

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 15:19-21

To understand more about Miriam and her role within Israel.

Read the Text:

For when the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his horsemen went into the sea, the LORD brought back the waters of the sea upon them, but the people of Israel walked on dry ground in the midst of the sea. 20 Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. 21 And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea." (Exodus 15:19-21, ESV)

Study the Text:

Conclusions and Introductions

Verse 19 through 21 serve as both a conclusion to the Red Sea narrative and an introduction to an important figure in the Old Testament. These verses reinforce things that were already (mostly) clear and also provide additional details that have not yet been revealed. Below is a breakdown of some of the key ideas and concepts in this passage.

THE CHARIOTS ALONE

Verse 19 re-emphasizes some of the details of the Exodus story and clarifies some of the questions we might have as we interpret this story, one of which is whether or not foot soldiers were included in the Egyptian forces that went into the Red Sea after the Israelites. The overwhelming emphasis in chapter 14 has been the chariots: "So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him, 7 and took six hundred chosen chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them" (Ex. 14:6). That Pharaoh's own personal chariot along with the six hundred "chosen" chariots in addition to "all other chariots of Egypt" are mentioned indicates that this is the primary mode through which Pharaoh will attack the Israelites. However, there is also mention of "his army," which could mean foot soldiers as well. However, verse 19 only indicates "the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his horsemen went into the sea," and were thus drowned. This precludes any foot soldiers. Verse 19 also never mentions that Pharaoh himself went into the sea, further solidifying the idea that he remained alive after the Red Sea incident. While it's possible that his army was much bigger and entailed more than chariots, verse 19 demonstrates that only the chariots went into the sea after the Israelites.

MIRIAM

Verse 20 introduces to us "Miriam" by name for the first (and last) time. While she is more than likely the older sister who looked after and protected Moses while he floated down the river in his little ark (Ex. 2:4-8), she is never actually mentioned by name in the Book of Exodus except for here in verse 20. She is never mentioned in Genesis (due to the fact that neither she nor her brothers were born by the time Genesis ended). She is mentioned several times in the Book of Numbers and once in the Book of Deuteronomy, and though she is a Levite, she is not mentioned in Leviticus. Regardless, she is a prominent character in the story of Moses.

Verse 20 also describes her as “a prophetess.” This indicates that like Moses and Aaron, Miriam received instructive words from God to be voiced to the people. Micah 6:4 says, “For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.” Miriam is positioned as a co-leader alongside Moses and Aaron. The extent of her prophetic utterances are not known other than what is recorded here in verse 20, but it is not an uncommon occurrence for the Bible to call people “prophet” or “prophetess” and give no record of what they actually had to say (see also *Deborah* in Jdg. 4:4; *Huldah* in 2 Kg. 22:14; *Noadiah* in Neh. 6:14; *Anna* in Lk. 2:36).

Verse 20 indicates that Miriam played the tambourine and lead the women in a song and dance. Notice in verse 21 that Miriam’s song is the same as Moses’ song in verse 1. This indicates that while Moses wrote the song, Miriam probably popularized it. The implication is that she did not merely teach them what is recorded in verse 21 (verse 1 in Moses’ song) but all of Moses’ song. This would be like saying today, “I taught them the song, ‘Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide, no escape from reality.’” The implication is that I actually taught them all of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, not just the first line of it. That she is also playing a tambourine is consistent with the common practice of women singing and playing tambourine in light of victory in warfare (Jdg. 11:34; 1 Sam. 18:6; Ps. 68:25).

It is also interesting that Miriam is described as, “the prophetess, the sister of Aaron.” Why Aaron, and not Moses? According to Old Testament scholar Doulas Stuart: “The answer would appear to be that Moses used proper modesty in introducing her officially and culturally correctly here, linking her to the oldest living male in her family, Aaron, who was three years older than Moses and thus the proper person to be mentioned.”¹ Even though Moses was clearly the most unique prophet to ever live in the Old Testament (Deut. 34:10-12), Moses recognizes the proper way in which Miriam ought to be introduced. He demonstrates humility, which of course, shouldn’t surprise us given his own opinion of how humble he actually was (Num. 12:3).

What About Now?

One takeaway is the important work that women play in the Old Testament. Women are often seen as “less than” men in most biblical contexts, and yet the roles of Miriam, Deborah, and Isaiah’s wife in the Old Testament, as well as Anna in the New Testament, cannot be overstated. Women are attributed prophetic gifts just as men are. When the gifts of the Spirit are constrained in the women of a church, the church suffers. The only clearly male-only office in the New Testament is that of a “pastor/elder” (same word in the Greek language: πρεσβύτερος [presbyteros]), and this is likely to mirror the orientation of leadership within the household to the leadership within the house of God to avoid confusion. Beyond that, gifting (including prophetic gifting) is attributed to both males and females in the Scripture, and there is no indication that these gifts ceased in one of the sexes at any given point.

Another takeaway is the importance of women leading women. Miriam specifically leads “all the women” (Ex. 15:20). The importance of older, more mature women leading and teaching younger women is expressed in the New Testament as well: “Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, 4 and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, 5 to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the

¹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2 of The New American Commentary, eds. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 362.

word of God may not be reviled” (Titus 2:3-5). The concept of discipleship or mentorship among women is not only clearly biblical but invaluable to the maturing of a local body of believers.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 15:19. What specific part of Pharaoh’s army drown in the sea according to Moses? By contrast, who “walked on dry ground?”

2. Read Exodus 15:20. Who is Miriam according to this verse? According to the notes, what else do we know about Miriam?

Day Two

1. Read Judges 4:4, 2 Kings 22:14, and Luke 2:36. Who are the prophetesses named here? Why are they significant?

2. Read Exodus 15:20. What did Miriam lead the women to do? What instrument did they use? Was this a common practice?

Day Three

1. Read Exodus 15:21. Where have you read this song lyric previously? What does this likely indicate about Miriam’s song?

2. Read Jude 5. Who was ultimately responsible for leading the Israelites out of Egypt?

Day Four

1. What major detail does the recap in verse 19 leave out? Read Psalm 78:13. Did the Psalmist leave this detail out?

2. Read Psalm 78:5-16. What do you think the main idea of this section of Scripture is?

Discuss the Text!**Week 37 Discussion: Sing a Song**

In Exodus 15:20-21, Miriam teaches the women a song first penned by Moses in the beginning of Exodus 15 that recounts the victory of the LORD over Pharaoh and his host. Songs are a powerful way to express adoration and thanksgiving to God, and to simply remember what He has already done for us. Talk as a group about how worship through song helps you remember what God has done for you, specifically.

1. Icebreaker: What's your favorite worship song of all time? What's your least favorite worship song? Why?
2. Does corporate worship matter to you? Do you show up on time to worship with God's people every Sunday? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever heard a worship song and not thought much of it, and then experienced something in life that changed how you felt about that song the next time you heard it? Why does this sometimes happen?
4. Are worship songs great because of what they say or how they sound? Why?
5. Why does theological accuracy in worship music matter so much? Or does it?
6. Should the church sing one style of worship music, or various styles? Why?

Takeaways:

1. Moses retells the story of God overcoming the Egyptian army.
2. Miriam is introduced into the Exodus narrative as "the sister of Aaron" and "a prophetess."
3. Miriam leads the women in singing and dancing and teaches them Moses' song.