

Who was Miriam in the Bible?

Miriam in the Bible is Moses' older sister. She is called "Miriam the prophetess" in Exodus 15:20. She plays an important role in several episodes of Moses' life and in the exodus of Israel from Egypt.

Miriam is the sister who watches over her baby brother Moses among the bulrushes on the banks of the Nile. Their mother had hidden Moses in a basket on the river bank to protect him from Pharaoh's decree to throw all Hebrew baby boys into the river (Exodus 1:22–2:4). As Miriam watches, Pharaoh's daughter discovers and pities Moses, and Miriam quickly intervenes to ask if the Egyptian princess would like a Hebrew woman to nurse the child for her. The princess agrees, and Miriam quickly gets their mother. Pharaoh's daughter commands Moses' biological mother to nurse him and bring him back to her when he is older. By the grace of God, Miriam helps save the infant Moses (Exodus 2:5–10).

Miriam had another brother, Aaron. Their parents, Amram and Jochebed (Exodus 6:20), were both from the Levite tribe of Israel (Exodus 2:1). Together, God uses Moses, Miriam, and Aaron to lead the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land in Canaan (Micah 6:4). After miraculously crossing the Red Sea on dry ground and seeing the Egyptian army overthrown in the sea, Miriam leads the women with a tambourine in worshiping God with song and dance (Exodus 15:20–22). The words to Miriam's song are recorded in verse 21: "Sing to the Lord, / for he is highly exalted. / Both horse and driver / he has hurled into the sea." In this same passage, she is given the title "prophetess," the first of only a handful of women in Scripture identified that way. Others called a "prophetess" are Deborah (Judges 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3), Anna (Luke 2:36), and Philip's four daughters (Acts 21:9).

Unfortunately, Miriam later falls into a spirit of complaining. Both Miriam and Aaron criticize Moses for marrying a Cushite or Ethiopian woman, but Miriam is listed first (Numbers 12:1) so it is likely she instigated the complaint. While the complaint was ostensibly against Moses' wife, the discontent ran deeper: “‘Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?’ they asked. ‘Hasn’t he also spoken through us?’” (Numbers 12:2). In her criticism, Miriam was questioning the Lord’s wisdom in choosing Moses as the leader.

God was angry that Miriam and Aaron were so willing to speak against the servant He had chosen. The Lord struck Miriam with leprosy. Aaron, realizing the foolishness of their words, repented of his sin, and Moses, ever the intercessor, prayed on behalf of his sister: “Moses cried out to the Lord, ‘Please, God, heal her!’” (Numbers 12:13). After a week-long quarantine, Miriam was healed and rejoined the camp.

As Miriam’s leprosy convicted Aaron of the foolish words they had spoken against God’s chosen servant, it should also remind us not to judge those around us or live in jealousy when God has given a specific call to someone else (see Titus 3:1-15; James 1:26; 4:11-12; Ephesians 4:31; Philippians 4:8). Miriam had an opportunity to show the people of Israel what it meant to live in love as a servant of God without complaining, and, for most of her life, she did; but she failed in the matter of Moses’ wife. We, too, have opportunities to show the grumblers and complainers around us what it is to be a servant of Jesus Christ. Let us draw them to Jesus through our love and servanthood and not be drawn away from Him ourselves.

Our next encounter with Miriam is at the end of the 40-year desert wandering. Because of their grumbling and lack of faith in God, the first generation of Israelites to leave captivity was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. This included the prophetess Miriam. Most of the older generation had already died in the wilderness when Israel

comes back to Kadesh, where they had started their wanderings. It's here that Miriam dies and is buried (Numbers 20:1). Hers was a life of responsibility and service, of God's calling and providence, yet it also reminds us that no one is too important to receive God's discipline for personal sin (see 1 Corinthians 10:12).