

Anne: Can you briefly introduce yourself?

Susan: I'm Susan Ackerman, I'm a professor at Dartmouth College. At Dartmouth, my primary appointment is in the religion department, but I'm also a professor of women's, gender, and sexuality studies

Anne: Can you give us a brief overview of who Miriam is and how she fits in the Exodus story?

Susan: Miriam first appears in the Exodus narrative in Exodus 2, or at least we think she first appears in Exodus 2. An unnamed female character who is said to be the sister of Moses appears in Exodus 2, and since elsewhere in the Bible only one person is identified as a sister of Moses, and that's Miriam, we conclude that that is Miriam who appears in Exodus 2. And her role in that story in Exodus chapter two is a very famous one for people who know the Exodus story: the baby Moses was supposed to be killed at birth, as were all Hebrew male children, because they were perceived by the Egyptian Pharaoh to be a threat.

Moses's mother hides Moses for as long as she can after birth so that he won't be killed, but, like any baby, he becomes a little bit more difficult to hide once the months go on. And so then she places him in a basket and puts him in the Nile River, or in the marshes alongside the Nile River, hoping that somehow he'll be delivered from his fate otherwise of death. And indeed is found by the Pharaoh's daughter. As all of this is going on, Moses's sister - and again we would say that is Miriam - is watching to see what happens.

And when she sees the Pharaoh's daughter discover the baby in a basket alongside the Nile, and the Pharaoh's daughter decides to adopt the baby and rear the baby, the sister approaches her and asks her if she needs a wet nurse. And in one of the great ironies of the story, the wet nurse becomes Moses's birth mother, who the sister is able to provide as wet nurse to the baby.

Miriam then disappears from the story and shows up again thirteen chapters later at the end of Exodus fifteen. By that point in the story, Moses has grown to an adult and achieved the great work of the initial stage of his adulthood, which he has managed to liberate the Hebrews, or the Israelites, who are slaves in Egypt, from their Egyptian captivity, and bring them out of Egypt to come to, at that point in the story, what is described in Biblical tradition as either the Red Sea or the Reed Sea, depending on what translation you're using.

By that point, the Egyptian Pharaoh has come to regret his decision to let the Israelites leave Egypt, and so has pursued after them, and there is this climactic confrontation at this sea. I think most people probably know it best from the Cecil B. DeMille movie version of it, where Moses holds up his staff and the sea splits dramatically in two so that the Israelites can cross on dry land. After they cross, the Egyptians pursue, but Moses lowers his staff, the sea comes back over them, and covers them, and they are drowned.

After that miraculous deliverance at the Reed Sea, a song is sung in celebration, and I deliberately say that in the passive voice because who sings that song depends on whether

you're reading Exodus chapter 15 verse 1, or Exodus chapter 15 verse 20. If you're reading Exodus chapter 15, verse 1, it's Moses. If you're reading Exodus chapter 15, verse 20, it is Moses's sister Miriam. And Miriam is also said in those verses in chapter 20, 15:20, and continuing into 15 verse 21, to lead the other women of Israel in dancing and in playing frame drums, which look kind of like tambourines but they don't have the jangles on them, as they dance they play these frame drums and sing this song celebrating their victory at the Reed Sea, or Red Sea. And most notably - or notably also in that particular short passage, two verses - Miriam is called a prophet.

Then she disappears again, and she doesn't show up again until the book of Numbers, which is the fourth book in the Bible, Exodus is the second book, so there's a long time lag until Miriam shows up again. She shows up in the book of Numbers with her brother Aaron, where she and Aaron asked jointly of Moses that should they not also be serving, as does Moses, as an intermediary between God and the Israelite people. Does not God also speak through them, they ask.

God responds, I would say kind of ambiguously. God doesn't deny that God might speak through Aaron and through Miriam, but God says Moses is special, that with Moses, God speaks mouth to mouth is the literal Hebrew, or face to face. And then God, who has decided that Miriam and Aaron have been a little presumptuous in raising this question of getting to speak to God in the same way Moses does, God decides that punishment is necessary, although only Miriam is punished. Her skin is turned as white as snow, so some kind of skin disease, commonly translated as leprosy, but this isn't leprosy as we know it from, for example, from the European Middle Ages. It's some kind of other eruptive skin disease. She is expelled from the camp where the people are encamped and remains outside the camp until Aaron intercedes on her behalf. Her leprosy is healed, and she's allowed to come back into the camp. And then she disappears again, she appears only again in Numbers chapter 20, so that's eight chapters later, and she appears there in precisely one verse, to die. That's the end of Miriam's story

Anne: Poor Miriam, you feel like she should get so much more!

Susan: Well, I mean, I think it's interesting and it's worth thinking back to that episode in Exodus 15, where there are two renditions of the singing of this victory song, one attributed to Moses and one attributed to Miriam. And I think, and I'm hardly unique in thinking this, is that what we are seeing there is a tradition where probably originally the song was attributed to Miriam, but as the tradition was handed down over time, it did what many traditions do, especially as they're handed down orally, which is they attribute things to more famous people rather than less famous people.

So when I began my study of the Bible as a graduate student at Harvard, and at Harvard when I used to talk to people about the Miriam story, I would always ask them and - this is an American audience, so I hope the Canadians will forgive me - but I would always ask them who rode a horse through Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Harvard is, in 1776, shouting the British are

coming, the British are coming, the British are coming. And people would always answer: Paul Revere, because Paul Revere is the famous guy.

But, in fact, Paul Revere rode a southern route on the southern part of Boston. The rider who rode through Cambridge, which is north of Boston proper, was William Dawes, and it's a great example of how we do the same thing. We take the more famous figure, who in American history is Paul Revere, and we substitute him, without even thinking of it, for the person who actually was responsible for the act. And that's probably what happened to poor Miriam - she was the singer, but Moses, the more famous brother, got to come to the fore.

Anne: Can you tell us a bit about the prophetesses and how Miriam fits into that very small group?

Susan: So, there are, in the Bible, there are five women who are identified by the Hebrew word *naviyah*, which is the feminine form of Hebrew *navi*. *Navi* simply means a prophet, so *naviyah* is a prophetess, right, and there are five women identified as prophetesses, as well as a group of women, or a band of women, we don't know how many in the band, who are identified as a group of daughters who prophesy.

That's not a very large number compared to how many men in the Bible are identified as prophets, but it is worth taking note of. And these five women are Miriam, as I've already said, who's identified as a prophetess in Exodus 15 verse 20. Deborah, who is a character who is part of Israel's pre-monarchic history, so before the famous kings of Israel, when Israel is said to be ruled more by tribal leaders, who in the Bible are called judges, but they're not judges how we think of them, they have far more authority and do far more work than just we would think of an adjudicatory function. Deborah is said to be a prophet in the book of Judges in chapter 4 verse 4. The wife of the prophet Isaiah is also said to be a prophet, in Isaiah chapter 8 verse 3. And in the book of 2 Kings, in chapter 22, there is a woman, Huldah, who is identified as a prophet. And then finally, in the book of Nehemiah, in Nehemiah chapter 6, verse 4, there is a woman, Noadiah, who's identified as a prophet.

Now, if one follows the Biblical chronology, we've moved from Miriam, and if we had to put a date to that, to Miriam, we'd put her at around let's say 1250 before the common era. If we had to put a date to Noadiah, we put her at about 450 before the common era. So we've moved eight hundred years for five women prophets. That's not a huge representation. And I, moreover, would tend to discount calling Isaiah's wife as a prophet, I think she gets the title prophet simply because she's married to a prophet, in the same way that a woman who's married to a king gets the title queen, but is not necessarily a monarch with monarchical powers and abilities in her own right. So our number dwindles even more.

Anne: Can you tell me a bit about the theory that, during certain historical periods, when certain social conditions are met, the ancient Israelites could more readily conceive of women exercising power?

Susan : So, during certain social periods, especially - and this is, again, this is, i'm drawing on the work of other people, this is not my brilliant insight - but scholars have suggested that during certain social periods, especially when certain kinds of leadership hierarchies break down for whatever reason, there are often opportunities for women to exercise more kinds of power within their society, outside the domain of the household, which is where women, at least in many many societies through time, have traditionally exercised whatever authority and power they have. And that power that can become available to women during certain kinds of social periods, especially when hierarchies break down. It can be political power, it can be economic power, it can be religious power - it's not necessarily restricted to religious power - but it's just a sign that when the power structures that be disintegrate, women can step into those niches.

Again, I'll give you an example from American history - I'm speaking to you from the United States - but in the United States, we might think during World War Two of what is called the Rosie the Riveter phenomenon. Society was in a point of turmoil because of the war, and many, many of the men of our society had gone off, and were in Europe fighting, so who is going to be in the factories building the aircraft or the tanks or whatever the weapons that are needed to wage this enormous war effort? Women took on a lot of positions in that economic niche, because the men were absent, right, and that's an example.

My own sense is that, when we look at these women prophets in ancient Israel, and especially when we look at Deborah, and Hilda, and Noadiah, we're looking at similar kinds of moments in Israelite society, periods where for whatever reason there is just a break down of the normal structures of society. And as those normal structures, which tend to favor men's leadership - again, whether that's political leadership, or economic leadership, or judicial leadership, or religious leadership - as those structures which tend to favor men's leadership break down, then women have a little bit more opportunity, I think, to move into positions that they wouldn't normally have access to.

Anne: Can you just speak a bit about how you related Miriam's story to Van Gennep's Rites of Passage, what that structure of that rite is, and kind of how you see it applying to the Exodus narrative?

Susan: So, Van Gennep was a French ethnographer who was active at the beginning of the twentieth century, and his most famous book written in French - in French Rites de Passage, or Rites Of Passage - was published in 1909. And in that book Van Gennep suggested most prominently that rituals, and especially rituals that move or pass individuals from one stage of life to another - so let's think about initiation rituals, or coming of age rituals, marriage rituals, even death, which passes you from being living to being dead.

Van Gennep suggested those rituals all had a common pattern, and that pattern, it was a three part pattern, very simply that you are separated from your old stage or status in life - we might think of this, let's say, in a marriage ritual, when, especially the bride is kept in a room separate from all the other wedding guests and from the groom, who at least, in the Christian wedding ritual stands there at the altar waiting for her, but the bride is kept separate until the ritual proper

begins - at which point the ritual participant moves into what Van Gennep called a liminal phase, where you are famously just as betwixt and between your old status as that woman as she walks up the aisle isn't really single anymore, she's separated from that, she's left that bond, but until some officiant says "I now pronounce you man and wife," she's not married. She's kind of betwixt and between these two places of single and married until that final moment, that moment that Van Gennep called re-incorporation, where someone says, "I now pronounce you man and wife," and she's re-incorporated back into an identity, but now a new identity, with a new status. She's no longer a single woman, she's married.

Now, that's all about a ritual, but Van Gennep also suggested that this pattern could apply to other kinds of events, such as journeys - you separate from from where you start, you journey around to get to where you're going to, but you're not there yet - you're betwixt and between Place A and Place B, and then you get to place B. And the Exodus story is a great example of that. The Israelites start in Egypt, they journey around, according to the Biblical tradition, for forty years. So they're betwixt and between Egypt and the Promised Land, or the land of Israel, to which they're headed. They're kind of betwixt and between identities - they're no longer slaves in Egypt, but they're not yet a political entity who is living in the land of Israel. They're in this middle phase, what Van Gennep called this liminal phase, that comes from the latin word *limen*, which means threshold. They're on a threshold between one place and another.

And what I've at least tried to suggest is that in those liminal times, things can happen for women and for men that don't happen in ordinary life, because they're betwixt and between their old identity and their new identity, and they, in a certain sense, have no structure that's defining them. They can break out of constraining structures and be things they otherwise couldn't be. And so I think that's what happens for Miriam in the Exodus story - she's able to break out of the structures that constrain women in ancient traditions and be a prophet, because she's in this betwixt and between time and place and once that betwixt and between time and place ends, dies.

Anne: I think that's always what seemed like such a bummer to me about her story, is that she doesn't she doesn't get to see the fruits of all this wandering.

Susan: Well, and, you know, if you want to be fair, neither does Aaron - Aaron dies still in the wilderness as well, although closer to the Promised Land. And, ultimately, neither fully does Moses. Moses dies on Mount Nebo, which is on the boundary between what we would think of as modern-day Jordan on the east, and modern-day Israel in the Palestinian territories on the west. So Moses dies on Mount Nebo, overlooking the Jordan River and into what is to become the Biblical Promised Land, but he doesn't get to enter it, either, and also doesn't fully get to see the fruits of his labor, though gets to see more than miriam

Anne: That's true! Another thing that you mentioned that I found really interesting was about the wilderness as not just a liminal space, but also as a space for divine inspiration and revelation. I was wondering if you could speak a bit to that.

Susan: So, this was, again, part of Van Gennep's original work, but really more fully brought to the fore by Van Gennep's most famous follower, who's an anthropologist named Victor Turner, whose famous works on rites of passages were published in the nineteen sixties. And what Turner really suggested is, again, because people were in this betwixt and between space, because their old identity had been stripped away from them, they were rendered in a position where they were particularly susceptible to having new things put in their heads.

You see this in particular in initiation rituals, that if you strip away someone's old identity, because you're initiating them into a new identity, as, I don't know, in a tribal system, where you're initiating them into a new identity as a warrior or something like that, if you strip away that old identity, in Turner's language, it's almost as if the person becomes a blank slate on which new knowledge can be written.

And I always say to my students in my own academic institution, this doesn't mean new knowledge, like going to the library and reading a bunch of books, it means new knowledge like the really profound knowledge, the wisdom of the cosmos, and how the cosmos works. Let's say the kind of really profound knowledge that God and only God is able to reveal to the Israelite community as they stand at the base of Mount Sinai. All these things that are otherworldly knowledge, that only God has access to until God gives that knowledge to the Israelites. And, again, the argument would be that they're particularly at a moment where they can receive that knowledge, because they've been kind of wiped clean of their old ways of doing and knowing and they're ready to be imprinted, almost, if you will, with new ways of understanding and thinking.

Anne: This is really my last question, but I was just wondering if you have a favorite moment in Miriam's story?

Susan: Well, I think anyone's favorite moment in Miriam's story has to be she takes up a frame drum, and she dances, and she sings this victory song. It's such a moment. It's her moment, where she is most foregrounded in a leadership position. That's the moment where she's called a prophet, and she's also serving as a kind of musical leader, serving these women who are singing who are dancing and playing the frame drum. And she's a singer, so she's taking on a leadership role as a musician. She's taking on a leadership role as a prophet. I'm interested in women's leadership roles, so for me it's a wonderful moment in the story, and it's also because she does this in conjunction with other women. It's a great moment of female solidarity.

Anne: Well, thank you so much. Is there anything that you feel I didn't touch on or you wanted to add?

Susan: You know, I'm not a person who's written on this, but if you're talking to other people about Miriam, one thing you might want to think about or ask is the role of water in Miriam's story. Her story starts with water, she's the sister of Moses who's watching the baby as he's drawn out of that basket in which he's been placed in the Nile River that in that moment story that we just talked about is at water with the crossing of the red or the red and then in numbers

twenty when she dies in verse one the verse immediately afterwards talks about how the spring
a wilderness dry up.