

Worksheet 6

Monday, February 23, 2026 5:48 PM

Prophetess and Power: Miriam, Moses and Shared Leadership

Summary of the Lesson:

This worksheet focuses on a deeper dive into Exodus and particularly Miriam's role. Miriam shared an equal role as the prophetess to Moses the lawmaker and Aaron the priest. There is a pattern of her status being minimized but the Torah text preserves her role as a leader.

Miriam's entire life story starting from the crossing of the Red Sea all the way up to her death is filled with references to water sources. This connection binds Miriam to the early tradition of Enkima Elish and Tiamat. The water becomes a reoccurring motif for both Miriam and Moses.

The tools the SED, ORACC, Leitworts and Motif Chains are introduced for deeper Linguistic Study.

Reflections: Are there any immediate feelings towards the story of Moses and Miriam? Is there anything you have learned about them that you question to be the original linguistic intent? Is there anything about them you are certain must be true?

Key Terms (include a pronunciation guide):

Leitwort: guiding word that occurs when a Hebrew root appears repeatedly throughout a narrative to signal a deeper thematic connection.

Motif chains: where the same symbolic situations repeat across multiple events in the story.

Significant Hebrew words and their meaning:

מָשָׁה (mashah): to draw or pull out.

נְבִיאָה (navi'ah) / נְבִיאָה (navi'ah) (feminine form): one who is called or appointed to proclaim God's words, a recognized prophetic role within Israel's early leadership structure.

כֹּהֵן (kohen): those who perform sacrificial and ritual duties at the altar.

וַתַּעַן (va-ta'an): she answered

מָרָר (mar): bitter, suffering, or painful experience.

עֵץ (ets): a piece of wood.

LECTURE CONTENT:

Graphic: Comparing Linguistic Tools

	ORACC	SED
Stands for	Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus	Sumerian Etymological Dictionary
Purpose	Massive digital library of ancient Mesopotamian texts written in cuneiform.	A large list of defined words that are combined into groups of Uralic language families
Assists	Helps scholars to study how words and concepts were used in the ancient Near Eastern world. Also helps see how similar ideas appear in surrounding cultures like Sumer, Akkad and Babylon.	Helps scholars trace the development of ancient words and concepts across early languages. Also helps track how concepts evolved across languages and civilizations.

These tools help us move closer to the original conceptual world of the Bible.

Quote:

"Language is a composite lens representing only one perception of truth, we need to learn to be better critical thinkers... For that reason we should not treat scholarly interpretations as competing truths that force us to choose one over another. Instead, we should think of them as multiple maps of the same territory. When several maps are aligned correctly, the landscape becomes clearer. The goal of scholarship is not to replace faith, but to bring these maps into better alignment so we can see the terrain more accurately." - Jared

Reflection: What do you think the text, the Exodus text we are studying below, meant when it was first written?

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The Story:

Israel's covenant community was established under the leadership of Moses who communicated the revelation from God as the prophetic leader, Aaron who administered ritual authority as the high priest and Miriam who led the people in song and communal worship as the prophetess (Exodus 15:20).

Rather than being given a portion of land, they are distributed among the twelve tribes and assigned designated cities within their territories (Numbers 35:1–8; Joshua 21). This unusual arrangement suggests that their identity is not defined by genealogy and more by their sacred service. For this reason many scholars understand the Levitical genealogies are actually reflection an organizational system of temple service groups. Later on, the Torah organizes the priesthood through the “sons of Levi,” with different Levitical clans responsible for different domains of maintaining sacred space (Milgrom, Numbers, Anchor Yale Bible; Meyers, Exodus, New Cambridge Bible Commentary). The clans of Gershon, Kohath, and Merari (Exodus 6:16; Numbers 3:17) each receive a distinct role connected to the priestly service of the Tabernacle. The Gershonites care for the textiles and coverings of the sanctuary and carry the curtains and veils that define the sacred boundaries of the space (Numbers 3:25–26). The Kohathites are responsible for guarding the most sacred ritual objects including the Ark of the Covenant, the table of the bread of the Presence, the menorah, and the altars (Numbers 3:31). The Merarites weave the structural framework together and bear it to allow the Temple itself to function. Their duties include assembling the boards, bars, pillars, bases, pegs, and cords that allow the Tabernacle to stand and function as sacred space (Numbers 3:36–37; 4:31–32).

Just as the Exodus narrative presents three leaders at the center of Israel’s early priestly life, the Levitical priesthood itself is structured around three foundational lines. Archaeological and textual evidence shows that sacred wooden Asherah pillars and sacred tree symbolism were often associated with temple spaces and with imagery of divine presence and fertility connected with the goddess Asherah. Mark S. Smith notes that Asherah appears to have been associated with early Yahwistic worship before later reforms attempted to remove her symbols from Israelite religion (Smith, *The Early History of God*, 2nd ed., Eerdmans, 2002). Iconographic studies likewise show that stylized sacred trees functioned as representations of divine life and blessing within ancient Near Eastern sanctuaries (Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, Fortress Press, 1998). Sacred tree imagery was widely associated with maternal divine symbolism in the ancient Near East and Egypt in particular revered the acacia tree as a sacred tree of life connected with divine protection and renewal. When these structural responsibilities are viewed alongside the linguistic pattern surrounding the root MRR appearing in the name Merari and in the wilderness narrative of Marah where bitter waters are transformed into life giving sweetness (Exodus 15:23–25) the narrative begins to reveal an intriguing symbolic pattern. Immediately following this transformation Miriam emerges as the prophetic leader who guides Israel in the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:20–21). Taken together the structural role of the Merarites the symbolic importance of sacred trees and pillars in ancient temple environments and the recurring MRR linguistic motif suggest that the Exodus traditions preserve a layered memory in which the establishment of sacred space prophetic leadership and the transformation of bitterness into life are woven together within Israel’s earliest priestly narratives.

Further reading:

Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907.

Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of Old Testament*. Leiden: Brill, 1994.

Carol Meyers. *Exodus*. Cambridge Bible Commentary.

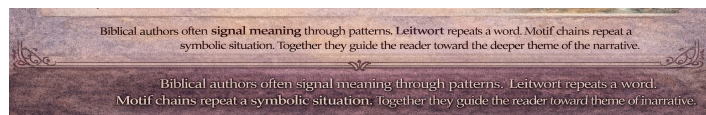
Tikva Frymer-Kensky. *Reading the Women of the Bible*. Schocken Books, 2002.

Jacob Milgrom. *Numbers*. JPS Torah Commentary.

Graphic:

Oral tradition of the text





Together these patterns indicate an intentionally “woven” theme of bitter suffering and priestly transformation connected to the women of the tradition and to the waters of the Mother first spoken of in Genesis, drawing from ancient Near Eastern traditions and their linguistic cognates.

Miriam

Miriam is one of the clearest examples of how this linguistic pattern signals her priesthood roles within this biblical narrative.

In Exodus 15:20 the text explicitly calls her “Miriam the prophetess,” using the Hebrew title ha-nevi’ah (הַנְּבִיאָה), the feminine form of the word navi’, meaning prophet. Linguistically the presence of the definite article ha indicates a recognized public office and not just a descriptive phrase. The linguistic indicates that this is identifying her as the official prophetess within the narrative. Lexical sources like Brown-Driver-Briggs and HALOT show the navi’ and its feminine form nevi’ah as the formal prophetic priesthood title used all throughout the Hebrew Bible for recognized prophets and prophetesses without any stratification. We see it being used officially with other priestesses such as Deborah and Huldah.

Further Reading:

Exodus 1:14

Exodus 2:4-8

Exodus 15:20

Miriam, My Jewish Learning

www.myjewishlearning.com/article/miriam-the-prophetess/

Why Are There No Israelite Priestesses?

<https://www.thetorah.com/article/why-are-there-no-israelite-priestesses>

Re-Encountering Miriam

<https://www.thetorah.com/article/re-encountering-miriam>

The Story:

Miriam assumes a leadership role, shifting from an unnamed sister to a respected authority figure, by leading the women in a worship procession. This task is reserved for only those who are prophets. She is described in the text as a nevi’ah, meaning a recognized prophetic role. Her role is specific to prophecy, song, and public leadership authorized by God. It does not include temple duties held by priests. The biblical text records two connected poetic performances. The longer “Song of the Sea” appears in Exodus 15:1–18, followed immediately by Miriam’s shorter refrain in Exodus 15:20–21. The Hebrew verb introducing Miriam’s refrain (va-ta’an, וַתֵּאָנֶן) can mean “she answered,” but it also carries the sense of leading a responsive chant. The Greek Septuagint tradition reflects this idea by portraying Miriam as leading the women in song rather than merely echoing Moses’ words. In the wider cultural setting of the ancient Near East, tambourine processions, dancing, and victory songs were commonly performed by women celebrating divine deliverance after battle.

Immediately after Miriam leads the victory song at the sea, the people of Israel find undrinkable water. God shows Moses a piece of wood that Moses throws into the water and turns it sweet. They moved to Elim, a place of abundance containing twelve springs and seventy palm trees (Exodus 15:27). In Numbers 12:1–15, Miriam and Aaron question Moses’ unique prophetic authority, asking whether the Lord has spoken only through Moses. Miriam is soon taken with a sickness making ritual impurity and is forced to remain outside the camp for seven days to heal. The whole group of people eagerly waited her return before continuing to travel, because of how deeply she was respected and recognized for her value in the community.

In Numbers 20:1–2 the narrative records Miriam’s death at Kadesh in an unusually brief statement: “Miriam died there and was buried there, and there was no water for the congregation.” The text places these two events directly beside one another with no explanation, creating a parallel for our continuing motif chain narrative in which the adjacency between Miriam’s death and the sudden water crisis are linguistically connected. In the Talmud (Ta’anit 9a) and later Midrashic traditions, they teach that Israel was sustained in the wilderness by the miraculous well of life that existed through the priesthood pattern of Miriam, and that when Miriam was cast out and forgotten and later died, the living waters of the well disappeared.

Graphic:

Linguistic Memory Pattern in the Miriam Narratives			
Narrative Moment	Text	Linguistic / Narrative Signal	Symbolic Meaning
Victory at the Sea	Exodus 15:20-21	Miriam named ha-nevi’ah (prophetess) and leads Israel in drum, song, and dance.	Women act as liturgical interpreters of divine deliverance.
Bitter Waters of Marah	Exodus 15:23-25	Place name Marah tied to the Hebrew root MRR meaning bitterness.	Bitterness becomes the setting for divine transformation.

Challenge to Moses	Numbers 12:1-15	Miriam's prophetic authority is contested and she is struck with tzara'at.	Earlier leadership reframed as a cautionary narrative.
Death of Miriam	Numbers 20:1	Her death is recorded briefly with no mourning period described.	Narrative memory of her leadership appears muted.
Water Crisis	Numbers 20:2	Immediately after Miriam's death the text records there was no water.	Narrative adjacency links Miriam with Israel's water supply.
Later Interpretation	Talmud Ta'anit 9a	Rabbinic tradition teaches Israel's well existed through Miriam's merit.	Later interpreters reconnect Miriam with sustaining water.

Moses

"Drawn out of the water"
Exodus 2:10

In Egyptian, the elements / mose commonly means "born of" or "child of," appearing in royal names such as Thutmose ("born of Thoth") and Ramesses ("born of Ra").

Hebrew translation connects the name to the verb mashah (מָשַׁח), meaning "to draw out" or "to pull out."

Egyptologists suggest that the name in its original form would have meant simply "child" or "born one," from the Mirar (MRR) and only later interpreted through Hebrew wordplay within the biblical narrative.

When read within the broader ANE narrative context, this linguistic layering becomes clear. Moses is literally drawn out of the waters, of the Mother and yet his story unfolds within a larger sequence of water imagery that runs throughout the Exodus traditions. The narrative moves from the Mothers waters (MRR) of the Nile, to the crossing of the Red Sea (MRR), to the bitter waters of Marah (MRR), and eventually to the living waters (MRR) drying up that follows Miriam's death.

Using the SED and ORACC for Linguistic Study

One of the most important skills in historical linguistics is learning how to trace a word across multiple ancient languages. Two of the most powerful tools for this work are the Semitic Etymological Dictionary (SED) and the Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus (ORACC). These allow researchers to compare Hebrew words with related terms preserved in Akkadian, Ugaritic, Aramaic, and other languages of the ancient Near East.

The story of Marah in Exodus 15:23 provides a great example. The place name Marah is connected to the Hebrew root MRR (מרר) meaning "bitter." Using the SED, students can trace this root across the wider Semitic language family and see that similar forms appear in Akkadian and other cognate languages with meanings related to bitterness, suffering, and harshness. ORACC allows researchers to go even further by examining actual cuneiform texts where these words appear in ancient Akkadian documents.

By comparing these sources, we can see how a single root such as MRR IDs expressed across multiple languages and cultural contexts. This then helps us better understand how biblical authors used familiar linguistic patterns and shared cultural vocabulary when constructing narratives such as the bitter waters of Marah.

How to Access These Tools

1. Using the Semitic Etymological Dictionary (SED)

The SED is a scholarly lexicon that traces the origins and cognates of Semitic words.

Steps for use:

1. Search online for "Semitic Etymological Dictionary SED PDF."
2. Locate the volume covering the root family you are studying.
3. Look up the three consonant root (for example: MRR).
4. Examine the list of related forms across languages such as:
 - o Hebrew
 - o Akkadian
 - o Aramaic
 - o

- Ugaritic
5. Note how meanings overlap or shift between cultures.

This allows researchers to see how words developed historically across the Semitic language family.

2. Using ORACC (Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus)

ORACC is a digital database maintained by the University of Pennsylvania that provides searchable Akkadian texts.

Steps for use:

1. Go to the ORACC website:
oracc.museum.upenn.edu
2. Use the search bar to enter a word or root.
3. Explore the results to find:
 - Akkadian word forms
 - Transliteration of cuneiform texts
 - English translations
 - Grammatical analysis
4. Examine how the word appears in actual ancient documents, including royal inscriptions, administrative tablets, and literary texts.

Using tools like the SED and ORACC allows scholars to examine the deeper linguistic world behind the biblical text. Motif chains such as MRR, can then be traced across multiple languages of the ancient Near East. This linguistic context will reveal patterns, symbolism, and cultural associations that are invisible when reading the Hebrew text alone. These tools make it possible to see how biblical language participates in a much larger conversation across the ancient world. Providing you the clearest interpretation possible.

Reflection: Pick your favorite verse in Exodus pertaining to Miriam and write out it's meaning with the SED and the ORACC? What are the biggest differences between the two translations? What is the biggest similarity?

Sources:

Robert Alter — The Art of Biblical Narrative

<https://www.amazon.com/Art-Biblical-Narrative-Robert-Alter/dp/0465022553>

Amazing book. A must read. It does a great job of explaining Leitwort and repeated Hebrew word patterns.

Free article: Robert Alter — Biblical Type Scenes

<https://www.commentary.org/articles/robert-alter-2/a-literary-approach-to-the-bible/>

Explains repeated narrative patterns in the Bible.

Meir Sternberg — The Poetics of Biblical Narrative

<https://www.amazon.com/Poetics-Biblical-Narrative-Ideological-Literature/dp/0253204534>

Explains motif chains and narrative structure in biblical storytelling.

Nahum Sarna — The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus

<https://www.amazon.com/JPS-Torah-Commentary-Exodus/dp/0827603274>

Discusses the literary structure of Exodus and wilderness testing narratives.

Free article: Nahum Sarna — Exodus Overview

<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/the-exodus-tradition-in-the-bible/>

Summary of the Exodus narrative structure.

Carol Meyers — Exodus (New Cambridge Bible Commentary)

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/exodus/0BBD532445DFE6B3D2BA9CB53E3E6906>

Explains the historical setting of Exodus and roles like Miriam's leadership.

Free article: Carol Meyers — Miriam

<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/articles/miriam/>

Overview of Miriam as prophetess and ritual leader.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky — Reading the Women of the Bible

<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/reading-the-women-of-the-bible-tikva-frymer-kensky/1100618357>

Study of women such as Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah in biblical leadership.

Free article: Frymer-Kensky — Women in the Hebrew Bible
<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/leadership-and-authority>
Short discussion of women's roles in biblical tradition.

Mark S. Smith — The Early History of God
<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/the-early-history-of-god-mark-s-smith/1112510965>
Explains ancient Israelite religion and Near Eastern religious context.

Free lecture: Mark S. Smith
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdKst8zeh-U>
Overview of early Israelite religion.

Fiona Given & Terryl Given — The God Who Weeps
<https://deseretbook.com/p/god-who-weep>
Discusses the theological unity of man and woman in covenant theology.

Free lecture: Fiona Given — The perfect union of man and woman
<https://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/uip/dial/article/49/1/1/249238/The-Perfect-Union-of-Man-and-Woman-Reclamation-and>
Lecture on divine partnership and theology of women.

ORACC — Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus
<https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu>
Database of Akkadian texts used to compare ancient Near Eastern language.

Tutorial
<https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/doc/help/index.html>
Guide to researching ancient words.

Semitic Etymological Dictionary (SED)
https://www.academia.edu/29743833/Semitic_Etymological_Dictionary
Tracks Hebrew roots across the Semitic language family.

Overview article
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Semitic-languages>
Intro to Semitic linguistic comparison.