Traditions about Miriam in the Qumran Scrolls

Sidnie White Crawford
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, scrawford1@unl.edu
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The literature of Second Temple Judaism (late sixth century BCE to 70 CE) contains many compositions that focus on characters and events known from the biblical texts. The characters or events in these new compositions are developed in various ways: filling in gaps in the biblical account, offering explanations for difficult passages, or simply adding details to the lives of biblical personages to make them fuller and more interesting characters. For example, the work known as *Joseph and Aseneth* focuses on the biblical character Aseneth, the Egyptian wife of Joseph, mentioned only briefly in Gen 41:45, 50. This work attempts to explain, among other things, how Joseph, the righteous son of Jacob, contracted an exogamous marriage with the daughter of an Egyptian priest. In an elaborate scene, Aseneth rejects her ancestral religion and converts to the worship of the God of Israel (10:2-17:10).

Further Second Temple period compositions focus on other biblical characters, most of them from Israel's hoary past: the patriarchs and matriarchs Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel, and their descendants. The collection of manuscripts recovered from the caves surrounding Khirbet Qumran, popularly known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, contains a wealth of previously unknown literary compositions from the period of the Second Temple, many adding to our knowledge of the traditions surrounding these familiar biblical characters. It is especially pertinent, given the theme of this volume, to note that there is new material concerning female biblical characters to be gleaned from the fragmentary remains of the Qumran collection.

This paper focuses on two or three Qumran texts that mention the biblical character Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, who, with her brothers, was a leader of the Israelites during the sojourn in the wilderness. Miriam appears in seven passages in the Hebrew Bible. In Exod 15:20-21 Miriam, identified as a prophet, is portrayed as leading
the Israelite women in a victory celebration following the rout of the Egyptians at the Reed Sea:

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." As it stands, Miriam's song is only a repetition of the first verse of Moses' Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1); one might ask if Miriam sang anything else.

Numbers 12:1-15 contains the story of Miriam and Aaron's complaint against Moses, with Miriam's subsequent punishment with a form of skin disease:

While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had indeed married a Cushite woman); and they said, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it...Suddenly the LORD said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting." So the three of them came out. Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the entrance of the tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forward. And he said, "Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the LORD make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face—clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed. When the cloud went away from over the tent, Miriam had become skin-diseased, white as snow. And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she had skin disease. Then Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, do not lay sin upon us for a sin that we have so foolishly committed. Do not let her be like one stillborn, whose flesh is half consumed when it comes out of its mother's womb." And Moses cried to the LORD, "O God, please heal her." But the LORD said to Moses, "If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days,
and after that she may be brought in again.” So Miriam was shut out of the camp for seven days; and the people did not set out on the march until Miriam had been brought in again. (Num 12:1-2, 4-15; NRSV with modifications).

It should be noted that although Miriam is punished in this passage, she is clearly a leader of the people; it is implied in verse 6 that she is a prophet of visions and dreams, and her skin disease and subsequent quarantine cause the journey through the wilderness to be delayed seven days (verse 15). Miriam’s skin disease is then recalled in Deut 24:9.

The death of Miriam is recounted in Num 20:1: “The Israelites, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. Miriam died there, and was buried there.” In the verse immediately following the notice of Miriam’s death, the narrative notes that the wells dry up and the people have no water; while there is no necessary connection between these two events, later tradition creates one. Miriam also appears in genealogical notices in Num 26:59 and 1 Chr 5:29 (Eng. 6:3), where she is identified as the daughter of Amram and Jochebed and the sister of Aaron and Moses. Finally, Micah, the eighth century prophet, lists Moses, Aaron and Miriam as the leaders of the Exodus from Egypt (Mic 6:4).

In addition, Exod 2:4-8 portrays an unnamed sister of Moses watching over him after his mother sets him adrift on the Nile. Although later tradition identifies this unnamed sister as Miriam (for example, Jubilees 47:4-9), some scholars have speculated that the tradition that identifies Moses, Aaron, and Miriam as siblings is a later P tradition, and that originally Miriam was a leader in her own right, unrelated to Moses. These few passages provide a tantalizing glimpse of a female leadership figure, a prophet whose actual role may have been far greater than recorded. Ilana Pardes suggests that “there must have been other traditions [about Miriam] which were not included in the canon.” It is always difficult to determine what the biblical accounts, some of which may be quite ancient (for example, Exod 15:1-18, the Song of the Sea), may have left out when they were redacted into their present form; but whether or not traditional material about Miriam was excluded from the books that now make up the biblical canon, the short passages concerning Miriam were ripe for interpretation and expansion, with the potential of forming a traditional body of material about Miriam.
In a few fragmentary manuscripts from Qumran we seem to have the oldest record of such traditions.

The first Qumran manuscript to contain fresh information about Miriam is 4Q365, one of a group of manuscripts known collectively as 4QReworked Pentateuch. 4Q365 is dated paleographically to c. 75-50 BCE, but includes much older material. It contains an expanded and altered text of the Pentateuch or Torah. 4Q365 changes the text of the Torah from the received text with which we are familiar by means of rearrangements, some omissions, and additions. These alterations were deliberate and usually had an exegetical purpose. One such addition occurs in the fragments that contain Exod 15. Fragments 6 of 4Q365 preserve the remains of two columns. Column I begins with Exod 14:12 and breaks off in the midst of 15:20-21, the verses concerning Miriam's victory song at the Reed Sea: “And [Miriam the prophet, the sister of Aaron] took [the tambourine in her hand and] she lead all the women after her with [tambourines and with dancing. And she answered...]

The verse presumably was completed at the bottom of column I (not preserved). The next verse that we expect, 15:22, does not appear until the beginning of line 8 in column II. In the seven preceding lines we find the very fragmentary remains of a poetic composition, presumably an expanded version of the song that Miriam sang at the Reed Sea. The preserved words are as follows:

1. you despised [  
2. for the majesty of [  
3. You are great, a deliverer [  
4. the hope of the enemy has perished, and he is for[gotten  
5. they perished in the mighty waters, the enemy [  
6. And extol the one who lifts up[, a ransom you (feminine plural) gave [  
7. [one who d]oes gloriously

As can be seen by the feminine plural imperative in line 6, this song is being addressed to a group of women, evidently those following Miriam in 15:20. The subject of the song is God, who is praised for destroying an enemy who must be the Egyptians. Several of the lines contain words or phrases that have already appeared in Moses' song, the Song of the Sea: the words “majesty” and “gloriously” in lines 2 and 7, from a Hebrew root that is also used in Exod 15:1, 7; and the “mighty waters,” found in line 5 and also 15:10. All this evidence allows us to say with confidence that these lines are the remnant of a Song of Miriam,
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part of a body of traditional material that has contributed to the longer
text of 4Q365. Perhaps this Song grew up in answer to the question
raised above, “What did Miriam really sing?” It certainly parallels other
songs of triumph sung by biblical women; for example, Deborah in
Judg 5, Hannah in 1 Sam 2:1-10, and Judith in Jdt 16.8 Miriam’s role
in the victory celebration at the Reed Sea is the subject of some discussion
in Second Temple literature; for example, Philo, the Alexandrian Jewish
philosopher of the first century CE, states that Moses and Miriam formed
separate men’s and women’s choirs (Moses 1.180), although in another
work he says that there was a single choir, with the men being led by
Moses and the women by Miriam (De Vita Contemplativa 87).9 However,
this Qumran fragment is unique; nowhere else in Second Temple Jewish
writings do we find an actual record of Miriam’s song. This song cements
Miriam’s status as a leader of the Israelites; since she is also called a
prophet in verse 20, it could be argued that the song is the product of
divine inspiration.

The second work from Qumran that mentions Miriam focuses on
her prophetic gifts and her membership in the family of the first high
priest, Aaron. 4QVisions of Amram is an Aramaic text found in six or
seven fragmentary manuscripts, which was composed, according to its
editor, in the early second century BCE.10 The text is part of a trilogy of
testaments from the ancestors of the high priestly family: Aramaic Levi,
the Testament of Qahat (or Kohath, the son of Levi), and the Visions of
Amram (the grandson of Levi and father of Aaron).11 Miriam appears in
the Visions of Amram as the daughter of Amram and Jochebed, the
grandson and daughter of Levi respectively (Exod 6:20 and Num 26:59),
and thus a member of the Levitical priestly house.

Miriam is first mentioned in the opening lines of the text, when
her father Amram arranges her marriage:

A copy of the writing of the words of the visions of Amram, son
of Kohath, son of Levi, all of which he declared to his sons, and
which he commissioned to them on the day of his death, in the
one hundredth and thirty-sixth year, that is the year of his
death, in the one hundredth and fifty-second year of Israel’s
exile in Egypt. And then it came to him and he sent and called
Uzziel, his youngest brother, and he gave him Miriam his
daughter as a wife, she being thirty years old. And he made a
marriage feast for seven days.12
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Miriam is here identified as the daughter of Amram, as she is in at least some parts of the biblical tradition. However, the biblical texts make no mention of Miriam’s husband; thus we have preserved here an extra-biblical tradition. Uzziel appears in Exod 6:18 and Num 3:19, as well as the pseudepigraph T. Levi 12, as the youngest brother of Amram. It is surprising to find Amram arranging for his daughter to marry her uncle, since uncle-niece marriage was clearly forbidden in the Qumran community. According to the Damascus Document, in a context that condemns the sexual activities of those outside its community:

And each man marries the daughter of his brother or sister, whereas Moses said, “You shall not approach your mother’s sister; she is your mother’s near kin.” But although the laws against incest are written for men, they also apply to women. When, therefore, a brother’s daughter uncovers the nakedness of her father’s brother, she is near kin (CD 5:9-11).

This prohibition is also found in the Temple Scroll, col. 66: “A man shall not take the daughter of his brother or the daughter of his sister, for this is abominable.” The same prohibition is also found in 4QHalakhah4, 12. The prohibition against uncle-niece marriage is quite clear in these documents. Moreover, it is based on the biblical prohibition of aunt-nephew marriage, found in Lev 18:12-14:

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s sister; she is your father’s flesh. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother’s sister, for she is your mother’s flesh. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s brother, that is, you shall not approach his wife; she is your aunt.

This negative commandment is reiterated in Lev 20:19: “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother’s sister or of your father’s sister, for that is to lay bare one’s own flesh; they shall be subject to punishment.” According to the interpretation found in the Damascus Document and implied in the Temple Scroll and 4QHalakhah4, what is expressly forbidden for men (to marry an aunt) is equally forbidden for women (to marry an uncle).13 Thus Miriam’s marriage, according to the regulations of the Qumran community, is illegal. It is thus remarkable that they would preserve several copies of a text that so blatantly supported uncle-niece marriage.14

However, the explanation may lie in the circumstances of the marriage of Miriam’s parents, Amram and Jochebed. According to Exod 6:20 and Num 26:59, Jochebed was the daughter of Levi and the sister
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of Kohath, therefore Amram's aunt! In other words, Amram himself contracted a marriage that was explicitly forbidden according to the terms of the Torah given to his son Moses on Mt. Sinai. This anomaly was not ignored everywhere in the tradition; Aramaic Levi amplifies the terse notice in Exodus and Numbers by stating that Jochebed and Amram were born on the same day. Thus, Miriam's marriage to Amram's youngest brother is parallel to Amram's marriage to Levi's youngest daughter. Both marriages are endogamous, something applauded throughout the patriarchal history. Nonetheless, the forbidden quality of Amram's marriage to Jochebed forces the author of Jubilees, otherwise a polemicist in favor of endogamous marriage, to pass over this particular marriage in silence. Later rabbinic tradition argues that before the revelation at Sinai only maternal relationships were considered, and that Jochebed was only the half-sister of Amram's father Kohath, through their father Levi, but that they had different mothers.

A similar type of apologetic may be at work in the Qumran community, which tends to excuse the peccadilloes of the ancients on the basis of ignorance of the Law. For example, the Damascus Document excuses the fact that David had many wives, seemingly in direct contradiction to Deut 17:17 ("He [the king] shall not multiply wives for himself"), by saying "but David had not read the sealed book of the Law which was in the ark, for it was not opened in Israel from the death of Eleazar and Joshua, and the elders who worshipped Ashtoreth. It was hidden and not revealed until the coming of Zadok" (CD 5:2-4). The same argument could be applied both to Amram and Jochebed and to Miriam and Uzziel; both couples did not know the Law and therefore could not be expected to follow it. Thus the Qumran community could preserve such seemingly contradictory documents. This, however, points to a different interpretive tradition than Jubilees, also preserved by the community, which argues vehemently that the patriarchs and matriarchs did observe the Law.

The second mention of Miriam in the Visions of Amram comes in 4Q546, 12, 3-4: "and he clung to Aaron to be [ ] and the secret of Miriam he made for th[em...]" The Hebrew word for "secret" has a divine connotation; thus, Miriam's secret had been revealed to her by God. As E. Puech notes, there are several extra-biblical traditions according to which Miriam is the recipient of divine revelation; since she is called a prophet in Exod 15:20 and in Num 12:2 makes the claim that God has spoken to her, the growth of this extra-biblical
tradition is not surprising. In the *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo, Miriam has a prophetic dream concerning the birth of Moses (9:10). In rabbinic tradition, Miriam is the recipient of divine revelations. This fragment seems to be part of that extra-biblical tradition, although unfortunately we cannot be certain what the “secret of Miriam” was. Puech suggests that it is a revelation concerning the birth of Moses and his mission, in the same tradition as Pseudo-Philo.

4Q547, 9, 10, another manuscript of the Visions of Amram, has a brief mention of Miriam, unfortunately in a broken context. Amram appears to be narrating his return to Egypt from the land of Canaan, perhaps followed by the birth of Miriam, the oldest of the three siblings. Nothing more can be ascertained from the fragment.

The last manuscript containing a mention of Miriam is 4Q549. This Aramaic manuscript was originally catalogued by Jean Starcky as a separate work entitled “Composition mentionnant Hur et Miriam.” In his *DJD* edition, however, Puech argued that 4Q549 is not a separate work, but a seventh manuscript of 4QVisions of Amram. In support of his argument, he notes that the characters mentioned by name are either part of the family of Amram, for example, Miriam, Aaron and Sitri, or are associated with Moses and Aaron, for example, Hur. Further, he finds in fragment 2 elements of the genre “testament”: a meal, an announcement of the anticipated death of the patriarch, and a reunion with his sons and other male relatives. Finally, fragment 1 mentions Egypt, the setting for 4QVisions of Amram. Robert Eisenman and Michael Wise, however, have argued that there is no connection between this text and 4QVisions of Amram because in this text Miriam is married to Hur rather than Uziel. As we shall see, the text itself does not clearly identify the spouse of Miriam. The lines in question read as follows:

8. ten, and he begat from Miriam, a relative?  
9. and Sitri. *Blank* And Hur took [for a wife...  
10. and he begat from her Ur, and Aaro[n...  
11. from her four/fourteen sons [  

These lines are clearly giving the genealogical record of the family of which Miriam and Aaron are a part; that is, the family of Amram. We are already familiar with Miriam and Aaron from the biblical text and the fragments presented above. Sitri, according to Exod 6:22, is the son of Uzziel. In 4QVisions of Amram, Miriam is the wife of Uzziel and, by implication (but not biblically), the mother of Sitri. The juxtaposition
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of lines 8 and 9 here, with the unnamed husband begetting children from Miriam and Sitri’s name in the next line, may yield the understanding that Miriam is the mother of Sitri. Hence, her unnamed spouse must be Uzziel, in agreement with manuscripts 4Q543, 545 and 546, 4QVisions of Amram.27

The character Hur, presented as taking a wife and fathering Ur in lines 9 and 10, appears in the biblical text in two different contexts and is in fact probably two different characters. The first Hur debuts in Exod 17:10-12, where he and Aaron prop up Moses’ hands during the battle against the Amalekites. In Exod 24:4 Moses leaves Aaron and Hur in charge of the people when he goes up on the mountain. Although Hur’s genealogy is not given in either of these passages, his association with Moses and Aaron suggests that he is a Levite.

There is a second series of passages concerning Hur. This Hur is the grandfather of Bezalel, the chief craftsman of the tent sanctuary, and is a Judahite (Exod 31:2, 35:30, 38:22; 2 Chr 1:5). In 1 Chr 2:19-20 Hur is a son of Caleb by his second wife Ephrath. There would seem to be no necessary connection between these two Hurs; however, the later tradition identifies the two characters and further puts Miriam into relationship with Hur.

Josephus, the late first century CE Jewish historian, knows a tradition in which the Hur of Exod 17:10-12 is married to Miriam (Ant. 3.53-54). He also identifies the two Hurs with one another, since he states that Bezalel is the grandson of Miriam (Ant. 3.105). Another tradition, however, identifies Miriam with Ephrath, the second wife of Caleb in 2 Chr 2:19, thus making her the mother of Hur, the grandmother of Uri, and the great-grandmother of Bezalel (Tg. Chron., Sifre to Num 78, Sotah 11b-12a, m. Rab. to Exod 1:17, among others). Is 4Q549 part of either of those traditions?

The Hur found in line 9 must be identified with the biblical Judahite Hur, since he is the father of Ur in line 10, and Ur is clearly part of the Judahite ancestry of Bezalel: “Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah” (Exod 31:2). It might then be possible to argue that Hur is the unnamed husband of Miriam in line 8 above. We would thus have a text in line with the tradition of Josephus, which identifies the Judahite Hur with the Hur of the battle against the Amalekites and relates him to Moses and Aaron through his marriage to Miriam.28 However, two elements militate against this solution. First, the pattern of the text seems to follow this order: Male person marries female person and begets
a certain number of sons who are listed by name. Given that pattern, it is most likely that Miriam is the mother of Sitri. Since we know that Sitri is the son of Uzziel and is nowhere related to Hur, it follows that the unnamed husband of Miriam must be Uzziel. Further, there is a vacat [blank space] in the middle of line 9, after Sitri's name and before the mention of Hur's marriage. This implies that there is no relationship between the two groups of people. Therefore, it seems most likely that 4Q549 is part of the tradition known to 4QVisions of Amram, in which Miriam is married to Uzziel; Hur (identified with the Judahite Hur) is mentioned here because of his connection with Aaron (line 10), not Miriam. This conclusion strengthens Puech's argument that 4Q549 is a seventh manuscript of 4QVisions of Amram.

In sum, these few fragments have added much to our knowledge of the body of traditions surrounding the biblical character Miriam. Miriam's reputation as a prophet is visible in the creation of the Song of Miriam in 4Q365 and the mention of the "secret of Miriam" in 4QVisions of Amram. Miriam's status as an important member of the family of Amram is emphasized through her presence in the genealogical material in 4QVisions of Amram. Finally, a new tradition has been discovered concerning Miriam's marriage to Amram's brother Uzziel, pointing to a process that was neither static nor unified, but grew in different directions among different groups of Jews in the Second Temple period.

NOTES

2 All biblical passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
3 See, for example, J. Kugel, The Bible as it Was (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 364.
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Here and elsewhere in translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls, material in brackets has been supplied by the editor of that fragment.


Kugel, The Bible as it Was, 350.


Also Wise et al., The Dead Sea Scrolls, 434.


b. Sotah 58b.


“a peopl[e?], the same letters as Puech but understanding it differently. García Martínez and Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, 1097, have the same reading, but translate “aunt(?)”.
