

FEMINIST APPROACHES TO THE BIBLE

Symposium at the Smithsonian Institution
September 24, 1994

Sponsored by the Resident Associate Program



PHYLLIS TRIBLE

TIKVA FRYMER-KENSKY

PAMELA J. MILNE

JANE SCHABERG

HERSHEL SHANKS, MODERATOR



ON THE COVER: "Miriam" by Shraga Weil is a detail from the ceiling in the Israel Lounge at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. Weil's ceiling is a complex panorama of biblical scenes celebrating musical themes. "Then Miriam the prophet...took timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her." *Photo ©Pucker Gallery, Boston.*

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Eve and Miriam: From the Margins to the Center

PHYLLIS TRIBLE

I can tell you about the standing of our first speaker with a little story. Elie Wiesel gives a series of lectures every year at the 92nd Street "Y" in New York on different biblical figures, and he mentioned to me that he was going to give one lecture this year on Miriam. Of course, that immediately brought up the subject of Phyllis Tribble's work.

He told me he didn't know Phyllis, so I suggested luncheon together, and he jumped at the opportunity. I called Phyllis, and the three of us shared a long, leisurely lunch at Le Perigord. It was a wonderful occasion. I just sat there quietly in the middle and listened. I'm only sorry I didn't record the conversation because it was magnificent.

Elie Wiesel and Hershel Shanks are not the only people who hold Phyllis Tribble in high regard. The 4,500 members of the prestigious Society of Biblical Literature, all scholars, elected her their current president. She delivered her presidential address to thousands of Bible scholars assembled at the annual meeting of the society in Chicago on November 19, 1994. Phyllis is best known to the general public for her two path-breaking books, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* and *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*.

It is a pleasure for me to present to you the Baldwin Professor of Sacred Literature at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Professor Phyllis Tribble, who will speak on "Eve and Miriam: From the Margins to the Center." —H.S.

In the year of her 80th birthday (1895), the feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton published *The Woman's Bible*, an effort, as she described it, to "have women's commentaries on women's position in the Old and New Testaments."¹ Stanton worked against formidable odds, most tellingly, opposition from other suffragists who thought their larger cause would suffer if they attacked entrenched religious interests. Women scholars of the time who were versed in biblical criticism and biblical languages refused to help her for fear that an unpopular subject would compromise their reputations and attainments. But Stanton persevered. Her controversial work became a best-seller, though its effect upon scholarship and religious thinking was minimal. For 70 to 80 years thereafter, the feminist task of reinterpreting the Bible lay dormant, as did feminism itself.

In 1963 a midwestern housewife named Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a book destined to alter the scene in North America and throughout the world.² Marking the beginning of the second wave of feminism, this book placed on the agenda of the nation the issue of what it means to be female and male. Within a few years (1968), the religious community took on this issue, first through another book entitled *The Church and the Second Sex*. Although the author Mary Daly has since repudiated her own writing because of its reformist rather than revolutionary stance, in its time this work dominated theological debate about gender.³ Shortly thereafter, women biblical scholars began to engage the debate.

Unlike their 19th-century sisters, they have been willing to risk reputations and attainments. Their growing numbers and scholarly qualifications have compelled a respectful hearing within the academic community. So over the past two decades, a new perspective, perhaps even a new discipline, has emerged: feminist interpretation of the Bible.

A few years after Daly published her book, I left the South and moved to Boston, where Daly was speaking frequently to various groups. I listened attentively to what she had to say, not having to be convinced of feminism, for I knew that it was bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. But at the same time I knew, decidedly at variance with Daly, that the Bible fed my life in rich and beneficial ways. The Bible that I grew up with in Sunday School, where "sword drills" were routine—I think a few people in this audience know about "sword drills" (Laughter.)—and memorization of biblical verses was mandatory, *that* Bible continued to make a claim upon me. To be sure, I learned in college and later in graduate school that the Bible is rather different from what Sunday School teachers and some preachers tell us. But not even critical and sophisticated ways of studying it supplanted or diminished my love for it. There is power in the document, and it need not work adversely for women or for men. This I knew and this I know, no matter how much others may rush to say it isn't so.

But there was a rub. To know that one is a feminist and to know that one loves the Bible is, in the thinking of many, at best an oxymoron, perhaps clever as a rhetorical statement but surely not a possibility for existential living. After all, if no man can serve two masters, no woman can serve two authorities, a master called Scripture and a mistress called Feminism. And so my predicament grew as I heard the challenge that Daly and others posed and continue to pose. "Choose ye this day whom you will serve, the God of the Fathers or the God of Sisterhood. Biblical religion gives us the God of the Fathers. In it is no resting place for feminists." If this be true, then I am of all women

most wretched, or whatever adjective seems fitting: confused, schizophrenic, misguided, conservative, or just plain wrong.

To sketch how this perceived predicament works itself out in my life, let us begin with a statement I have never doubted, with an observation that is overwhelming as description and condemnation. The Bible was born and bred in a land of patriarchy; it abounds in male imagery and language. For centuries, interpreters have explored and exploited this male language to articulate theology, to shape the contours of the church, the synagogue and the academy, and to instruct human beings, male and female, in who they are, what roles they should play, how they should behave. So harmonious has seemed this association of Scripture with sexism, of faith with culture, that few people throughout the ages have even questioned or analyzed it. Understandably, when feminism turns attention to the Bible, it first of all names the document as patriarchal. To name it thus means more than putting a label or tag of identification upon it. It means investigating patriarchy and beyond that indicting the Bible for this sin.

Feminism has no difficulty making a case against the Bible. It has no difficulty convicting the Bible of patriarchy. One could say that this recognition is the sine qua non of all feminist readings of the Bible. And yet the recognition that the Bible is a patriarchal document has led to different conclusions.⁴

Some feminists—they may be secular or religious—denounce the Bible as hopelessly misogynous. It is, they tell us, a woman-hating document, and there is no health in it. Other feminists have reprehensibly used patriarchal data to support anti-Semitic sentiments. They may posit a prehistoric or early historic era of what they think was "good" goddess worship that was undercut, discredited and demolished by the ascendancy of the Hebrew God. Still others may believe that whereas the "Old Testament" is terribly bad on this issue the New Testament brings an improved revelation. (I suggest that whoever thinks that should read the New Testament some time.) (Chuckles.) Still

other feminists read the Bible as an historical document, devoid of any continuing authority and hence worthy of dismissal.

So from time to time the question comes, who cares? But if we are attuned to the world, the church and the synagogue, we know that a lot of people care. They enlist the Bible repeatedly in support of their political and social agendas. I need not say more about that in this setting and in this city. (Chuckles.) Thus some feminists succumb to despair about the ever-present male power that the Bible and its commentators hold over women. And still others, unwilling to let the case against women be the determining word, insist that the text and its interpreters provide more excellent ways.

This last approach is my niche. How did I get here? First, with the recognition that the Bible is a patriarchal text. Second, with the conviction, indeed the realization, that the Bible can be redeemed from bondage to patriarchy; that redemption is already at work in the text; and that the articulation of it is desirable and beneficial. Sometimes it is even fun. To bring together the self-critique that operates in the Bible with the concerns of feminism is to shape an interpretation that makes a difference for all of us—an interpretation that begins with suspicion and becomes subversion, but subversion for the sake of redemption, for the sake of healing, wholeness and well-being.

What are the elements of this approach? Reinterpreting familiar texts is one procedure. Reinterpretation does not mean making the Bible say whatever the reader wants it to say. It does not hold that there are no limits to interpretation and that the text can, in effect, be rewritten. But reinterpretation does recognize the polyvalency of the text: that any text is open to multiple interpretations, that between those who adamantly hold fast to only one meaning and those who breezily claim that the text can be manipulated to say anything is a wide spectrum of legitimate meanings. Some of these meanings assert themselves boldly, and others have to be teased out.

Reinterpretation also recognizes the diversity of Scripture. The Bible is not a single-minded document; rather it teems with diverse voices and points of view. Despite attempts to harmonize it, by ancient redactors working within it for canonization or by modern commentators working from the outside to establish and reestablish its authority, the Bible itself comes to us full of struggles, battles, contradictions and problems. It refuses to be the captive of any one group or perspective.

Fittingly then, if ironically, even the winners who prevail in Scripture—those whose points of view tried to stamp out other points of view—bear witness to the stories of the losers. And in the very process of trying to discredit these stories, the winners gave them canonical status. Understanding that every culture contains a counterculture, feminism seeks those other voices in the Bible. It is open to exploiting diversity and plurality.

Further, reinterpretation emphasizes the pilgrim character of the Bible. It knows that all Scripture is a pilgrim wandering through history, engaging in new settings, and ever-refusing to be locked in the box of the past. Every generation or group that engages the text comes to it from certain perspectives not adopted by others, with certain questions not asked by others, and with certain issues not raised by others. One group sees what another does not, at the same time acknowledging that we all see in part, not in whole. So this pilgrim book has maintained a lively dialogue with generations of readers, for weal and for woe.

To illustrate reinterpretation, let us return to the most familiar of all texts, the story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2–3. We hardly need reminding that throughout the ages this text has been used to legitimate patriarchy as the will of God. So powerful has been the patriarchal interpretation that it has burrowed its way into the collective psyche of the Western world. We think we know what the text says, and we think it tells us that man was created first and woman last—and that the order of creation is a value judgment making her

subordinate to him. She is his derivative, having come from his side. She is described as his "helper"; surely that means his assistant, not his equal. She seduces him and so is blamed for their disobedience. And we are told that she is cursed. She is punished by being subjected to the rule of her husband.

Now if this be your exegesis of the text, be clear that your understanding is no different from any patriarchal reading proposed by men throughout the ages. The difference may come in evaluation, in deciding whether or not this story is to hold power over your life. Given this particular interpretation, the choice is clear for the feminist. She denounces the story; she rejects it, a response with which we are all familiar.

But that is not the response of *this* feminist, as you no doubt may have guessed. Long ago I asked myself this question—how come, if, as it certainly appears, this story is so terribly patriarchal, how come I like it? How come it feeds and nourishes my life? How come I feel no anger in reading this story, no embarrassment in proclaiming it? How come it gives me a sense of well-being despite its tragic ending? In pondering these questions, I thought there had to be another interpretation at work in the text. How else could I explain the way the story draws me unto itself? Over time, fragments of thought began to surface in my mind. I shall tell you two of them.

I remembered a Southern Baptist missionary who, having returned from foreign lands, was given the assignment of teaching little girls in summer camp. I was one of those little girls. We belonged to a group called the G.A.'s. (As some of you know, that group is still with us today.) In Southern Baptist churches there were groups for boys and groups for girls. The boys were called R.A.'s, the girls G.A.'s. G.A.'s meant Girls Auxiliary.⁵ R.A.'s meant Royal Ambassadors. (Laughter.)

So in summer camp it did not matter too much who taught the G.A.'s. "We will put the little girls off to the side, and we will ask this woman missionary to take care of them for Bible study." Well, that's when subversion happens. (Laughter.)

This woman said to us, "Little girls, everything that God created got better and better. What was the last thing God created?" (Laughter, Applause.) Now in unison and with great vigor, we replied, "Man." And she said, "No. Woman." Hers is not the precise interpretation with which I have ended up. (Chuckles.) But nonetheless, to this day, I am grateful for her word. It resonated deeply within me, though at the time I knew it not.

Many years passed, and one day I was sitting in a classroom at Union Theological Seminary in New York. The course was entitled Old Testament Theology. The professor was a learned scholar whom no one would ever accuse of being a feminist. (Chuckles.) Carefully, in great detail, he analyzed the story of the Garden. All that he said I fervently recorded in my notes, and then in the years that followed I rarely, if ever, consulted those notes...until that day came, that day when another fragment of thought surfaced in my mind, and I sought out those notes. I found what I vaguely remembered. The professor said something like this. The portrayal of the man in the Garden in Genesis 2-3 is not the portrayal of a patriarch. Whereas the woman is depicted as alert, intelligent and sensitive, the man comes off as passive, bland and belly-oriented. All he can do is eat. (Chuckles.)

Surely enough, as I reread the text, I saw that the woman, before she eats, contemplates the tree. She finds it good to eat; that is, it has a physical appeal. She finds it pleasant to see; it has an aesthetic dimension. She finds it desirable for wisdom, a sapiential motif. The story that moves so rapidly pauses at this point to let us watch the woman as she contemplates, her vision encompassing the gamut of life. Only then does she eat.

By contrast, the man "who was with her"—now that in itself is a telling phrase, and until recently it was deleted in most Bible translations. If you look up the reasons for deleting it, you will find people saying we don't need it. But excising it has led to all kinds of erroneous interpretations. The text says quite clearly, "the man who was with her." It's in every Hebrew

manuscript; it's in the Septuagint, the Greek translation. If you are interested in the history of translations, I found it lacking in Jerome's Vulgate. (Laughter.) But the man who was with her didn't contemplate. He ate.

How grateful I am, and shall always be, for this insight from the lips of the professor. He knew not what he was doing that day. (Chuckles.) But at some deep level, his exegesis resonated with feminist flesh and bone. These and other fragments of thought that surfaced after years of lying dormant helped me to reread Genesis 2-3 from a feminist perspective: to reinterpret it in a way that runs counter to tradition in seeing the text not as legitimation but as critique of patriarchy. Let me recite some of the details of this reinterpretation:⁶

For most people, the story of the Garden begins with the creation of man. All translations would like for us to think that, too. But in Hebrew the story begins in a much more interesting and subtle way. It begins with a wonderful pun, the creation of *hā-'ādām* from *hā-'ādāmāh*. You can hear in the pronunciation of the Hebrew the similarities of those words. We have a play on their sounds. Moreover, we are not talking about an individual creature, but *the* (*hā-*), the creature who comes from the soil. It is difficult, as you know, to transfer the puns of one language into another, but in this case I think we can do it. Let us translate, God "formed the human from the humus." As soon as we do that, we have radically altered the interpretation of this text.

The point of the first creation is not gender and sexuality but the creation of a creature that comes from the earth, a creature not specifically identified sexually. So the first creature is not male; the first creature is not the first man.

Indeed man, the male, enters this story of creation only with the advent of woman, the female, and that does not happen at the beginning. It happens at the end of chapter 2, where the one earth creature, the one human from the humus, is, through divine surgery, made into two beings, one female and the other male. And interestingly, if the order of words is

important to you, the word "female" occurs before the word "male." The two creatures that come from the one earth creature constitute the advent of sexuality in creation. They are bone of bones and flesh of flesh, phrases that mean mutuality and equality. So the first woman, who later receives the name Eve in a strange and ironic way, is not created second to the primal man.

Moreover, she is not created as his helper, that is to say, his assistant and his inferior. To be sure the Hebrew word *'ezer* has traditionally been translated "helper," but the translation is totally misleading. If you look the word up in a concordance, you discover that most often in the Hebrew Bible it is used to describe God. God is the helper of Israel. And when we hear that God is the helper of Israel, we never think that God is inferior to Israel. To the contrary, we know God is superior to Israel. God is the one who creates and saves Israel.

So then, if we have trouble with this word as applied to the woman, it is not the trouble we thought we had. The connotations of the word are connotations of superiority. I think the storyteller recognizes the issue because the storyteller does not allow the word to stand alone but adds to it another word: an *'ezer*, "fit for," an *'ezer*, "corresponding to." The point is to temper the connotation of superiority.

The woman Eve is no opposite sex, no second sex, no derived sex. She is not Adam's rib. Indeed that "rib," or perhaps that "side," which belongs anyway not to the man but to the sexually undifferentiated first creature, is but the raw material for divine activity. God takes that raw material and "builds" it into woman. Most translations say "makes" it, which is a tamer verb. But the Hebrew verb *banah* indicates considerable labor to produce solid and lasting results. It's a word used for building towers, cities and fortifications.

The primal woman is no weak, dainty, ephemeral creature. Indeed, she is the culmination of the story, fulfilling humanity in sexuality. Though equal in creation with the man, she is actually elevated in the design of the story. Therefore, "a man



leaves his father and his mother, and cleaves to his woman, and they become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). That is hardly the pattern of patriarchal culture. And interestingly enough, the man alone is identified with parents. The woman stands alone; her independence as a human creature remains intact. To her the man comes. He does not control her; rather, he moves towards her for union. In her very creation, this woman shatters traditional ideas that have clustered around her.

And she does something more. She engages in the world's first conversation, mythically speaking—a conversation between the serpent and herself. If you were to initiate conversation in the world, what topic would you choose? Why, there's only one—theology, that is to say, God-talk. Even the serpent knows that. So the serpent addresses the woman in Hebrew with plural verb forms. In the South we would say, "Did y'all...Did God say, 'y'all shouldn't eat of that fruit?' " (Genesis 3:1). The serpent recognizes the woman as the spokesperson for the human couple, once again hardly the pattern of patriarchy.



The woman discusses theology with great intelligence, indeed wisdom. When she answers the serpent's question, she states the case for obedience to God even more strongly than God had stated it. She says, "From the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the Garden, God said, 'You shall not eat from it and you shall not touch it, lest you die'" (Genesis 3:3). Now God had not said anything about touching it. She has added the phrase, "you shall not *touch* it," and thereby her interpretive skills begin to emerge.

Not only can the woman relay the command of God, but she can interpret it faithfully. Her understanding guarantees obedience. If the tree is not touched, its fruit cannot be eaten. As I pondered her words some time ago, I thought that here Eve is building what the rabbis called "a fence around Torah." They created additional laws to protect the laws of God. If you obey the laws that they put like a fence around the sacred laws, you will never disobey God. And that is exactly what she is

doing. If we cannot touch the fruit, then we will never eat it.

Eve, the first rabbi? (Chuckles.) I wondered what rabbinic commentaries might say about that. One day, a friend and I checked. We read a sentence something like this: "Here, indeed, the woman builds a fence around Torah; Adam told her what to do." (Laughter.) I tell you that he did not. (Laughter.) She was the one who spoke with clarity and authority. Eve is theologian, ethicist, hermeneut (that is, interpreter), preacher and rabbi. She defies the stereotypes of patriarchal culture, and she provides us with a powerful statement about the creation of the female. It is not the statement that the church, the academy and the synagogue have traditionally made about women.

Now if the structural, verbal and grammatical ambiguities of this ancient story yield interpretations that defy patriarchy and open up other possibilities for interpreting the story and for appropriating it in new ways, the text thereby encourages us to look even further within the Bible, to listen for other accents and other voices that subvert patriarchy.

That encouragement brings me to a second female, the woman Miriam. I first became interested in her because of my interest in the issue of authority, an issue I think feminism has posed to the biblical text and to the faith of Christians and Jews in a way that has never been done before. I asked myself who in Scripture posed the question of authority. As far as I could remember, the first was none other than Miriam. She wanted to know whether God spoke only through Moses. "Does God not also speak through Aaron and me?" she asked (Numbers 12:2).

Miriam's story begins long before she asks this question. It begins when she, as the unnamed sister of Moses, plays a mediating role in saving her baby brother at the River Nile (Exodus 2:1-10). She and other women play prominent roles at the beginning of the Exodus event. But once the Exodus event gets underway, what happens to these women? Why, they disappear. They get submerged in the text—not in the sea, but

in the text. And Moses, Pharaoh and God begin to struggle through the plagues and the sea crossing. The men eclipse the women.

As the narrative reaches the sea, Moses takes center stage. He stretches out his hand; the sea recedes. He stretches out his hand; the sea returns. Israel walks on dry ground; the Egyptians lie dead upon the shore (Exodus 14:21-31). "When the strife is o'er and the battle done," Israel celebrates the victory won. A magnificent song appears on the lips of Moses and the men of Israel (Exodus 15:1-18). The first of many stanzas sets the tone and the content:

I will sing to the Lord
who has triumphed gloriously.
Horse and rider God has thrown
into the sea.

Literarily and theologically, this long litany of triumph climaxes and closes the Exodus story. Accordingly, readers of the text who pay attention to how literature takes shape, expect the story to move on to another topic, to move into the wilderness narrative. But that does not happen.

Instead, what follows the grand hymnic conclusion is a small section that recapitulates the event at the sea, thereby returning to all the struggles that preceded closure. That's a jarring way to organize a text. It seems awkward, repetitious and misplaced. An attentive reader with feminist sensibilities begins to suspect tampering with the text. As she reads on, the suspicion intensifies. We find these words: "Then Miriam the prophet, the sister of Aaron, took timbrel in her hands, and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dances, and Miriam answered them, 'Sing to the Lord most glorious deity, horse and rider God has hurled into the sea'" (Exodus 15:20-21). These words from Miriam match the first stanza of the hymn attributed to Moses. But only after her words do we get closure to the Exodus and then move into the

wilderness. I suggest that we ponder this arrangement, especially asking what it means that this little story about Miriam and the women was preserved.

The story reads on the surface as if Miriam repeated the first stanza of the long poem assigned to Moses. Not only did she not sing the entire song (just the first verse), but she didn't get it exactly right. She changed it. So people may conclude that, by comparison, her performance is deficient. Back in the 1950s, however, long before there was feminist interpretation of the Bible, two male scholars (both of whom write for *Bible Review*), wrote an article on the so-called Song of Moses, or the Song of the Sea, in which they argued that the very fact the little Miriamic ending is preserved is a clue that in an earlier stage of the tradition the entire song belonged to Miriam and the women of Israel, not to Moses.⁷ In this connection, recall the ancient songs explicitly attributed to women, the Song of Deborah and the Song of Hannah. Now add the Song of Miriam.

But what did tradition do? Tradition, eager to elevate Moses, took the song right out of the mouth of Miriam and gave it to him. And remember, he was supposed to be inarticulate (Exodus 4:10-17). By such a procedure redactors both preserved and destroyed the women's story. They kept Miriam, giving her the first stanza, but they diminished her importance. What does feminist interpretation do? It looks at these marginal voices. It looks at these people in the shadows, and it brings them forth.⁸

So then, like the beginning, the end of the Exodus belongs to women. The central woman is Miriam. We meet her first at the bank of the River Nile. Next we see her at the shore of the sea. She is a mediator who has become a percussionist, lyricist, vocalist, prophet, leader and theologian. This hidden Miriam tells a different version of the Exodus story from the visible Moses. Her voice is worth hearing. But you say to me, "Don't stop there because the next time we hear about her, she poses the question of authority that gets her into trouble, 'Does the

Lord speak only through Moses? Does the Lord not also speak through Aaron and me?' (Numbers 12:2). Miriam was reprimanded severely for asking that question."

God answered her question and made it quite clear that Moses stands peerless at the top in the prophetic order. Further, God zapped Miriam and Aaron with some kind of punishment. But the punishment was not equal. Miriam got the worst of it. Translated literally, the text says, "The nostril of the Lord burned against them and God left" (Numbers 12:9). God glorified Moses with the divine mouth. With the divine nose, God attacked Aaron and Miriam. This divinity is made of stern stuff.

Now when the divine glory and anger depart, we behold Miriam alone stricken with scales like snow (Numbers 12:10). Red hot anger has become a cold white disease. A searing emotion produces a scarred body. The Exodus in which Miriam has led in such a triumphal way brings us to a repudiation of her. But Aaron beseeches Moses on her behalf, so that, in time, she is restored to the community of Israel (Numbers 12:11-16). Yet we do not hear any more about her for several chapters. Never does she speak again, and never does she have a major role in the wilderness experiences of the people. It is as though a vendetta has been launched against her, and that vendetta continues unto her death.

Silences and juxtapositions unfold the tale. Just preceding the obituary for Miriam comes a lengthy section of ritual prescriptions (Numbers 19). In content as well as in placement, they work to indict Miriam. The first prescription concerns preparing special water for impurity. To the burning of a cow the priest will add cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet yarn. Though the text does not specify the meaning of these ingredients, we know from Leviticus (14:1-9) that they are used in the cleansing of one with a diseased skin, truly a reminder of Miriam's punishment. At the appropriate time, running water is added to the mixture, and its use awaits a second prescription that pertains to those who become unclean through contact with the dead.

Seven days are required for their purification, the same time needed for the cleansing of diseased skin.

Immediately following these two prescriptions, the one alluding to diseased skin and the other emphasizing the uncleanness of the dead, comes the announcement of Miriam's death. "And the people of Israel, the whole community, came into the Wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. And Miriam died and was buried there" (Numbers 20:1). She never spoke again. If we accept only the surface level of the text, this is the ending the Bible gives to this uppity woman.

But I don't accept only surface meanings. I try to tease out of the text the hidden stories, the stories of the losers. In doing that, I isolate six fragments that disclose a different version of the Miriamic story.

The first fragment comes in the reaction of the people at the time Miriam is punished by God. God sends word, after the episode about authority, that the people are to move on. They are to continue the journey. But what do we read? The people refuse to do that until Miriam is restored to them (Numbers 12:15). God may tell them to move on, Moses may tell them to move on, but they do not set out on the march until Miriam is brought in again. They wait for her. Those whom she served do not forsake her in her time of tribulation. This steadfast devotion of the people to Miriam indicates a story different from the regnant one.

The second fragment brings us to the symbol of water, a symbol that supports Miriam in interesting ways. The first time we see her, she is by the River Nile. The next time we see her is at the triumphal crossing of the sea. No life-giving waters emerge, however, when in the wilderness authorities conspire to punish her. Diseased flesh bespeaks arid land. In the ritual prescriptions preceding her obituary, the symbol of water appears with ambivalence. The water for impurity mediates

between cleanliness and uncleanness. Miriam dies, thereby becoming unclean. Yet at her death, no water for impurity is invoked. Instead, a striking thing happens, though translations do not encourage us to recognize it.

They report Miriam's obituary, put a period, and then begin a new paragraph. Sometimes they even put a space between the obituary and the new paragraph, thereby suggesting that we are not to make any connection between the two sentences.⁹ But when we do connect them, we learn something important: "In Kadesh, Miriam died and was buried there. Now there was no water for the community" (Numbers 20:1-2). Nature is responding to Miriam's death. The response is immediate and severe. Nature mourns; the wells in the desert dry up. Miriam, protector of her brother at the riverbank and leader in victory at the sea, symbolized life. How appropriate then that the waters of life should reverence her death. Like the people of Israel, nature honors Miriam.

A third fragment: After her burial, the lack of water introduces a long narrative critical of Moses and Aaron (Numbers 20). In structure, it balances the prescriptions preceding her death announcement. In effect, it counters the vendetta against her. Once again, the people attack their leaders, Moses and Aaron, because of overwhelming miseries. The two men appeal to God, who instructs them to secure water from a rock. They are successful, but God is displeased and decrees that neither man shall lead the people into the land. Miriam's death has initiated their demise. Soon thereafter, when the congregation has sojourned from Kadesh to Mount Horeb, Aaron dies, and in time Moses follows. If Miriam never reached the Promised Land, neither did her brothers.

After the death of Miriam, the wells in the desert dry up, the people rebel again, God censures Moses and Aaron, Aaron dies, and the days of Moses are numbered. However much the detractors of Miriam have tried, they do not control the story. There are more interpretations than are dreamt of in their hermeneutics.

Beyond the Exodus and wilderness accounts, a fourth fragment of a pro-Miriamic tradition surfaced in the Hebrew Scriptures. If certain groups repudiated Miriam forever, the prophets reclaimed her. In fact, they stated boldly what others worked hard to deny, namely, that in early Israel Miriam belonged to a triad of leaders. She was the equal of Moses and Aaron. In Micah 6:4, God speaks, "For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, I redeemed you from the house of bondage, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam." Here prophecy acknowledges the full legitimacy of Miriam, its own ancestor, who was designated "the prophet" even before her brother Moses received the title (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15). If you are bothered by the fact that in this list her name comes last, and you think that order suggests a lowly position for her, let me counter with a well-known biblical truth: "The first shall be last, and the last first" (cf. Matthew 19:30).

A fifth fragment shows Miriam animating the musical life of Israel. If Jubal be its mythical father (Genesis 4:21), she is its historical mother. She inaugurates a procession of women who move throughout Scripture singing and dancing in sorrow and in joy. Think of the daughter of Jephthah in the days of the judges, who comes out to meet her father with timbrels and dances (Judges 11:3-4). Later the virgin daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances (Judges 21:21). And in the days of the monarchy, when warriors returned victorious from battle, the women come out of all the cities singing and dancing with timbrels, songs of joy and instruments of music (1 Samuel 18:6-7). All these women with timbrels and dances are heirs of Miriam.

From these narrative texts, her musical legacy passes into liturgical tradition. Read the psalms, and you will hear resonances of Miriam. A psalmist describes a parade entering the temple, with the singers in front, the minstrels last, and between them the women playing timbrels (Psalms 68:24-25). Another psalm based on Exodus and wilderness memories echoes

Miriam, "Raise a song," it says, "sound the timbrel" (Psalms 149:3-4). Similarly, a third proclaims, "Let Israel praise God's name with dancing, making melody with timbrel and lyre" (Psalms 149:3). And in the grand finale of the Psalter, where everything that breathes is called upon to praise God, the woman Miriam breathes in the last line, "Praise the Lord with timbrel and dance" (Psalm 150:4).

For a sixth fragment, let us move beyond the Hebrew Scriptures as indeed the story of Miriam moves beyond them. Though we might move into Jewish midrash or into the Gnostic gospels, I chose to move into the Second Testament. My clue is the Greek name Mary, which is the equivalent of the Hebrew name Miriam. Once you understand that, then you find Miriam resurfacing in the Gospel narratives after centuries of silence. A multitude of Marys attests to the enduring life of Miriam.

As the first Miriam chanted a litany of triumph to the women at the sea, so Mary, pregnant with the child Jesus, sings a song of exaltation (the Magnificat) in response to a blessing from Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56). We all know that the Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2) provides vocabulary and themes for the Magnificat, but few of us know that the Song of the Sea, the Song of Miriam (Exodus 15), does the same.

Listen, for example, to these lines juxtaposed from the two songs (SS=Song of the Sea; M=Magnificat):

SS: I will sing to the Lord, most glorious deity.

M: My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.

SS: Thy right hand, O Lord, glorious in power;
thy right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy.

M: God has shown strength with the divine arm,
has scattered the proud in the imaginations of
their hearts.

SS: Pharaoh's chariots and his hosts God hurled into the sea.

M: God has put down the mighty from their thrones.

In assigning the name Mary to the mother of the Messiah, Christian tradition honors Miriam, the mother of deliverance. From the birth of Moses to the birth of Israel to the birth of the Messiah, Miriam now enters the ministry of Jesus. In Mary of Bethany the prophet of the Exodus becomes the disciple who chooses the better portion (Luke 10:38-42). On another occasion, when she anoints the feet of Jesus and wipes them with her hair, he defends her action against criticism (Luke 7:36-50; John 12:1-7) and thereafter emulates it himself by washing the feet of the disciples (John 13:3-11). Mary, that is to say Miriam, sets the ritual that Jesus follows, a ritual that subverts established meanings and proper procedures. In such actions she reflects her namesake.

Again, Miriam, healed of leprosy, re-emerges in Mary called Magdalene from whom seven demons have gone out. In a composite picture, this Mary figures prominently at the crucifixion and resurrection. She stands at the cross of Jesus, witnesses his entombment, brings spices for anointing the body, discovers the empty tomb, hears the angelic announcement, sees and talks to the risen Lord (see Matthew 27:57-61; 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:10; John 20:1-18). Above all, Mary Magdalene, this Miriam, joined by other women, is the first individual to proclaim the resurrection (Luke 24:10).

All the Marys who witness crucifixion embody in name and deed Miriam, who herself was crucified in the power struggles of the wilderness. All the Marys who proclaim the resurrection, only to hear disbelieving men say they speak an idle tale, incarnate Miriam, whose good news male authorities also demeaned. But in the surprising, indeed subversive, turns of faith, the male judgments did not prevail. "O foolish men," says the text, "and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken" (Luke 24:25). The Marys got it right. They are Miriam *rediviva*, the woman who first challenged authority.

To lift up Miriam and to lift up Eve, to discern their stories from the margins, is to begin the redemption of Scripture from

the confines of patriarchy. To this task feminists who love the Bible have dedicated themselves. In reading Scripture, they exploit its ambiguities and complexities, and they see it as setting before all of us life and death, blessing and curse, liberation and patriarchy. Then they hear the word of God coming from the ancient world to the present, "Choose life, that you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

ENDNOTES

1. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (New York: European Publishing Company, 1895-1898), p. 9.
2. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963).
3. Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968; with a new, feminist post-Christian introduction, 1975).
4. On these conclusions, cf., e.g., Susannah Heschel, "Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Theology," *Tikkun* (May/June 1990), pp. 25-28, 95-97; for a balanced discussion of goddesses and biblical religion, see Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Macmillan, Free Press, 1992).
5. I am told that these letters have since been assigned the meaning "Girls in Action." The change makes no difference as long as boys continue to be designated "Royal Ambassadors."
6. For the full examination of this text, see Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 72-143.
7. Frank Moore Cross, Jr., and David Noel Freedman, "The Song of Miriam," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 14 (1955), pp. 237-250.
8. For a full discussion, see Trible, "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows," *Bible Review* 5:1 (1989), pp. 14-25, 34.
9. Cf., e.g., the RSV, NRSV, NJV and NAB.