

# AND SHE BECAME "SNOW WHITE"

By Jacqueline Williams

In Numbers 12, "the woman Moses married" is not named. She is also not referred to as Moses' wife, but twice in Num 12:2 she is referred to as the "Cushite woman whom Moses married". This is the only place in the bible where she is mentioned at all. The issue at state here is not her role as a wife, but her race, her nationality, the identity of her primary community. The underlined issues in this narrative, which at face value deals with a power struggle between Moses and the duo Miriam and Aaron are firstly the uncleanness (wrongness, otherness in a negative sense) of black persons as understood Miriam and Aaron, and secondly the deity's utter contempt with such reasoning.

It is generally assumed that the Cushite "woman Moses married" as mentioned in Num 12:1-2 and Zipporah, whom we know to be Moses' wife, are the same person. This is an incorrect assumption, as the hebrew bible witnesses to two different women. The most obvious reason for the suggestion that they are two different women is geographical. Zipporah is mentioned in the book of Exodus, both directly and indirectly. Ex 2:16, implies her existence. "Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock". It also mentions that their father was named Reu'el. Zipporah is mentioned more directly in Ex 2:21. "And Moses was content to dwell with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah."

In verse 22 of the same chapter it informs us that Zipporah bore Moses a son called Gershom. Again she is mentioned in Ex 3:20 "... Moses took his wife and his sons and set them on an ass, and went back to the land of Egypt"... A few verses later (ex 4:24-26) Zipporah is mentioned again and this time she speaks in her own words. The narration goes thus: "At a lodging place on the way the Lord met him and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it, and said. "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me! So he let him alone. Then it was that she said, "You are a bridegroom

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In the history of exegesis the passage immediately above has been seen as very problematic and difficult to understand. There is no understanding of the meaning of the story, or the logic of the event. However what it clearly is saying to the reader is that in this case Zipporah acts instinctively to protect her family. She summed up the situation and within the context she found herself acting to save the life of her husband and that of her children. Zipporah is mentioned again indirectly in Exodus 18. This time Jethro the priest of Midian who is also known as Reu'el brings back to Moses, Moses' wife and sons. Ex 18:2-5 reads: "Now Jethro, Moses' father in law, had taken Zipporah Moses' wife, after he had sent her away, and her two sons of whom the name of the one was Gershom (for he had said "I have been a sojourner in a strange land."), and the name of the other Elie'zer (for he said, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh). And Jethro Moses' father in law came with his sons and wife in the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of God."

The Zipporah we have seen above comes from the land of Midian, this is located on the Arabian peninsula. The other woman mentioned in Moses' life is the "Cushite woman whom he had married." Cush according to biblical tradition is the land from which the southern most people known to the Hebrews come. It is also known as Ethiopia. This geographical reality and distance between Cush and Midian makes it difficult for Zipporah and the Cushite women to be the same person. We are therefore not dealing with a relationship between Zipporah and Miriam, but one between the "Cushite woman" and Miriam.

In the narrative all the main characters at one point or the other speak for themselves, except for "the Cushite woman". At no point in our narrative do Moses, Miriam, Aaron or the deity speak to the "Cushite woman" and Miriam. Within our narrative all the main

characters at one point or the other speak for themselves, except for "the Cushite woman". At no point in our narrative do Moses, Miriam, Aaron or the deity speak to the "Cushite woman" directly. This silence of the African woman in this narrative, and as well as the silence of the other actors in the narrative, about the "Cushite woman" makes it difficult to have any idea of her other than her Africanness. We therefore have to look at other scriptural witnesses for a better understanding of her position in this community and why this bitter attack on her identity by Miriam and Aaron.

There is an added difficulty in that there is no other scriptural witness to the relationship between Miriam and "the Cushite woman" that enlightens us to the kind of relationship between these two women. For us to understand Miriam's behaviour towards the "Cushite woman", we will look at some other place in the scripture where Miriam is dealing with a foreign woman in relation to Moses. This may help us understand Miriam's intentions and behaviour in our narrative. The most obvious relationship to examine is the one between the daughter of Pharaoh and Miriam.

Before we do as suggested above let us have a closer look at Miriam. Miriam's name comes from the hebrew root (mrh) which means "to be contentious". To be refractory" or "to be rebellious". Her name is more precisely linked to the hebrew word (mry) which is a masculine noun which means rebellion. Miriam's name therefore has the connotation in this case of a "rebellious person", but rather more accurately as "rebellious water". (yam in hebrew means water or sea).

In Exodus 1:15-2:1-11 we are made aware of the circumstances under which Moses was born, and also the way his family as a team made sure that he stayed alive. Three months after the birth of Moses it was impossible to hide him from the authorities. He was then put into a basket on the river. It was the duty of his sister to keep watch at a distance so that the family could know what would happen to the boy. Even though the narrative does not say it, it seem obvious that the sister's task was to see that no harm was done to the little boy. We assume that the sister of Moses as

mentioned in Ex 2:4 and verses 7-8 is the same person as Moses' sister Miriam. In Exodus 2 the sister is not named.

There is however no other tradition in the Hebrew bible that contradicts the assumption that the sister of the boy, in the basket, is the same person whom we know as Miriam, Moses's sister. What we can gather from the narrative is that she was a very courageous and intelligent girl. We see this when she went forward to show herself to Pharaoh's daughter, even though the action may have put both her and her brother's life in jeopardy. She goes forward towards pharaoh's daughter, but not without a plan. She thinks well and fast in situations of danger. Here we see a young oppressed girl taking initiative turning a moment of possible death into a moment of life. Scheming seems to be something that comes natural to her. This ability of the girl we become aware of when she suggested to the daughter of Pharaoh that the child's own mother be his nurse.

From a very tender age Miriam uses her initiative. Her sense of timing at this tender age seems to be well developed. The abilities she manifests to the reader in this story are the elements that suggest that she already was a fine leader. We see in this setting Miriam using the nature of the oppressor for the benefit of her family. She uses the feelings that a child stirs up in a person and in this case Pharaoh's daughter, in the interest of life for her brother. She also makes the suggestion for her mother to be the nurse to the child in the heat of the moment, so that Pharaoh's daughter does not get a chance to rethink her plan of adopting the child. If this was Miriam as a child, how much stronger as a grown woman? Note that in Exodus chapter 2 narrative Miriam is an oppressed slave girl, while the Pharaoh's daughter comes from the elite of the oppressor class. Pharaoh's daughter, an African woman, resembles the Israelites more in terms of features and skin colour than the people of Cush resemble the Israelites. We find a clue to this reality in Exodus 2:18-20. This passage is a discussion between Jethro the priest of Midian and his daughters about the identity of the stranger (Moses) who helped them at the well, they identify him as an Egyptian.

In Miriam's relationship with the Cushite woman we observe that

her situation in life has changed drastically. Firstly, she was not a slave any more, secondly she was a grown woman, and thirdly, she was one of the three top leaders of her community. The obvious issue in our narrative is, why does Moses have authority over Miriam and Aaron? We become aware of this question in the following: "...Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also'..." (Ex 12:2). In the case of Miriam, Aaron and Moses, they were all seeing themselves as authentic leaders, as chosen by the deity, and accepted by their community. (See Ex 12:2). All three of them were claiming that their authority over the people came from the same source, which entitled them to have the same standing in the Israelite community. From the response of Miriam and Aaron it becomes obvious that they felt they were not given the recognition they deserved. Something had to be done about this state of affairs.

When challenging an opponent it is advantageous to know his\her weak points. They therefore chose to attack Moses at his weakest point. His choice of wife. Now the two women whom we know to be Moses' wives are Zipporah the Midianite and the "Cushite woman" (Moses may have had more wives). Both of them were foreigners. One from the land of Midian and the other from the land of Cush. It seems clear then that Miriam and Aaron's objection was because Moses married foreign women. The woman from Cush was offensive to Miriam and Aaron because she was a black African woman. We stress here a black African woman, because the Egyptian princess in whose house Moses grew up, was an African. As noted above the national looks of Egyptians resemble Israelites in both colour and features. Which is also true for Israelites and Midianites. The issue being raised by Aaron and Miriam at this point is not that of being foreign, but black. It is a racist issue. This was not only the attitude of Miriam and Aaron. In choosing a "weakness" of Moses, so that people would question his authority, they had to chose something which would certainly have the necessary effect (to question Moses' authority) in the community. There had to be, in the larger community, a fair number of people with this disposition.

It is interesting to see the response of the deity to the conspiracy of Miriam and Aaron against Moses. The deed done by Miriam

and Aaron was grave enough to guarantee a physical manifestation of the deity's presence in the community. The deity calls all three of the leaders together and speaks to them. In the deity's words to Moses, Aaron and Miriam the deity affirms again that he\she has chosen Moses as his\her special representative. What is interesting in the discussion is that the deity does not mention the Cushite woman at all. The deity deals with the issue of authority. Yet if we look at what the deity does about the plot against Moses, we see the deity responding directly to the issue of the blackness of the wife of Moses. In Num 12:9 we are told that the deity's anger was kindled against Aaron and Miriam. Our narrative however does not tell us how the deity's anger was manifested against Aaron, but only how it was manifested against Miriam. The deity made that which Miriam was so proud of, a white skin, something to be despised. Miriam as "leprous, as white as snow". The deity gave her an illness that forced her separation from the community. She became unclean. That which was "as white as snow" became unclean, defiled and separated from the community and the deity. It is interesting in this narrative that the deity does not refer to skin colour in mere words, but in action, that spoke much more effectively. Differences are natural and created by the deity. If we use these differences to glorify ourselves to the detriment of others we are creating our own down fall.

We learn from this text that women, who are part of a racially powerful group, can use racial differences for their own positions of power in their communities. It becomes obvious then that talking about the idea of sisterhood, amongst women who form part of the group in power and those who form part of the oppressed group, is not in the interest of the oppressed, if the assumptions and behaviour of those women in power, are not challenged by the oppressed women. There should be a re-evaluation of the concept white. In our narrative this re-evaluation is forced on all concerned, by the leprous Miriam who is "as white as snow". The deity challenges the idea that "as white as snow" - as pure as snow" - morally pure - is chosen by the deity. It also challenges the idea that white is always right, always pure, and always holy. Holiness (to be set apart) for the deity's purpose is not an outward image, but obedience to the purpose of the deity, which is the liberation of the poor and the oppressed.

The other interesting issue our narrative raises, which could be interpreted in both a negative and a positive way, is the silence of the Cushite woman. It may be seen as, once more, those in power discussing the position of the oppressed without the oppressed having any input in the discussion. Those in power defining the powerless and making decisions for the oppressed according to the powerful's definition of the oppressed. Or it could be understood that racism is not a problem of the Cushite woman therefore she does not have to defend her own identity. She is who she is. She leaves those with the problem to deal with it.