this reading (see above). If verses 6-8 are an independent tradition, then Miriam and Aaron do not need to be the audience to which God speaks. Note that Miriam and Aaron are not named in verses 6-8.¹⁰ In fact, Burns argues this citation is better suited for a group and fits with the themes of shared authority set forth in Numbers 11.¹¹ Moreover, Burns feels it is important to distinguish the two narratives from each other because verses 2-9 represent a greater issue in the redactor's community in which the Levites, represented by Moses, are vying for primacy of oracular authority over the Aaronic priests and their authority.¹² Therefore, if verses 2-9 are an independent narrative, then 1, 10f.f. must be a separate narrative. To successfully argue this point, Burns draws attention first to verse 1. Here the Hebrew verb translated as "spoke" is in the feminine singular, "suggesting that Aaron was added only after the controversy over the Cushite wife was joined with the second subject of controversy (vv. 2f.f.)."¹³ If this is so, then Miriam is struck with leprosy in verse 10 because she is the only one to speak against Moses. Hence, an understanding of the two distinct narratives helps alleviate some of the textual complexities and answer some lingering questions.

The second school claims the text is a single composition and must be read as such. This approach is best seen in the work of Irmtraud Fischer. She acknowledges the contradictions in the text but, rather than account for them with a historical-critical study, which would necessitate different authorship or two distinct units as seen in Burns, she argues for a source-critical solution. The

⁶ Rita J. Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 84 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 41-2.

⁷ Burns, *Has the Lord*, 41; 51.

⁸ Burns, *Has the Lord*, 51.

⁹ Burns, *Has the Lord*, 52-3.

¹⁰ Burns, *Has the Lord*, 54.

¹¹ Burns, *Has the Lord*, 57.

¹² Burns, *Has the Lord*, 59-61.

¹³ Burns, *Has the Lord*, 68.

source-critical solution sees the contradictions resulting from later additions to the narrative, which originally was recorded as a literary whole.¹⁴ Fischer sees that the tensions in the text result from intention rather than synthesis.¹⁵ For Fischer, if the text were separated, it would minimize the effect that Numbers 12 has on Miriam and, thereby, women in the Jewish community. According to Fischer, the intention cannot be divorced from the result; therefore, she connects the two seemingly different conflicts. She argues that the feminine singular form of the verb in verse 1 should be interpreted as highlighting Miriam as the driving force of the action or dominant character, and as such she would logically bear the greater guilt and punishment.¹⁶ Separating the text would reduce Miriam's position within the community.

Fischer further helps to unify the text by linking Moses' Cushite wife with the larger issue of prophetic authority. Like Burns, she believes Miriam, Aaron and Moses represent groups in the community.¹⁷ She notes that the word "to speak" is the same word used for "prophetic speech." In her view, the problem with Moses' Cushite wife concerns greater prophetic issues needing attention in the community.¹⁸ Specifically, she argues with Ex 18:2 as her guide that what is at issue is Moses' divorce from Zipporah motivated by his need to maintain a constant state of ritual cleanliness,¹⁹ which consequently reflects the communal issue of mixed marriage.²⁰ According to this reconstruction, Fischer sees that Miriam and Aaron are advocating on behalf of Zipporah against Moses' decision to divorce her.²¹ Unlike Burns, Fischer is able to synthesize Moses' humility mentioned in verse 3 with God's declaration in verses 6-8 to the end that Moses is the exception and outside the norm – his divorce cannot be the basis for other divorces in the community.²² Miriam is punished for speaking against God, but

¹⁴ Irmtraud Fischer, "The Authority of Miriam: A Feminist Rereading of Numbers 12 Prompted by Jewish Interpretation," *Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine, *A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)* 5 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 2000) 160.

¹⁵ Fischer, "Authority of Miriam," 161.

¹⁶ Fischer, "Authority of Miriam," 161.

¹⁷ Fischer, "Authority of Miriam," 166.

¹⁸ Fischer, "Authority of Miriam," 161-2.

¹⁹ Fischer identifies the Cushite wife of Moses as Zipporah. However, this is not a scholarly consensus. As we shall see, Williams strongly disagrees with this assessment. Fischer, "Authority of Miriam," 163.

²⁰ Fischer, "Authority of Miriam," 166-7.

²¹ Fischer, "Authority of Miriam," 167.

²² Fischer, "Authority of Miriam," 168-9.

she does not receive the typical punishment of death; considering her dominant role in verse 1, this punishment seems light.²³

Each group, as represented by Burns and Fischer, is able to construct arguments that account for the complexity of the text and the contradictions contained therein. Burns supports the idea of two distinct units while Fischer argues for textual unity. Each woman's ability to bring clarity to the text dictates that the arguments are internally sound. However, since Numbers 12 is presented as a complete unit in the Pentateuch and is often addressed as such, Fischer's focus on unity is a more helpful reading of the text. Her reading allows for a deeper reconstruction of the character of Miriam from the text in its present form.

After an exploration of the textual composition, the next step in a reconstruction of Miriam's character from Numbers 12 is to reach an understanding of the controversy surrounding Moses and his Cushite wife. Fischer offers one sound interpretation of the events surrounding the text, though the identity of the Cushite woman remains questionable. Ruth Sohn clearly identifies the two viable options for this woman's identity: "It [sic] could be Tzipporah, the Midianite woman whom Moses had married years before ... But perhaps this reference is to a second wife."²⁴ Jacqueline Williams takes up Sohn's latter suggestion in her attempt to identify this woman, maintaining the Cushite woman is a black African, and thus a foreigner whose race becomes synonymous with her identity in the community.²⁵ Williams' reading of Numbers 12 is chiefly concerned with race and makes Miriam's sin that of racism. According to Williams, Miriam objects to Moses' marriage as an opportunistic attempt to claim validation for her own authority in the community. By aligning herself against a controversial aspect of Moses' life, Miriam is able to gain public support.²⁶ She is sharply rebuked for her opportunism and sinful behavior. Williams argues that Miriam's punishment, white leprosy, is fitting because God "made that which Miriam was so proud of, a white skin, something to be despised."²⁷

Yet Williams' interpretative methodology is not neutral; rather, it is shaped by her experience of apartheid in South Africa.²⁸ Because personal bias shapes

²³ Fischer, "Authority of Miriam," 169-170.

²⁴ Ruth Sohn, "Parshat Beha'alotecha: The Silencing of Miriam," *All the Women Followed Her: A collection of Writings on Miriam the Prophet and the Women of Exodus*, ed. Rebecca Schwartz (Mountain View, CA: Rikudei Miriam Press, 2001) 191.

²⁵ Jacqueline Williams, "'And She Became 'Snow White'': Numbers 12:1-16," *Old Testament Essays* 15 (2002-01): 259.

²⁶ Williams, "Snow White," 265.

²⁷ Williams, "Snow White," 266.

²⁸ Williams, "Snow White," 260.

her reading, it does not accord with textual sentiment. Fischer notes that in Jewish tradition, this passage is interpreted as being hostile to foreigners.²⁹ In fact, Cush also could refer to a region of the Gulf of Aqaba, which allows identification of this woman with Zipporah and not an unnamed black African woman.³⁰ Fischer and others who look to Jewish Midrash hold this position. Like Fischer, Rebecca Schwartz identifies the Cushite woman with Zipporah. Schwartz holds that Miriam is advocating on behalf of her sister-in-law's religious rights as part of a larger public issue in the community.³¹ Zipporah's religious rights include any priestly rights she may have enjoyed as the daughter of a priest and the wife of Moses prior to ratification of the covenant. The larger communal issue, according to Schwartz, is that of women's place within the Mosaic codes, especially those noted in the *sotah* trial of Num5.³²

Like the issues noted in the textual composition presentation, there is no consensus of scholarly opinion as to the identity of the Cushite wife of Moses, what her role was in the controversy, or whether Miriam was arguing for or against her. What is clear from scholarly attempts to identify her is that personal bias cannot be read into the text so much that the position becomes tainted. The Cushite wife of Moses could be Zipporah or a second wife; both remain plausible, though the arguments for Zipporah are more convincing.³³

In verse 2, Miriam and Aaron ask, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" The question of Moses' sole authority, and thereby the authority of Miriam and Aaron, is made explicit in this passage. A definitive answer to their question is found in verses 6-8. Here, according to Burns, God's response "do[es] not negate the authority of those who prophesy from dreams and visions. Rather, it distinguishes it from and subordinates it to Moses' gift."³⁴ So Miriam and Aaron, as prophets of the second degree, are not denigrated and declared false prophets; rather, their gift is placed within a hierarchical structure. Moses, who has direct access to the divine word, is placed over prophets who "receive the word through means which need interpretation."³⁵

²⁹ Fischer, "Authority of Miriam," 163.

³⁰ Fischer, "Authority of Miriam," 163. This is not to say that she is definitively Zipporah, but rather to argue that one cannot exclude her based only on the Cushite description.

³¹ Schwartz, Rebecca, "If There Be A Prophet ...," *All the Women Followed Her: A collection of Writings on Miriam the Prophet and the Women of Exodus*, ed. Rebecca Schwartz (Mountain View, CA: Rikudei Miriam Press, 2001) 166-7.

³² Schwartz, "Be a Prophet," 168.

³³ See Schwarz, "Be a Prophet," and Fischer, "Authority of Miriam," for more information.

³⁴ Burns, *Has the Lord*, 54.

³⁵ Burns, *Has the Lord*, 54.

Despite her defense of Miriam and Aaron's prophetic authority, Burns feels that the title of prophet is anachronistic and meant to indicate Miriam's cultic/priestly position in the community rather than a legitimate prophetic activity.³⁶ She concludes that prophetesses were not exceptional, but held the same position of prophets in the community, "regarded as mediators of the Lord's word and, as such, they were oracular authorities in sacral matters which might pertain to the entire community."³⁷ In pointed contrast, Susan Ackerman, utilizing Turner's perspective of liminality to interpret the same data as Burns,³⁸ concludes that female prophets are exceptional occurrences in the Old Testament. Prophetesses gain recognition and authority only when liminal conditions are present. Ackerman writes:

Miriam is assigned the prophetic role in Exod 15:20 that is otherwise accorded only to men in the exodus account because the narrative locates her prophetic identity as belonging to the liminal period of anti-structure. In narrative depictions of liminality, the gender conventions that more usually restrict women from holding positions of religious leadership can be suspended. Therefore Miriam can be described as occupying a position as a prophetic functionary that, outside of liminal time and space, women are generally denied.³⁹

Since the conditions of the Exodus and wilderness wanderings are reflective of liminal conditions, Miriam was indeed a prophet to Israelites during the Exodus and their wilderness wanderings. Ackerman's careful analysis of prophetesses in the Old Testament surpasses Burn's simplification of the term. In fact, it offers greater room for synthesis of the priestly/cultic function Burns sees in Miriam because Ackerman already has equated prophetesses with religious leadership in the community.

As noted in the Ackerman citation, conditions for women to gain authority in the religious community must reflect a liminal period of anti-structure. As she points out, the Exodus event exemplifies this period. Complications arise for those recording the text because their surroundings do not mirror a period of anti-structure or they are attempting to return to old structures of masculine power. The period gap between Miriam's time and that of the redactors causes the redactors to suppress female authority, i.e. Miriam, in the text. The text discredits

³⁶ Burns, *Has the Lord*, 41, 47-8.

³⁷ Burns, *Has the Lord*, 46.

³⁸ Both Burns and Ackerman discuss the other four females designated as prophets in the Old Testament: Isaiah's wife, Deborah, Hulda and Noadiah.

³⁹ Susan Ackerman, "Why is Miriam Also Among the Prophets? (and Zipporah Among the Priests?)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 1 (2002): 71.

her by means of ritual impurity; she becomes leprous and is banished from the community for seven days. Her punishment results from her speaking against Moses. The act of speaking in verse 1 occurs in the feminine singular form, though Aaron appears to be present, and this contradiction can be clarified using a variety of scholarly techniques. What is important to note from the various interpretations is that this disparity cannot be easily explained; it is most likely an attempt to discredit female authority. Naomi Graetz notes that it is important not to minimize the injustice Miriam experiences in the text; Aaron's lack of physical punishment is important. Those who equate his mental anguish upon seeing his leprous sister with Miriam's physical anguish diminish Miriam's pain.⁴⁰ She suffers humiliation and banishment, in addition to physical pain.

Still other scholars, like Erica Brown, attempt to alleviate the severity of her punishment. Brown notes that Miriam's punishment for disobeying God is a disease and seven days of isolation. This is in contrast to the death sentences her brothers receive as a result of their inability to sanctify the waters at Meribah in accordance with God's instructions in Num 20:2-13.⁴¹ Brown holds that the deaths of Miriam, Aaron and Moses are not equal, as Miriam's death is not a punishment but a natural part of life. This point highlights that the punishment she does receive during her life is not as severe as it could be, suggesting some textual redemption.

Other scholars, like Schwartz, find it possible to view Miriam's leprous condition as validation of her authority rather than as punishment. Since her banishment is to the desert, Schwartz suggests that perhaps Miriam is ordered there by God so she can speak with God, thus following a pattern similar to that presented in the Genesis stories of Abraham, Rebekah and Jacob.⁴² She further equates Miriam's leprosy with that of Moses in Ex 4:7, noting that Lev 13:12-17 states that if leprosy covers the entire skin and is completely white, it is pure.⁴³ These two considerations allow for the possibility that leprosy is not necessarily a punishment; instead, it can be seen as a further indication of Miriam's privilege within the community.

Finally, a textual analysis of Numbers 12 must make sense of the people's unwillingness to follow God after the cloud moved away from the tent of meeting in v. 10 until Miriam is restored to the community. Judith Hadley notes that the

⁴⁰ Graetz, "Talk Too Much," 241.

⁴¹ Erica Brown, "The Well Dried Up: Miriam's Death in Bible and Midrash," in *All the Women Followed Her: A collection of Writings on Miriam the Prophet and the Women of Exodus*, ed. Rebecca Schwartz, (Mountain View, CA: Rikudei Miriam Press, 2001) 49.

⁴² Schwartz, "Be a Prophet," 172.

⁴³ Schwartz, "Be a Prophet", 173.

defiance disrupts the pattern of movement established in Exodus.⁴⁴ The cloud leaves the tent of meeting, indicating that the people should follow; however, they wait until Miriam is brought into the camp seven days later in verse 15. Phyllis Tribble finds this fact to be telling of the community's opinion of Miriam. In her opinion, it is a moment of unsuccessful suppression of Miriam's authority in the community.⁴⁵ Despite God's anger with Miriam and ambivalence towards the Israelites, and in spite of Miriam's disease, they remain ever faithful to her. Not once in the Pentateuch do they speak ill of her, and their actions regard her with love and respect rather than accusation and contempt.⁴⁶

FURTHER INTERPRETIVE POSSIBILITIES

In addition to contradictory textual analysis, interpretations provide divergent understandings of each of Miriam's roles. Burns sees the title of prophet assigned to Miriam as anachronistic and representative of cultic, not prophetic, duties.³⁶ However, Ackerman views Miriam's prophetic distinction as reflective of her genuine communication with God. Her prophetic role is viable because the Exodus situation provides the ideal liminal conditions for female prophets to gain power in the community.³⁹ Correspondingly, Williams argues that Miriam's leprosy was a severe chastisement that results in her fading out of the text, suggestive of her decline.²⁷ Schwartz, on the other hand, argues that Miriam's leprosy was not a punishment but a public sign of her authority.⁴² In support of Schwartz, Tribble would offer the community's unwillingness to move until Miriam's return as further evidence of her sustained authority.⁴⁵ In an effort to continue the divergent pattern established above, two different understandings of Miriam's sisterhood will be explored in the remaining discussion.

The first is seen in the work of Claudia Camp, who views Miriam as both a community insider and outsider. Miriam's position as sister affords her a unique space in the community as an insider, yet she is an outsider by nature of her gender. Therefore, the text makes her foreign or strange in order to remove her insider distinction and discredit her authority.⁴⁷ Behind the textual process of making Miriam strange is the Jewish identity struggle in the post-exilic period and an internal priestly struggle for validation of the Aaronic line as the priestly

⁴⁴ Judith Hadley, Numbers and Wilderness Wanderings class lecture and discussion. THL 8110: The Pentateuch. Villanova University, Villanova, PA. 16 November 2005.

⁴⁵ Tribble, "Out of the Shadows," 180.

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Claudia Camp, "Over Her Dead Body: The Estranged Woman and the Prince of the Promised Land," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 29, no. 2 (2002): 3.

lineage.⁴⁸ These extra-textual struggles view Miriam as a threat to the masculine understanding of authority. The text, therefore, makes her strange in order to solidify Jewish identity in masculine authority. Similarly, by making Miriam ritually unclean through disease, she helps to preserve the sanctity of the priestly line.⁴⁹ In Numbers 12, Miriam receives punishment for both her and her brother's actions.⁵⁰ Her uncleanness is expanded in verse 12 to include death as seen in the imagery of a stillborn child.⁵¹ Her disease and association with death forces Miriam to move outside the camp and thereby isolates her from the community, denying her the authority her status as sister of Aaron and Moses previously allotted her. So in Camp's interpretation of Numbers 12, because she is the sister of Aaron and Moses, Miriam must be discredited in order for the community to unify under one understanding of masculine authority.

On the other hand, Ita Sheres and Anne Blau do not feel that Miriam is necessarily the biological sister of Moses or Aaron. Rather, her "sister" distinction is a title that affords her greater respect and authority within the community.⁵² Their interpretation is rooted in understanding that Egyptian cultic customs were intimately connected to Hebraic understanding prior to the Exodus. Their argument holds that the "Mosaic way" is an attempt to separate the Egyptian and Hebrew customs.⁵³ Accordingly, Miriam's objection to Moses' Cushite wife in verse 1 concerns Miriam's "prerogative to marry Moses in a traditional 'brother-sister' ritual marriage."⁵⁴ If this is Miriam's objection, Miriam utilizes her old religious-cultural framework to diagnose the situation. The greater message Num 12 delivers in Miriam's punishment is that the Egyptian-Hebrew system practiced prior to the Exodus is obsolete. It is to be replaced without modification with the new 'Mosaic way.'⁵⁵ Consequently, Miriam is punished for attempting to maintain old religious-cultural standards within the new law codes and becomes a warning for all those who do the same.

These two detailed understandings of Miriam's sisterhood and previous divergent material concerning her role as prophet, leader and leper evidence that a

⁴⁸ Camp, "Over Her Dead Body," 3.

⁴⁹ Camp, "Over Her Dead Body," 4.

⁵⁰ Camp, "Over Her Dead Body," 4.

⁵¹ Camp, "Over Her Dead Body," 5-6.

⁵² Ita Sheres and Anne Blau, "Sister Miriam the Leper," *All the Women Followed Her: A collection of Writings on Miriam the Prophet and the Women of Exodus*, ed. Rebecca Schwartz (Mountain View, CA: Rikudei Miriam Press) 209.

⁵³ Sheres and Blau, "Sister Miriam," 202.

⁵⁴ Sheres and Blau, "Sister Miriam," 205.

⁵⁵ Sheres and Blau, "Sister Miriam," 205, 209.

singular understanding of Miriam cannot be definitively reached from the biblical evidence. However, this observation does not devalue attempts to understand Miriam; rather, it demonstrates that with each new understanding of her and her place within the Exodus and wilderness wanderings, a fuller appreciation of her remarkable character can be reached. Also, each contradiction calls the scholarly community to value previous work so that these sketches can be synthesized.

CONCLUSION

Scholarly reconstructions of Miriam from Numbers 12 provide a number of viable yet contradictory interpretations of her character and the narrative. On the first level, the text appears to uphold Moses' sole authority at the expense of other leadership in the community. Yet as Burns, Fischer, Tribble and others have pointed out, a deeper, more careful reading of the text allows for the character reconstruction of those secondary to the narrative, especially Miriam. Within Numbers 12, one sees that Miriam holds an authoritative role in the community – she is able to address her concerns directly to Moses on behalf of the community and has the people's support. She is a prophet and remains a prophet in the text – verses 6-8 substantiate her prophetic role; her prophecy is subordinate only to Moses. Also, she is a leper. Despite the conflicting understanding of the disease and its meaning, what is indisputable concerning her leprosy is that the community waits for her in solidarity and support. Her leprosy does not diminish her role within the community. Lastly, she is a sister; as indicated by the two different understandings of sister, this is a complicated relationship. Yet sisterhood closely ties Miriam to Moses and Aaron; she is their equal despite attempts to suppress her position.

Finally, Jewish Midrash from the second century C.E. onward upholds the conclusion that Miriam played a greater role in the Exodus and wilderness wanderings than is given space in the Pentateuch. As Tribble noted, evidence of Miriam's importance to the Israelite community can be found within the Pentateuch, such as Num 12:15, where the community waits for her; in other Old Testament books such as Micah 6:4, in which Miriam's prophetic ability is recognized within the prophetic literature;⁵⁶ or in the New Testament, where the mother of the Messiah is named Mary, the Greek form of the Hebrew Miriam.⁵⁷ The tradition of Miriam lives in fragments in the Bible, but these fragments are

⁵⁶ Phyllis Tribble, "Eve and Miriam: From the Margins to the Center," *Feminist Approaches to the Bible, Symposium at the Smithsonian Institution September 24, 1994*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1995) 21

⁵⁷ Tribble, "Eve and Miriam", 21

testimony of the strength and durability of Miriam within the Jewish and Christian communities.

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