
When Miriam Died

'Miriam died there, and was buried there'
(Numbers 20:1).

That's it. In one brief sentence, the Bible records the death of Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron. The brevity seems almost insulting. Even a death notice in a newspaper says more. And here we are, twenty chapters into the Book of Numbers—in the midst of the Israelites' wilderness journey in which Miriam has been an important figure, in reach of the Promised Land having survived slavery, escape from Egypt, hunger and thirst, conflicts and rebellions—and all we have is one terse statement marking her death.

Just twenty verses later the death of Miriam's brother, Aaron, is described at some length and with certain emotion. The whole community observes a thirty-day period of mourning for Aaron. Why not Miriam? Is she less important? Less loved? Do we simply presume a patriarchal bias in the text's historical development? Can we reconcile this brevity with the way Scripture elsewhere speaks of Miriam as a chosen co-leader along with Moses and Aaron? *"I redeemed you from the house of bondage, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam" (Micah 6:4).*

Fascinating responses to this question can be found in Jewish interpretative traditions. Creatively attentive to the text, the Rabbis observed that Miriam's death does not go unnoticed. Look at what happens. The moment she dies, the very next sentence reads: "The community was without water..." (20:2), a fact which impacts harshly upon the Israelites, even erupting into an attack on Moses to which Moses responds badly, displaying none of his characteristic virtues of patience and trust in God.

Why do the community and its leadership become unhinged at the moment of Miriam's death? What is God's Word trying to teach us?

In the Scriptures Miriam is associated with water. At the Nile she ensures her baby brother's

survival; at the Red Sea she leads a victory dance (Exodus 2:4-8; 15:20).

In rabbinic storytelling the Israelites are said to have been accompanied in the wilderness by 'Miriam's well,' a miraculous source of fresh water.¹ When she dies, the well disappears. Can it be that Moses and the community are grieving more than the absence of water? Has the ever-present contribution of Miriam to the wilderness journey been taken for granted until now?

Reflection on Miriam's death releases precious insights into the greater biblical narrative as well as into our own stories and contact with death. Can we ever really fathom the impact of death until a loved one is no longer with us?

Again turning to Jewish tradition we find the Talmud offering this interpretation. Miriam, like Moses, died in a most sacred, intimate way: by the divine kiss.² Why a kiss? A literal translation of the Hebrew text tells us that Moses died "at the mouth of the Lord" (Deut. 34:5).³ For many people death can be a terrifying struggle as they face the finality of 'letting go' this world. But so attuned was Moses to divine ways that his release from this life into the Lord's embrace was like the gentlest of kisses. And this was also true for Miriam, say the Jewish sages, enjoying a midrashic play on a textual repetition:

'So Moses the servant of the Lord died *there...*'
(Deut. 34:5).

'Miriam died *there...*' (Num. 20:1).

An apparently extraneous word in the text fuels the rabbinic mind in such a way that the tradition enfolds a deeply-held conviction: the Lord's special love and choice of his daughter Miriam.

1. BT Shabbat 35a

2. Mo'ed Katan 27b-28a

3. English translations often read 'at the command of the Lord.'

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