

spiritual power and victory, then nothing remains of that great lie in which we have been living since Adam.

*From GREAT LENT by Alexander Schmemmann*



## WOMEN WHO FOLLOWED THE LORD

### Miriam, the Sister of Moses

When reading about the well-known people of the Bible, or the saints of the Armenian Church, we often make a sort of mental mistake that we may not even notice. We make an assumption that somehow it was easier “back then” to be a saint, or to do God’s will, or to stay faithful to God. Perhaps it’s because the Bible is the record of God with His people that we assume that those we read about had a “direct line” to Him that we no longer enjoy. In any case, it’s easy to excuse ourselves from being holy as the saints were because of this mistaken assumption that it was easier for them than for us.

But if we look at the lives of saints or at the people of the Bible more closely, we’ll see that they struggled, fell to temptation and into terrible sin. They had to work their way painfully back to God just as we do. A perfect example is Miriam the sister of Moses. She is a resourceful, brave, faithful person who nonetheless has a terrible fall into one of the most common and harmful of sins — jealousy. Hers is the kind of jealousy that can eat up a person’s own peace of mind and make him or her much less able to deal with life. And who was the object of Miriam’s destructive feelings? No less than the estimable Moses, her own blood brother and one of the greatest figures of the Church’s ancient history.

We first meet Miriam in the second chapter of Exodus, at the famous scene of her watching her baby brother who has been placed in a basket and floated down the Nile to escape Pharaoh’s edict that all firstborn Hebrew children should die. She is only seven, and yet her family obviously has a lot of confidence in her to entrust her with the task of seeing to her brother’s welfare. She coolly arranges with the Egyptian princess who finds Moses to bring a Hebrew woman to nurse him, never once revealing to the great Egyptian personage that it is the boy’s own mother she

is bringing. This is a self-possessed and resourceful child indeed.

Our next encounter with Miriam comes at one of the most triumphant moments of her life, and another famous scene; the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus (chapters 14 and 15.) In 15:21 it is Miriam who leads the people in exulting over their escape from the Egyptians with one of the most famous of all Hebrew songs: “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.” (This is also used as a liturgical song by the Christian Church today.) What a great privilege is given to this woman, to be the one who leads her people in praise to God after such a great victory. She is indeed a chosen vessel of God. In fact, the prophet Micah would link her name with those of her brothers and write “For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of bondage; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam” (Micah 6:4)

The very next time we hear of Miriam, she has fallen from this position of great authority and renown to the low occupation of sniping against Moses, saying, “Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” (Numbers 12:2.) It may be that she was jealous of Moses’ second wife, an Ethiopian, or that she simply resented his prominent position. In any case, we see that the Old Testament is not at all shy about revealing her weakness (just as it unflinchingly reveals those of David, Solomon, and Moses himself as well as the other great Hebrew leaders.) Like all of us, even the chosen leaders of God’s people can fall into sin and error.

The Book of Numbers goes on to tell us that Miriam turned white as snow with the terrible condition of leprosy. It is as if her body now came to reflect the condition of her jealous heart — diseased, not its natural self. But her loving brother Moses prayed to God for her, and she was healed. In fact, she was still so revered by the people that despite their eagerness to get on with their long trek, “the people did not set out on the march till Miriam was brought in again” (Numbers 12:5). A little further in the Book of Numbers we read of her death; she, like Moses himself, was not to see the Promised Land.

We all have the spiritual journey to make, as Miriam did. We may have the same temptations she did; we may even give in to them as she did. If we do, we must pick ourselves up and start again. Before us will go the example of this woman who is in the company of the greatest leader of the Old Testament, who is privileged to lead her people in one of their greatest triumphs, and who still falls prey to the “green-eyed monster.” No matter what our own sins and temptations, we are not alone in our struggle with them. And, like Miriam, we have the possibility to do wonderful things for God in spite of them all.

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