

Miryam of Nazareth: Woman of Strength and Wisdom

Ann Johnson

Ann Johnson gives a powerful, Hebrew female voice to the mother of God called Mary, known as Miryam in Hebrew. In this updated reprint of a classic prayer volume, Johnson invites us into Mary's life as we follow her on her journey of faithfulness to God. Just as Mary/Miryam drew on the rich resources of her Jewish heritage, so too can we draw upon the richness of her life possibilities to inform our present circumstances. Here we encounter the imagined personal spirituality of this deeply religious Jewish woman. Through these gracefully written reflections and prayers we are taken on a journey through the history of great Jewish women, and through them much of the Jewish history that would have been known to Mary. We see the search for God acting in history, the repeating story of upheaval and challenge, and the resultant range of human emotions. There is a prayer for each time of Mary's life and of our own lives, as we make the connection to Mary and all of life through God, transcending time and place. Mary's story is at once timely and timeless, rooted in her tradition and transcending all traditions.

Mary has much to teach us about developing a deeper relationship with God, and Ann Johnson has given us an excellent tool to do so. Let this guide be a starting point for a deeper experience of this volume, and let these prayers be like the midwives of old birthing a renewed life of faith in us.

(Perhaps) Unfamiliar Words

Miryam: An uncommon name in the Hebrew testament, it means "rebellion" in Hebrew and "beloved" in Egyptian.

Adonai: (page 17) "Lord of lords;" the term a Jew would read in place of Yahweh, a name so sacred it was not spoken.

pur: (page 39) Persian for "lot" in this text. Purim, the Jewish festival celebrating the victory obtained through Esther's intervention over enemies in Persia, may have been named for the "lots" cast by the enemy Haman.

Shabbat: (page 53) Hebrew for the Sabbath day of rest, with the emphasis being more on rest than on prayer, as observant Jews prayed three times daily.

Maranatha: (page 78) Aramaic for "Come, our Lord" (or, "Our Lord has come"). It is a phrase that was in use in the early church and could have been known to Mary as a member of the Acts community.

Rabboni: (page 110) Aramaic, an emphatic form of *rabbi* meaning teacher.

Gamaliel: (page 119) See Acts 5 to learn more about the prophecy of this great teacher of rabbinic law thought to have been Paul's teacher. He refused to punish the early Christians, for if the Jesus movement was from God, those who opposed it would be acting against the will of God.

History of the Magnificat

The original Magnificat of Mary, found in Luke 1:46-55, is a psalm of thanksgiving and praise. In it the favor of God rests with the poor and lowly, whom God elevates. Mary and Israel are identified with those lowly favored by God. The theme of this type of psalm is based on this: true power and riches come from God and remain in God to be used by those who reside in God. All

glory belongs to the Most Holy One. This type of individual psalm of thanksgiving is an ancient Hebrew prayer form that, as the author points out, would have been known to Mary.

- *Using your own life experiences, challenges and blessings, write your own magnificat.*

Image of the Jewish Mary

What was Mary, the Jewish woman born in Jerusalem and married in Nazareth, like? What did she know? What was it like for her to be a Jewish woman at that time? While much about Mary's life remains unknown, we have clues to what her life could have been like through evidence in the Bible and understanding of Jewish history. Judaism is a mid-Eastern religion with an Eastern flavor rather than the Western one Christianity has developed. Whereas mainstream sects of Christianity have developed linear, rational thinking based on Greek philosophy, Judaism is an experience-based faith, based on a people's experience of God. That experience includes times of God's apparent absence (i.e., the period of slavery in Egypt), God's harsh judgment (i.e., prophetess Miryam's leprosy as punishment for disobedience), and God's tender mercy and loving compassion. The Psalms, and indeed the reflections on Hebrew Testament women in this volume, attest to this experience. Many of such prayers contain lamentations blaming a God it seems has forsaken God's people followed immediately by praise of God's goodness and glory. What is central for the Jewish people is fidelity through all trials.

Along with this mindset, Mary would have had knowledge of major events in Jewish history. Larger stronger kingdoms often overpowered the Hebrews, and such struggles were central to their faith development. To refresh your knowledge of Jewish history, read "An Outline of Biblical History" in the *Catholic Study Bible* or a similar study text, or look online for an outline of Jewish history. If we learn more about Jewish history we can make those connections to better inform our understanding of Mary and indeed our own faith.

- *Reflect on Jewish history from the perspective of Mary. What does such reflection reveal to you about the Jewish mother of God?*

Living Witness, Living History

These prayers invite us to make connections among the strong, faithful women of the Hebrew testament, Mary, and us. We can make this connection on a larger societal level as well. In the Israel of Mary's time, political upheaval and violence were no strangers. Jews lived in a state of fear of an occupying army (the Romans) with unpredictable violence the norm. The Zealots unsuccessfully attempted violent revolt, and many Jews were looking for a powerful new Messiah in the vein of King David.

Although the political situation has changed with the Jews maintaining control in the Israel of today, there are similarities in the underlying fear and violence, and in the longing for a powerful leader who can bring peace and security.

- *What do these Magnificats of Miryam, particularly the Magnificats of Conversion and Terror, tell us about true security? How can this inform our quest for security in our own country?*

To Look for as You Read:

Deborah: In Judges 5 read the Song or Canticle of Deborah, an ancient Hebrew poem describing her victory believed by some to have been authored by Deborah.

Judith: Trust in God giving her strength; she came to God open and broken, hiding nothing, and his trust filled her – trust in God to save us. See the historical book of Judith for more detail.

Esther: The Hebrew text of this book of the Bible, upon which this current edition is based, contains no references to God. The Catholic Church accepted pre-Christian additions in Greek, which are placed appropriately throughout the book. To see the original Hebrew text, check out <http://www.chabad.org/library/archive/LibraryArchive2.asp?AID=15782> Esther is a lesson in the ever present yet sometimes hidden God.

Ruth: In the Book of Ruth, part of the Pentateuch, God calls on a gentile woman who fulfills the Jewish ideal of daughter-in-law and wife, showing an unwavering devotion to God and widowed friend. A book of tolerance.

Miryam, sister of Moses: A prophet who learned the importance of being God’s vessel and turning continually to God rather than clinging to old laws. She also sang a canticle of thanksgiving and praise to God. See the books of Exodus and Numbers for more about Miryam, sister of Moses. Some scholars believe that she may have had more prominence in the oral tradition before those who wrote the Exodus story placed a greater importance on Moses.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- Look for themes of fidelity to God, listening to God, trust in the Lord for safety and the future. What other themes do you find?
- Reflecting on the story of Mary/Miryam presented here, how does trusting in God bring about joy and freedom in us?
- Think about how God called these great women of the Bible—Deborah, Judith, Esther, Ruth, Miryam, Mary—and how they offered themselves in service to the Lord.
- What visions of God do you find in here—dreamer, creator, etc.? How does this enrich your view of God?
- Johnson alludes to the ”creative wisdom” of God. Allow yourself to be inspired to journal or write prayers of your own. Consider sharing them with your group.