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When Miriam's Well Runs Dry: Death, Thirst, and the Bitterness of Israel in Num 20:1–2

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Abstract: The abrupt juxtaposition of Miriam's death and the subsequent water crisis in Num 20:1–2 invites deeper reflection on the narrative and theological significance of her role in Israel's wilderness journey. While the biblical text provides a succinct account, the immediate onset of thirst among the Israelites suggests a profound connection between her presence and divine sustenance. This article explores the literary and theological dimensions of Miriam's role, arguing that her death disrupts the delicate balance of Israel's survival in the desert. Through the exegetical analysis of Num 20:1–2, this study examines the syntactical continuity that binds Miriam's passing with the ensuing crisis. It revisits her leadership in Num 12, where her challenge to Moses highlights the complexity of wilderness leadership. Furthermore, the article engages with rabbinic interpretations that identify Miriam as Israel's well, emphasizing the theological implications of her absence. By synthesizing biblical narrative, linguistic analysis, and Jewish exegetical traditions, this study argues that Miriam's presence embodies Israel's dependence on divine provision. Her death, and the drying up of water that follows, expose the fragility of both leadership and faith in the wilderness. In doing so, the article underscores how—while somehow building on the biblical text—rabbinic interpretations portray Miriam as a pivotal mediator of divine grace, whose absence precipitates a crisis of both thirst and identity.

Keywords: Numbers 20; Miriam; Israel; water scarcity; bitterness; wilderness; rabbinic interpretations; divine provision

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1. Introduction

Water sustains life, yet its absence often exposes deeper fractures within the fabric of a community's story. In the wilderness narrative of the Israelites, the sudden onset of a water crisis immediately following the death of Miriam is more than a coincidence—it invites reflection on the intricate dynamics of leadership, divine provision, and communal resilience. Why does this crisis emerge at this specific moment? What does it reveal about the collective journey of the Israelites and the loss of one of their key figures? This article delves into the narrative and significance of this connection, exploring how these intertwined events shape the broader story of identity and survival in the wilderness.

Although Num 20:1 offers a strikingly succinct account—stating simply that Miriam died and was buried—the subsequent mention of water scarcity immediately following her burial calls attention to a deeper narrative and theological connection. This stark juxtaposition suggests that Miriam's presence transcends mere historical or familial functions, positioning her instead as a figure closely bound to Israel's corporate well-being, especially in moments of wilderness trial. From a literary perspective, the deliberate brevity

of the description—"Miriam died there and was buried there" (20:1)—heightens the impact of the ensuing complaint about the lack of water (20:2). Such narrative conciseness highlights Miriam's pivotal role, as the community is abruptly confronted with a destabilizing absence at a time when they need divine sustenance the most. Rabbinic tradition further deepens this connection by portraying Miriam as the source or guardian of Israel's "well" during their sojourn in the desert, thereby underscoring the profound communal vulnerability that emerges with her demise.

The wilderness represents a multidimensional setting within the Hebrew Bible: it is a physical space of scarcity and hardship, yet also a theological milieu where divine provision is tested against human faithfulness. In Numbers, Israel navigates a series of crises—ranging from hunger and thirst to internal rebellions—that probe the people's reliance on Yahweh as well as on their human leaders. These desert narratives operate as a sustained test of Israel's obedience, exposing the fragility of a community that is utterly dependent upon God's benevolence. Within this milieu, leadership takes various forms. Moses remains the preeminent figure, yet he is supported—and sometimes challenged—by his siblings, Aaron and Miriam[1]. Their collective guidance is tested throughout the wilderness journey, as seen in Numbers 12, where Aaron's—and especially Miriam's—prophetic status (cf. Exod 15:20) comes into tension with Moses' singular position. Though Miriam's confrontation with her brother leads to divine reproof, it also confirms her significance as a prophetess who embodies a pivotal leadership role. This tension between her authority and Moses' sets the stage for understanding her death in Num 20:1, a moment that exposes the delicate balance Israel's leaders must maintain between divine calling and human frailty.

The primary aim of this article is to elucidate Miriam's theological and narrative significance, particularly as illuminated by her death and its immediate association with water scarcity in Num 20:1–2. In pursuit of this goal, the study will undertake an analysis of the text, emphasizing how the concise statement of Miriam's death and burial functions as a literary hinge that inaugurates the subsequent water crisis. It will revisit Miriam's earlier leadership episode in Num 12—where she challenges Moses—to illustrate the complex dynamic of familial leadership, prophetic authority, and divine discipline that shapes her portrayal in the broader wilderness narrative. Additionally, this study will explore the etymological connections that establish semantic links between Num 20:1–2 and Exod 15:22–25, particularly the episode of the waters of Marah, highlighting how these linguistic echoes contribute to the intertextual framing of Miriam's role in relation to water. Finally, this study will engage with rabbinic interpretations that identify Miriam with Israel's well, investigating how this tradition amplifies her role as a mediator of divine provision in the wilderness.

Regarding the methodology, this article adopts a multi-pronged approach to shed light on Miriam's role and the water crisis in Numbers. It combines narrative analysis with Hebrew verbal–syntax examination to demonstrate how both literary structure and grammatical nuances anchor the water crisis to Miriam's death. Next, we situate our reading within intertextual studies, drawing on parallels to highlight recurring motifs of bitterness, provision, and leadership in the Torah. At the same time, feminist biblical criticism informs our understanding of Miriam's significance, prompting a reevaluation of traditional gender hierarchies. By foregrounding the narrative's female protagonist and showing how rabbinic traditions further expand her role, we argue that Miriam's leadership—though distinct from that of Moses and Aaron—remains central to the community's physical and theological sustenance. Through this blend of methodologies, the article underscores how biblical and post-biblical portrayals of Miriam converge into a meaningful theological portrait.

By examining these textual and interpretive strands, this article argues that Miriam's death not only represents a personal loss for the people of Israel but also serves as a the-

ologically charged catalyst for communal instability. In so doing, this study underscores the importance of Miriam as far more than an ancillary figure, instead recognizing her as a linchpin whose presence—or absence—reveals crucial dimensions of Israel's dependence on God's sustaining grace in the harshness of the desert.

2. The Text of Num 20:1–2 and Its Multiple Implications

Before analyzing Miriam's role and the theological implications of her death, it is essential to begin with an exegetical study of Num 20:1–2. This brief textual unit serves as a decisive hinge in the wilderness narrative, marking the abrupt transition from Miriam's quiet burial to the immediate crisis of water scarcity. The following analysis will highlight how these verses, though concise, bear a structural and thematic weight that not only frames Miriam's significance but also foreshadows the deeper tensions of leadership, provision, and communal faithfulness that run throughout the Pentateuch.

2.1. Syntactic Continuity and Thematic Linkages in Num 20:1–2

Most of the commentaries separate Num 20:1 from what follows, marking verse 2 as the beginning of a new narrative[2]. Proponents of this two-part reading emphasize that verse 1 and verse 2 exhibit distinct stylistic, thematic, and structural features, suggesting they stem from separate traditions eventually placed side by side. They observe how Num 20:1 addresses Miriam's death in a barebones fashion, omitting standard elements such as a date or a mention of mourning rituals, while Aaron's death in 20:28–29 and Moses' in Deut 34:8, both include explicit mourning. This terse style, combined with the apparent lack of contextual ties to the surrounding verses, leads to the conclusion that a localized memory of Miriam's burial at Kadesh was inserted here with minimal narrative elaboration. From this perspective, verse 1's sole function is to mark the passing of the first major figure of the exodus generation, independent of the episode that follows.

As an illustration, Noth views 20:1 as an older local tradition highlighting the burial site of Miriam—something that would have circulated apart from the "water-from-the-rock" story, which he sees as a later editorial combination of material also found in Exod 17. Though recognizing similar stylistic cues, Wenham frames verse 1 as a transitional remark that foreshadows the generational shift: Miriam's death here anticipates the subsequent demise of Aaron and Moses but does not by itself set up the water crisis in verse 2. Instead, he treats the latter as a typical "murmur narrative" embedded within the final travel story of the exodus wanderings. Meanwhile, Ashley underscores how verse 1 appears abruptly, with minimal narrative bridging to verse 2; for him, the longstanding motif of Israel complaining over water in verse 2 constitutes a well-known, self-contained pattern seen elsewhere[3] and is thus best read as a distinct unit. These commentators collectively argue that 20:1 was never intended to introduce the water crisis but simply notes Miriam's demise before a new pericope begins in 20:2, where the congregation's dissatisfaction takes center stage.

By contrast, the approach here recognizes that differing sources may underlie these verses yet argues that, in their final editorial form, they function as a unified literary unit. The ensuing analysis of syntax, narrative structure, and what we will see later about early interpretive traditions will try to illustrate how Miriam's demise and the ensuing thirst crisis are deliberately juxtaposed to underscore her pivotal role in Israel's wilderness journey.

Let us begin with the syntactical analysis, showing how Num 20:1–2 could reveal a compact narrative structure that pivots on key Hebrew verbal forms. The narrative chain is carried primarily by *wayyiqtol* verbs: "And the children of Israel came (וַיָּבֹאוּ) … Miriam died (וַתָּמָת) … and she was buried (וַתִּקָּבֶר)." Immediately thereafter, verse 2 introduces a negative clause: "And there was not (וְלֹא־הָיָה) water for the congregation". Typically, one

might expect the construction וְלֹא + *verb* to interrupt or mark a shift in the flow of the main narrative. However, this need not always be the case.

The question of whether a negative clause introduced by וְלֹא regularly interrupts the *wayyiqtol* chain in Biblical Hebrew is addressed in various standard grammar references and syntactic studies. Generally, negative statements do tend to behave differently from positive *wayyiqtol* clauses, often providing background information or expressing a contrast rather than carrying the main storyline forward. However, scholars acknowledge that this tendency is not absolute, and there are documented exceptions where וְלֹא + *verb* does continue the flow of narration.

In considering the consecutive tenses and the placement of negative clauses, Gesenius and Kautzsch[4] show that negative statements often have an explanatory or descriptive function rather than advancing the principal storyline. Yet, this grammar also allows for negative clauses to be part of the main narrative flow under certain conditions. If the negative statement is required to describe the immediate outcome or next step (especially in cases of contrast or denial), it may still remain within the sequence.

In their discussion of narrative sequencing, Waltke and O'Connor[5] observe that negative clauses commonly occur off the main line of narrative. They point out that standard narrative progression in Hebrew is typically marked by consecutive *wayyiqtol* forms. When the text shifts to negative statements, interrogative statements, or certain types of circumstantial clauses, one often sees a break or at least a shift in focus. Nonetheless, they also note that the Hebrew verbal system, particularly in historical narrative, can be flexible. A clause introduced by וְלֹא may at times immediately follow a *wayyiqtol* without creating a major structural disjunction—especially when the negative clause is tightly bound thematically or syntactically to what precedes.

As for them, Joüon and Muraoka also address how negative clauses typically function in Biblical Hebrew narrative, often positioning them outside the main *wayyiqtol* chain but noting exceptions where וְלֹא + *verb* continues the flow of events[6].

Scholars working in discourse analysis of Biblical Hebrew[7] further clarify that the pragmatic function of negation can vary. A negative clause may supply background information (e.g., "but this did not happen"), introduce contrast, or continue the story by telling what directly followed in negative form ("she wanted to hide him, but she could no longer…").

In sum, while it remains true as a broad principle that negative clauses in Biblical Hebrew often do not carry the main thrust of the narrative in the same way that *wayyiqtol* clauses do, this is not a rigid rule. In fact, there are several instances where וְלֹא + *verb* continues the narrative chain, specifying the immediate "next step" in negative form. Our hypothesis is that this is the case of Num 20:2, where וְלֹא־הָיָה would not break the chain but instead seamlessly continues the narrative sequence, emphasizing that the crisis of water follows immediately after Miriam's death, with no break in between. This syntactical choice would enhance the thematic connection between these two events—Miriam's death and the ensuing water scarcity—suggesting a deeper link between the two as reflected in rabbinic literature, which often interprets the death of Miriam and the lack of water for Israel as intertwined events, as we will see below.

To explore our argument further, we can pinpoint other instances in the Hebrew Bible where וְלֹא + *verb* does not interrupt the narrative chain but instead builds upon it, creating a continuous flow in the story. In such cases, the negative statement ties directly to the preceding event rather than creating a fresh paragraph or backgrounded aside.

In Gen 37:4, as Joseph's brothers become increasingly hostile upon witnessing their father's favoritism, the text reads: "They hated him…and could not (וְלֹא יָכְלוּ) speak to him peaceably". This remark follows the *wayyiqtol* sequence describing the brothers' percep-

tion and hatred, yet it continues that same flow of events rather than veering into a separate explanation. The inability to speak kindly, introduced by וְלֹא, emerges as the direct outcome of their hatred[8].

A likewise illustrative instance appears in Ex 2:2–3. After a chain of *wayyiqtol* forms describing how Moses' mother conceives, bears a son, and hides him for three months (Ex 2:2), verse 3 begins with "and she could no longer" (וְלֹא־יָכְלָה). Despite being introduced by וְלֹא, this clause continues the main narrative sequence, detailing what happened next rather than pausing for background information or opening a new section[9].

Another relevant example surfaces in Judg 8:33–34. Immediately after Gideon's death, Israel quickly lapses into idolatry, returning to Baal. The text, running along with *wayyiqtol* verbs, explains how the people "turned again" to Baal-berit (v. 33) and follows this with: "And they did not remember (וְלֹא זָכְרוּ) the Lord their God" (v. 34). The mention of Israel's forgetting God appears via a וְלֹא clause yet stays fully integrated in the same movement of rebellion that Gideon's death precipitates. Rather than introducing an editorial aside, the clause accentuates the people's apostasy as the direct outflow of their leader's absence[10].

The text of 1 Sam 1:21–22 underscores a similar dynamic in a very different context. Elkanah's yearly pilgrimage to offer sacrifices (1 Sam 1:21) is described by a *wayyiqtol* form, and immediately in verse 22, the text continues: "But Hannah did not go up (וְחַנָּה לֹא עָלְתָה), for she said to her husband…". Here too, one might expect the negative clause to indicate a new narrative segment or editorial comment. Instead, it remains within the main narrative stream, simply narrating Hannah's differing choice—"she did not go"—compared to Elkanah's actions. It does not halt the forward progression of the storyline; rather, it underscores the contrast between Elkanah's actions and Hannah's[11].

In 1 Sam 10:20–21, some commentators see a slightly more debatable case. The passage recounts Israel's selection of Saul by lot. After a sequence of *wayyiqtol* verbs describing the process of inquiring, searching, and selecting, verse 21 states that Saul "was not found" (וְלֹא נִמְצָא). While certain interpreters detect a momentary dramatic pause, the search for Saul remains the central action; even if there is a hint of suspense, the negative clause still forms part of the main narrative thrust—"they sought him, and they did not find him"—leading promptly to further inquiry from the Lord. In other words, the text does not break away to an unrelated topic; it continues narrating the people's actions in real time[12].

Lastly, a very similar phenomenon is visible in 2 Sam 3:11, where Ish-bosheth "could not (וְלֹא יָכֹל) answer Abner another word", continuing the mounting tension of the dialog within the same chain of immediate actions, rather than pausing to introduce a distinct narrative aside[13].

Taken together, these passages show that while וְלֹא can at times mark the beginning of a new unit, it can also continue, contrast, or complete the preceding sequence of actions within a *wayyiqtol* framework. By remaining in sync with the unfolding storyline rather than suspending it for exposition, negative clauses introduced by וְלֹא in these contexts highlight the immediate narrative or emotional impact of what is lacking (whether ability, presence, remembrance, or, in the case of Num 20:2, water). This syntactical flexibility proves crucial for interpreting the abrupt shift from Miriam's burial to the congregation's thirst in Num 20:1–2, where וְלֹא־הָיָה seamlessly conveys the community's sudden deprivation as a continuation—rather than a separate editorial note—of the main storyline.

This syntactical analysis will support the notion that the narrative construction in Num 20:1–2 portrays Miriam's death and the following crisis as inextricably linked in a unified literary and theological message. Such a reading of וְלֹא הָיָה מַיִם לָעֵדָה as part of the ongoing narrative sequence supports the rabbinic tradition that interprets Miriam's presence as inseparable from Israel's water supply. Instead of distancing the water crisis from her demise, the syntax itself binds the two events together. This closeness offers a syntactic

rationale for why ancient interpreters viewed Miriam as the guardian of Israel's well or the personification of God's gracious provision of water.

2.2. The Notice of Miriam's Death in Num 20:1

The single verse devoted to Miriam's death (Num 20:1) provides only the most basic facts—location (Kadesh), the events of her passing and burial, and the community's ensuing crisis with water[14]—yet this very minimalism elevates the theological importance of her demise. In contrast to the extensive accounts of Moses' and Aaron's deaths[15], where either ceremonial components (Aaron's vestments being removed) or divine eulogies (God's personal words regarding Moses) underscore the significance of these figures, Miriam's passing appears almost abrupt. However, the text's restraint concerning Miriam's final moments does not diminish her stature; on the contrary, the absence of a recorded lamentation or elaborate ritual for her burial highlights the suddenness of her absence and the community's vulnerability in that moment.

When the narrative immediately transitions from "There Miriam died and was buried" to "And there was no water for the congregation", it forces the reader to sense the raw impact of Miriam's disappearance. By tying the water crisis so tightly to her death—through the unbroken string of *wayyiqtol* verbs and the וְלֹא + *verb* construction, as demonstrated above—Numbers underscores that something essential has been lost along with her[16]. Though the text does not explicitly announce a causal link, its phrasing suggests that her presence could be integrally related to the people's sustenance. This subtle literary design resonates strongly with rabbinic traditions that portray Miriam as the guardian or catalyst of Israel's well in the wilderness, as we shall see later. According to these interpretations, the flow of water depended on her being alive; the moment she dies, the well ceases to provide. Whether understood literally or symbolically, the linking of Miriam to Israel's supply of water points to her distinct role among the desert generation—a role that exceeds mere familial closeness to Moses.

Moreover, the understated nature of her death permits a theological reading that stresses the fragility of the community's survival. Both Moses and Aaron have episodes that more clearly ritualize their respective departures. Miriam, by contrast, vanishes swiftly from the text, almost as if to highlight the precariousness of Israel's situation in the wilderness: one critical leader is gone, and the lifeline of water dries up. This abruptness leaves the reader contemplating not only the event itself but also its rippling effect on the wider narrative and community.

In this way, the short reference to Miriam's death seems to function less as a mere chronological marker and more as a deliberate narrative device. By refusing to linger on her final moments, the text points beyond her personal story to the broader theological reality of a people utterly dependent on divine provision—often mediated by human agents like Miriam. Far from diminishing her importance, the very brevity of her death notice amplifies the sense of loss, inviting the reader to see the wilderness as a realm in which leadership, provision, and survival are inextricably woven. The stark shift into a water shortage visually and syntactically conveys the sudden vacuum she leaves behind, foreshadowing the conflict that soon unfolds and reinforcing how Israel's journey in the desert hinges on the presence of its divinely appointed guides.

2.3. Etymological and Figurative Connections to Marah

In the preceding section, we showed how the syntax of Num 20:1–2 closely intertwines Miriam's death with Israel's sudden thirst. Here, we shift attention to the motif of "bitterness," particularly as it emerges in the Marah narrative (Exod 15:22–25) and in later rabbinic interpretations of Miriam's name. Strictly speaking, the biblical text offers

no direct etymological explanation linking "Miriam" to the Hebrew verb מרר (marar, "to be bitter"). However, Rashi and other classical interpreters draw on the root's resonance with "bitterness" (Exod 1:14) to illustrate how her very identity evokes the harshness of Israel's plight. Although this interpretive move extends beyond the biblical text's own statements, it prompts a deeper exploration of the thematic connections between bitterness, water crises, and communal vulnerability—a lens that can shed new light on how Miriam's presence (and absence) shapes Israel's wilderness experience.

The brief account of Marah in Exod 15:22–25 unfolds just after the Israelites' triumphant crossing of the Sea of Reeds (or Red Sea), where they have witnessed Yahweh's saving power against Pharaoh's army. This triumphant backdrop sharply contrasts with the immediate adversity they face in the desert of Shur, highlighting how swiftly desperation and murmuring can replace gratitude and faith[17].

The passage begins in Exod 15:22 by noting that Moses leads Israel deeper into the wilderness for three days without finding water[18]. The three-day detail establishes a sense of urgency: after an extended journey with no freshwater source, the community's anxiety naturally escalates. When they finally discover water at Marah (15:23), it proves undrinkable, described with the Hebrew term מָרִים (bitter), a wordplay with the location's name, מָרָה[19]. As the text states, "for they could not drink the water … because it was bitter", it underscores the physical and psychological severity of the people's predicament. The sequence of verbs highlights the swift shift from the desperate hope of finding water to the disillusionment upon discovering that it is unusable. The people immediately "complain" (וַיִּלֹּנוּ) against Moses (15:24), forging a narrative link between physical thirst and internal discontent. This murmuring pattern—where Israel expresses distrust or frustration—becomes a hallmark of the wilderness narratives, repeated in later episodes such as Exodus 16—17 and our Num 20[20].

In response to the people's complaint, Moses "cried out to YHWH", a formulation reminiscent of earlier points in Exodus where human distress triggers divine intervention[21]. Here, YHWH shows Moses a piece of wood (15:25). The exact nature of this object remains vague—some traditions view it as a tree or log—but the core emphasis is on God's direct guidance and Moses' obedient action. By tossing the wood into the water, Moses symbolically participates in a divine act of "sweetening" (מתק) what was bitter. Such transformation of bitterness into sweetness carries both physical and spiritual connotations. It tangibly meets Israel's pressing survival need: they can now drink. On a deeper level, it foreshadows YHWH's ability—and willingness—to alleviate the community's bitter experiences, whether physical or existential. This act of providential care also sets a precedent that highlights Israel's covenantal duty: the people will be sustained as long as they trust in God and adhere to divine instruction.

In Exod 15:22–25, the Hebrew verb נסה ("to test") operates on two levels: YHWH tests Israel, and Israel in turn "tests" YHWH through its complaints. The question arises whether Israel passes or fails this first test right after the Sea crossing. Strictly speaking, the text does not depict Israel's cry for water as outright failure. In the biblical tradition, crying out can be an expression of trust, recognizing God as the ultimate provider. Yet Exod 15:24 shows that despite witnessing the miraculous deliverance at the Sea of Reeds, the people's faith quickly wavers when they encounter bitter water. Thus, the issue is not that crying out is intrinsically wrong, but rather that the people must learn to maintain trust in YHWH's care rather than letting fear undermine the memory of recent salvation. By giving חֹק וּמִשְׁפָּט ("a statute and an ordinance") at Marah (15:25), YHWH highlights both the divine commitment to sustain Israel and Israel's responsibility to listen and obey (15:26). The passage does not condemn the act of calling out for help; instead, it underscores the

tension between faith and complaint: the same God who redeemed the people can and will provide, if they continue in trust rather than succumbing to doubt.

The episode concludes in v. 26 with YHWH's self-revelation as healer (אֲנִי יְהוָה רֹפְאֶךָ), tying the physical transformation of the water to a deeper spiritual reality: God alone can cure both the material and moral ailments of Israel. In so doing, Marah becomes a paradigm for future tests. Each water crisis in the desert repeats this pattern of longing, complaint, divine intervention, and instruction, illustrating the precarious balance between Israel's gratitude and grievance[22].

Although Exod 15:22–25 does not mention Miriam by name, we can at least infer that the Marah narrative forms a thematic continuum with episodes in Num 20:1–2, where Miriam's death and a renewed water crisis converge. As Rashi points out in his commentary on Song of Songs, Miriam's entire life might be linguistically tied to the concept of bitterness: "*For, lo, the winter is past* (Song of Songs 2:11): these are the four hundred years which were decreed over our fathers in Egypt. *The rain is over and gone*: these are the two hundred and ten years. Is not 'winter' the 'rain'? Rabbi Tanchuma said: The primary problem is the rain, so the primary enslavement of Israel in Egypt was the eighty-six years that were from the time the Miriam was born. And why was her name called Miriam? Because, as it is said: *Ruthlessly they made life bitter* (*vayyimareru*) *for them* (Exodus 1:14): so Miriam means bitter (*maror*)"[23].

From the vantage point of Rashi's interpretation, Miriam's presence recalls the community's capacity to endure and transcend suffering[24]—while her absence, as seen in Num 20:1–2, leaves them acutely vulnerable to the bitterness of thirst and disunity. Just as מָרָה served as an early crucible where Israel's faith was tested through bitter waters, so מִרְיָם references the bitter era of Egyptian bondage (cf. Exod 1:14). This parallel underscores how the motif of bitterness recurs throughout the broader Exodus–Numbers saga, linking early experiences of hardship to later events in the wilderness.

When examined in tandem, both the crises of Marah and that surrounding Miriam's death illuminate how themes of bitterness, water, and trust weave throughout Israel's journey. Marah marks the initial post-Exodus test of faith, while the subsequent wilderness episodes (Num 20:1–13 included) reveal how easily bitterness resurfaces—and how dependent Israel remains on YHWH's sustaining presence. Within this unfolding narrative, Marah thus stands as a pivotal lesson: despite the people's propensity to murmur when faced with adversity, God's capacity to transform bitter circumstances into sweet relief remains a central theological thread. The question posed at Marah—will Israel trust?—persists all the way through the wilderness narrative, culminating in renewed challenges whenever scarcity or anxiety reemerge.

Num 20:1–13 picks up the thread of bitterness and complaint, though the bitterness here is more implicitly linked to the communal experience than to the physical taste of water. The people respond to the water shortage by quarreling with Moses and Aaron (20:3), a pattern reminiscent of their earlier episodes of discontent. While the text does not use the exact vocabulary of *marah*, the underlying thematic parallels are evident: a dire lack of water, the threat of communal demise, and the tension between human leadership and divine provision.

In this respect, Miriam's death amplifies the sense of "bitterness" in Num 20. Her abrupt absence can be read as intensifying the community's despair, as though the wellsprings of hope (not only water) have dried up with her burial. The crisis points back to the central theological motifs introduced at Marah: that Israel's survival hinges on God's merciful intervention and on the mediating role of its leaders. Whereas, at Marah, Moses was prompted to sweeten the waters through a divinely ordained act, in Num 20 the question arises whether Moses and Aaron can still bring forth water in the wake of Miriam's

loss. The connection to Marah thus underscores a cyclical pattern of testing and revelation, in which water crises become opportunities for Israel either to trust in God's provision or to succumb to discontent and bitterness.

In sum, we can conclude that the literary connections between Exod 15:22–25 and Num 20:1–13, taken together, shed light on how the motif of bitter water—and the resulting turmoil within the community—creates a continuous narrative thread throughout the wilderness journey. Miriam's death at Kadesh signals the gravity of this recurring theme: without her presence, the people once again face the stark "bitterness" of their predicament, challenging both leadership and faith.

3. Miriam in Num 12: Leadership and Tensions

Building on the discussion in the previous section, where we examined Miriam's connection to Israel's water crisis in Num 20:1–2, this section turns to an earlier episode that reveals her leadership and the challenges it entailed: Num 12:1–15[25]. This text offers a complex portrayal of Miriam as both a leader and a figure caught in moments of tension. According to the narration, Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses' unique prophetic status, raising questions about authority, gender, and the dynamics of leadership within Israel. Through her actions and their consequences, the text highlights not only Miriam's significant role among Israel's leaders but also the delicate balance of relationships and responsibilities in the wilderness narrative. This section will explore Miriam's leadership, the nature of her critique, and the broader implications of her confrontation with Moses.

3.1. Miriam's Challenge to Moses' Authority

Num 12 opens with a striking narrative: Miriam, alongside Aaron, criticizes Moses, ostensibly regarding his "Cushite wife" (12:1)[26]. Yet the actual thrust of their complaint soon emerges when Miriam and Aaron question whether Moses is the sole recipient of divine revelation: "Has YHWH indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us as well?" (Num 12:2)[27]. This confrontation sheds light on several key facets of Miriam's leadership and her role within the Israelite camp.

The text emphasizes that Miriam is not merely a supportive or background figure. Her protest implies that she possesses—or believes she possesses—an authentic prophetic status akin to Moses. Exod 15:20 already designates her as הַנְּבִיאָה, the prophetess, acknowledging her role in leading worship at the Sea of Reeds[28]. Phyllis Trible underscores that Miriam's prophetic role is often overshadowed by a patriarchal emphasis on Moses, yet the text retains traces of her independent authority. By portraying Miriam as the prophetess, Scripture acknowledges her capacity to speak for God—a capacity the narrative later complicates through conflict with Moses[29]. By challenging Moses' exclusivity, Miriam implicitly asserts that her own connection with the divine, and possibly Aaron's as well, should not be eclipsed by Moses' preeminence. The critique involves both Miriam and Aaron, but the text itself hints that Miriam is the primary speaker. The verb form in Hebrew at the outset appears in the feminine singular (וַתְּדַבֵּר, "and she spoke"), suggesting that, from the narrator's perspective, Miriam's agency drives the challenge[30]. While Aaron, as high priest, also bears responsibility, the emphasis on Miriam foregrounds her capacity for leadership and initiative, a move that has been interpreted as a clear assertion of female authority in a male-dominated narrative[31].

As we said, although Num 12:1 frames the dispute as concerning Moses' wife, the heart of the matter quickly shifts to issues of divine favor and revelation. Miriam's question—"Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses?"—reflects a tension over hierarchical leadership. The conflict revolves less around personal grievance and more around the theological question of how, and through whom, God chooses to speak to Israel.

Taken as a whole, the episode portrays Miriam as a figure conscious of her recognized authority and willing to challenge Moses in a manner that highlights the presence of multiple forms of leadership within the Israelite camp.

3.2. The Implications of Miriam's Temporary Exclusion and Restoration

In immediate response to the challenge, the text shifts to a dramatic portrayal of divine judgment. God summons Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to the Tent of Meeting (Num 12:4), where the divine voice affirms Moses' unparalleled prophetic status—he is one with whom God speaks פֶּה אֶל־פֶּה (Num 12:8)[32]. No such endorsement is granted to Miriam and Aaron, whose challenge is thus rebuffed[33].

The aftermath manifests physically on Miriam's body, as she is struck with a skin affliction commonly referred to as leprosy, though the Hebrew root צרע encompasses various skin conditions. This affliction visually enacts divine disapproval, countering Miriam's desire to stand on Moses' prophetic plane with a humiliation that isolates her from the community[34]. In the purity system of ancient Israel, צרע requires separation, and the text specifies that Miriam is kept outside the camp for seven days (Num 12:14–15), mirroring the gravity of her transgression against communal order[35].

Despite this punishment, the Israelite community displays remarkable solidarity, refusing to journey onward until Miriam is readmitted (12:15). As Trible aptly notes, the entire community's refusal to move on without Miriam offers a subtle but forceful testament to her enduring leadership, despite the text's effort to highlight her punishment: "The people do not set out on the march till Miriam is brought back again. Those whom she has served do not forsake her in the time of tribulation. They wait. Never do they assail her as on various occasions they attack Aaron, Moses and God. And their allegiance survives unto her death (…) The steadfast devotion of the people to Miriam indicates a story different from the regnant one"[36]. This communal pause underscores Miriam's continued significance: her temporary exclusion does not reduce her to an expendable figure. The people's willingness to delay their progress reflects their recognition of her value, likely recalling her earlier acts of leadership, such as watching over Moses at the Nile and leading the women in song after the Sea of Reeds. Although the text does not detail the formal reinstatement of Miriam's authority, her return to the camp suggests a restored equilibrium. She has received divine rebuke for her challenge but is not dismissed entirely from Israel's leadership.

Throughout the wilderness narrative, divine discipline often serves not as a final rejection but as a means of correction and reaffirmation of leadership. Aaron's involvement in the Golden Calf episode (Exod 32:1–35) initially casts doubt on his suitability as high priest, yet despite his failure, he is neither removed nor punished directly; instead, he later assumes his priestly role in the formal consecration of the Tabernacle (Lev 9:1–24), signifying divine restoration. A similar dynamic surfaces in the episode of the spies (Num 13:25–14:38). Although most of the leaders stir up fear and rebellion, retaining their positions for a time, they ultimately forfeit entry into the Promised Land. By contrast, Caleb and Joshua remain faithful and later guide the next generation into Canaan (Josh 14:6–13).

Likewise, Moses' act of striking the rock at Meribah (Num 20:2–13) results in his exclusion from entering the land, yet his leadership remains intact until his death, and he is ultimately honored with a divine vision of the land he has led Israel toward (Deut 34:1–12). These cases illustrate a recurring dynamic in which divine correction does not necessarily entail dismissal but rather serves to refine and reinforce the responsibilities of Israel's leaders.

Num 12:1–15 ultimately demonstrates how Miriam's leadership, while rooted in genuine prophetic gifts, comes into sharp conflict with Moses' unique status. Her punishment and reintegration reveal a tension between shared leadership and singular divine authority.

The text affirms Moses' primacy without denying Miriam's significance, creating a paradox that shapes her portrayal throughout the Pentateuch. From a feminist standpoint, this paradox exemplifies the tension between patriarchal structures and Miriam's resilient agency.

3.3. An Imperfect Yet Essential Leadership: Linking Num 12 and 20

The events of Num 12:1–15 set the stage for understanding the critical role that Miriam plays in the overarching wilderness narrative. The motif of her prophetic authority and the consequences of her absence or perceived error become even clearer when we compare her actions in Num 12 with the community crisis that ensues upon her death in Num 20:1.

Num 12 presents Miriam testing the boundaries of leadership. By questioning Moses' monopoly on divine communication, she forces the question of how leadership should be distributed among Israel's principal figures. Though she is rebuked, her essential function is not dismissed, as indicated by the communal waiting for her healing. In Num 20, Miriam's death—and the immediate shortage of water—underscores how critical her presence had been to the community's physical and spiritual well-being. Rabbinic interpretation, as we shall further see, draws a direct line from her demise to the cessation of the well, at least suggesting that her challenge in Num 12 stemmed not from illegitimate ambition but from her genuine, God-endowed role within Israel's leadership structure. Such complexities reveal a "buried mosaic" of Miriam's authority and undercut attempts to dismiss her as merely a subordinate figure[37].

In both Num 12 and 20, Miriam is portrayed in moments of crisis. In chapter 12, the crisis centers on leadership and divine favor, as Miriam's confrontation introduces a moment of communal tension that is resolved by God's explicit endorsement of Moses. In chapter 20, the crisis of water reiterates the community's reliance on multiple leaders—Miriam's passing triggers a tangible need. Her prior confrontation in Num 12 demonstrates that her leadership was not always perfectly aligned with Moses', yet her overall contribution remains vital. Without her, the people suddenly face thirst.

When placed side by side, these two texts offer a nuanced perspective on wilderness leadership. Num 12 reveals that even gifted leaders can err, leading to divine correction. Miriam's misstep does not erase her standing; instead, it refines her position relative to Moses and highlights a hierarchical nuance. Num 20, on the other hand, demonstrates the community's vulnerability in her absence. Her death, seemingly understated in the biblical text, leaves an immediate vacuum, underscoring her irreplaceable function as a mediator of God's care.

Ultimately, the interplay between these accounts illuminates a larger biblical theology of leadership in the wilderness: God selects and empowers multiple individuals, each contributing uniquely to the community's survival. Miriam exemplifies the complexity of this dynamic. At times, she tests Moses' authority (Num 12); at other times, her absence plunges the community into crisis (Num 20). This tension underscores the paradox that flawed or contesting leaders can still be essential instruments of divine sustenance, revealing how precariously Israel's well-being hangs on the balance of collaborative leadership.

4. Miriam in the Rabbinic Tradition

The connection between Miriam and water extends beyond the biblical text into the rich tapestry of rabbinic tradition. Jewish commentators, drawing on the narrative hints of Miriam's role in sustaining the Israelite community, developed the concept of "Miriam's well"—a miraculous source of water that accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness. This tradition not only deepens the symbolic association between Miriam and life-sustaining provision but also highlights her significance as a spiritual figure whose presence nourished both body and soul.

4.1. Early Rabbinic Literature

To fully appreciate the development of the tradition surrounding Miriam's well, it is essential to situate it within its broader rabbinic context. The interpretative methods and theological concerns of the rabbis shaped how they expanded upon biblical narratives, weaving Midrashic insights that connected Miriam's life and legacy with the spiritual and physical sustenance of Israel in the wilderness. This context provides the foundation for understanding how Miriam came to embody the motif of divine provision in Jewish thought.

4.1.1. The Tosefta and the Triad of Siblings

A significant rabbinic source regarding Miriam and the water provision for the people of Israel appears in the tractate *Sotah* of the Tosefta, rooted in the Tannaitic period (the era of the Mishnah) and therefore testifying to an early stratum of rabbinic interpretation[38]. In 11:1, rabbi Yoseh ben rabbi Yehudah names Moses, Aaron, and Miriam as "three good leaders" (שלשה פרנסין טבין) and recounts how three miraculous gifts were conferred upon Israel in their respective merits: manna for Moses, the pillar of cloud for Aaron, and the traveling well for Miriam. By attributing a discrete divine provision to each sibling, the Tosefta gives precise narrative and theological shape to the longstanding rabbinic conviction that Israel's survival in the wilderness depended on a synergy of all three leaders.

Notably, the Tosefta explicitly states that once Miriam died, the well immediately disappeared—a detail presented with the same matter-of-fact certainty in the Babylonian Talmud. As we will see in more detail later, this affirmation cements the idea that Miriam's personal righteousness was vital to maintaining the well, underscoring how her demise portended an immediate crisis of water scarcity. Such an assertion highlights a broader rabbinic worldview: particular individuals within the community can serve as conduits for specific manifestations of divine grace, whether it be food, protection, or water. The disappearance of the well upon Miriam's death stands as tangible proof that her merit was no mere abstract notion; it was a theologically potent force whose effects extended to the daily physical needs of the nation.

Because the tractate *Sotah* dates from the era of the Mishnah or slightly after, its witness to this tradition demonstrates that the idea of "Miriam's well" was already well-developed in the earliest stages of classical rabbinic literature. Far from being a late or marginal legend, the Tosefta frames Miriam's well as a pivotal element of Israel's wilderness experience. In so doing, it broadens the scope of Miriam's leadership role beyond what the biblical text overtly states, illustrating her indispensable function alongside Moses and Aaron.

Through its direct and unembellished wording—"At the moment she died, the well vanished"—the Tosefta establishes a strong literary and theological link between Miriam's physical presence and the presence of this miraculous water source, hinting that the community's well-being was bound to her in a manner even deeper than the biblical narrative initially reveals.

4.1.2. The Babylonian Talmud: A Well Bestowed in Miriam's Merit

Another central passage that illuminates Miriam's role in rabbinic tradition appears in the Talmudic tractate *Taʿanit*—part of the *Moʿed* (festivals) section of the Babylonian Talmud and concerned with laws of fasting during droughts or communal crises. Having already noted how the Tosefta establishes the triad of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam as the "three good leaders" who merited manna, the pillar of cloud, and the traveling well, respectively, we find a similar teaching recapitulated and expanded in *Taʿanit*. There, the sages reinforce the idea that each sibling is chosen by God to mediate a distinct form of

sustenance for the people of Israel: Moses for the manna, Aaron for the "clouds of glory", and Miriam for the miraculous well.

This Talmudic discussion, centered on divine favor and human intercession (particularly in times of drought), illuminates Miriam's pivotal role. As in the Tosefta's assertion that the well departed upon her death, *Ta'anit* attributes its presence to her righteousness or "merit" (זכות). While *Ta'anit* itself does not elaborate on why Miriam is deemed righteous—especially in light of her criticism of Moses in Numbers 12—later rabbinic traditions often highlight her positive legacy, such as her watchful care of the infant Moses (Exod 2:4) and her leadership in song after the Sea crossing (Exod 15:20–21). These portrayals tend to emphasize her overall faithfulness, helping to explain how she could be seen as deserving of divine favor that sustains Israel even in her absence[39]. By reiterating the trio of siblings—and by placing Miriam's well on par with Moses' manna and Aaron's protective clouds—the Talmud positions her as integral to Israel's very survival, situating her in a balanced relationship with her brothers and confirming the early rabbinic conviction that an entire nation's welfare could hinge on the presence (and piety) of one key individual.

While the idea of Moses "earning" the manna and Aaron "meriting" the protective clouds is itself significant (cf. *Ta'anit* 9a), Miriam's connection to the well evokes particular interest given the scarcity of explicit biblical details about her contributions compared to those of her brothers. The Talmudic passage explicitly states that "when Miriam died the well disappeared", which the rabbis interpret as the event behind the water crisis in Num 20:2. Through this statement, the Talmud posits that the timing of Israel's thirst is not a mere historical coincidence, but rather a direct result of Miriam's passing—an interpretive move that assigns profound theological weight to her role in the camp.

The broader rabbinic reasoning, as reflected in *Ta'anit*, is that individuals of exceptional righteousness can serve as channels of God's blessing to the collective. Miriam's personal merit forms the basis upon which God provides water on a continual, even miraculous, basis. Unlike the manna, which falls from heaven, or the clouds that shield the people's physical bodies, the well is intimately tied to the community's day-to-day health and sustenance. That the Talmud specifically links its cessation to Miriam's death underscores a belief that her righteousness was not a mere personal quality but a mediating force capable of sustaining thousands of lives.

This teaching, however concise, holds profound implications for understanding Miriam's place in rabbinic theology. By situating her as the well's guarantor, the Talmud invites readers to reassess the brevity of the biblical notice of her death and to recognize the gravity of her absence: what might seem, in the biblical text, like an abrupt or understated transition from Miriam's burial to Israel's thirst is anything but accidental from the rabbinic vantage point. Instead, *Ta'anit* 9a envisions a tight causal relationship, one in which Miriam's active righteousness secures the daily drinking water, and her sudden departure yields immediate communal hardship.

In this way, the Talmud's framing of Miriam's merit is not merely about her personal piety but about the ongoing function of certain righteous individuals as brokers of divine blessing. It joins her destiny to that of her people, underscoring the precarious balance Israel maintains in the desert: as soon as one of its pillars of faith is removed, the foundation of physical survival shows signs of cracking. In a similar way, the Talmud attributes the cessation of the protective clouds to Aaron's death and the end of the manna to Moses's death. Thus, each gift (well, clouds, and manna) is said to depend on a particular leader's merit, underscoring how the fate of the entire community hinges on the presence—and continued righteousness—of these key figures.

Read in conjunction with the biblical text, *Ta'anit* 9a solidifies a lasting rabbinic portrait of Miriam as an indispensable figure whose impact resonates far beyond her limited

biblical appearances, shaping a theological narrative in which Israel's blessings can evaporate as swiftly as the well's waters, once such a pillar is lost.

4.1.3. Bamidbar Rabbah and Other Midrashic References

In Midrashic literature, the figure of Miriam expands well beyond the brief mentions in the biblical text, attaining a profound symbolic significance that links her presence to both Israel's physical sustenance and its spiritual well-being[40]. In *Bamidbar Rabbah*[41], 1:2 the rabbis develop a striking image: Miriam's well was not a static water source confined to a single location in the desert, but rather a movable entity that accompanied Israel throughout their journeys. As we read: "How was the well constructed? It was rock-shaped like a kind of bee-hive, and wherever they journeyed it rolled along and came with them. When the standards [under which the tribes journeyed] halted and the tabernacle was set up, that same rock would come and settle down in the court of the Tent of Meeting and the princes would come and stand upon it and say, *Rise up, O well* (Num. XXI, 17), and it would rise"[42].

By characterizing it as an ever-present companion, the Midrash makes quite a strong theological statement: God's provision, as mediated through Miriam, was neither sporadic nor arbitrary but followed the people wherever they went. This portrayal testifies to the idea that divine benevolence, once imparted, remains steadfast as long as the covenantal relationship between God, Israel, and the righteous intercessor (in this case, Miriam) endures[43].

Such a traveling well underscores Miriam's indispensable role. The Midrash explicitly notes that once she died, the water's flow ceased. This detail is more than a simple narrative observation: it functions as a homiletical device highlighting how Miriam's death creates a rupture in the community's ongoing experience of divine grace. The tangible loss of water at her passing illustrates a broader principle, namely that the collective welfare can be precariously dependent upon the virtues of key figures. It also intimates that God's blessings, however miraculous, can be withdrawn in the absence of those whose merit justifies their continued bestowal.

In these rabbinic texts, the well takes on both practical and spiritual significance. On one level, it meets the Israelites' most pressing physical need: hydration in an arid wilderness. Midrashic narratives at times recount how the water from this portable source was of a superior quality, quenching thirst and sustaining life to a degree that normal wells could not match. On a spiritual level, however, the well symbolizes the living favor of God—an outward sign that the divine presence remains with Israel. That this favor should be tied to Miriam's holiness underscores her intra-familial parity with Moses and Aaron. While they, too, mediate vital blessings—Moses provides manna, Aaron the cloud of protection—Miriam's ability to channel water situates her as a maternal or nurturing figure, reflecting an aspect of leadership focused on care and provision[44].

Midrashic discourse often uses feminine imagery for God's care[45], so it is not surprising that Miriam, as the lone female figure among the three sibling-leaders, is the one to supply water, that most elemental resource. This maternal motif resonates with earlier biblical glimpses of her role protecting Moses by the Nile (Exod 2:4) and leading women in song after the crossing of the Sea of Reeds (Exod 15:20–21[46]). In *Bamidbar Rabbah*, the well thus becomes a literary and theological emblem of Miriam herself—mobile, life-giving, and constant until the moment she departs.

Such interpretive expansions illustrate how rabbinic thought weaves together narrative details and theological considerations, portraying Miriam as a leader of considerable importance. Yet, her role is not on par with Moses's unmatched prophetic authority, nor does it mirror Aaron's distinct priestly responsibilities, thereby highlighting the unique but limited scope of her leadership relative to her brothers. Her particular mode of leadership emerges through the idiom of nurturing, life-sustaining water. By defining her well

as a "moving boulder" that follows Israel, *Bamidbar Rabbah* further cements the notion that the people's survival in the wilderness hinged on more than Moses' and Aaron's official functions of prophet and priest; it also rested on Miriam's distinct capacity to foster connection between the people and their God. When that bond is severed by her death, the water is lost, and the community once more confronts the stark reality of life without divine provision—foreshadowing further crises and underscoring how delicate the balance of leadership and holiness truly is in the wilderness narrative.

4.2. Rashi and Medieval Interpretations

Having explored the foundational insights of early rabbinic literature, let us now turn to the medieval period, where scholars like Rashi further developed and refined these interpretations. Rashi's commentary, marked by its clarity and synthesis of tradition, bridges the early rabbinic discourse with the evolving exegetical needs of the medieval Jewish community.

4.2.1. Rashi's Commentary on Israel's Loss of the Well

A prime example of how rabbinic tradition regarding Miriam's well permeates the medieval exegetical landscape appears in the commentary of Rashi[47]. From the outset, Rashi's approach to biblical commentary interweaves the *peshat*[48] with insights derived from Talmudic and Midrashic sources. His notes on Num 20:1–2 exemplify this method: where the biblical text abruptly shifts from Miriam's death to a sudden lack of water, Rashi cites rabbinic teachings that interpret this juxtaposition as proof that the well disappeared with Miriam's passing. By doing so, he reinforces the notion—already present, as we saw, in *Ta'anit* 9a, *Tosefta Sotah* 11:1, and *Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:2—that the nation's ready access to water was directly linked to Miriam's merit.

In Rashi's reading, there is nothing arbitrary in the Torah's narrative sequence. The statement, "Miriam died there and was buried there" (Num 20:1), followed immediately by "And there was no water for the congregation" (Num 20:2), serves not as happenstance but as a tightly woven cause-and-effect relationship. This interpretive perspective underscores how Rashi perceives Miriam's vital, if understated, status among Israel's leaders. Just as Moses is remembered for the manna, and Aaron for the protective cloud, Miriam is cherished for the miraculous well. When she dies, that life-sustaining gift dries up, vividly illustrating how personal holiness can channel communal blessing.

Yet Rashi does not limit his analysis to Num 20:2. Drawing on a broader midrashic tradition, he also connects Miriam's identity to the theme of bitterness, as we saw before. From Rashi's perspective, Miriam's role in the desert can be seen as a counterbalance to that bitterness—her merit helped ensure that the community's thirst was continually slaked. Just as the sweetening of the bitter waters at Marah (Exod 15:22–25) highlighted divine intervention, Miriam's presence offered ongoing relief from what might otherwise have been insurmountable hardship. By showing how her name itself encodes the realities of Israel's suffering, Rashi imbues her character with a symbolic weight: she is both witness to and antidote for that bitterness. Her death, then, signifies more than a personal tragedy; it precipitates a reemergence of communal anxiety, as the bitterness and vulnerability of wilderness life reassert themselves.

Ultimately, Rashi's commentary amplifies the biblical text's sparse mention of Miriam's demise by illuminating its deeper theological message. Where the Torah is succinct, Rashi's reliance on earlier rabbinic tradition supplies explanation and significance, creating a seamless tapestry that spans from Egypt's bitter bondage to the sudden scarcity of water at Kadesh. In Rashi's portrayal, Miriam is never merely the sister of Moses and Aaron; she is an essential, grace-bearing figure whose personal merit sustains the nation in their most basic needs. Her loss, therefore, is felt not only in the sorrow of those who mourn her but

also in the literal thirst of those who remain behind. By foregrounding these connections, Rashi preserves and perpetuates the classical rabbinic consensus on Miriam's indispensable role, ensuring that her memory resonates across generations as a model of faith, leadership, and the power of righteous individuals to safeguard a community's well-being.

4.2.2. Other Medieval Authorities

Beyond Rashi's widely cited interpretations, other medieval commentators grapple with the significance of Miriam's well and its abrupt disappearance in Num 20:1–2, offering perspectives that blend the *peshat* of the text with earlier rabbinic traditions.

Foremost among these is Ramban[49], whose commentary frequently interweaves literal exegesis with midrashic insights. When confronted with the terse statement of Miriam's death followed immediately by the congregation's dire lack of water, Ramban stresses that the text itself nudges the reader toward a causal connection. By juxtaposing these two events without any intervening narrative, he argues, Scripture intimates that Miriam's presence had tangibly safeguarded Israel's water supply. Drawing on classical Midrash, Ramban presents Miriam not as a peripheral figure, but as an essential link in the chain of divine providence—her righteousness, he suggests, held open the channels through which God's sustaining grace flowed[50].

A somewhat different interpretive style appears in the work of Ibn Ezra[51], known for his commitment to a more rationalistic and philological approach. While Ibn Ezra often focuses on linguistic and syntactic features that clarify the meaning of a given verse, he too acknowledges the longstanding rabbinic view connecting Miriam's death to the sudden water crisis. For Ibn Ezra, the grammar of Num 20:1–2—particularly the immediate sequence of "Miriam died and was buried" followed by "and there was no water"—underscores the plausibility of reading these two events as intimately related. Although he may not dwell on the midrashic motif of a traveling well to the same extent as Ramban, Ibn Ezra's willingness to incorporate this tradition into his *peshat*-oriented commentary highlights the widespread acceptance of Miriam's central role in sustaining the nation[52].

Taken together, the works of Ramban and Ibn Ezra preserve and disseminate a consensus that runs through rabbinic and medieval interpretation alike: Miriam's impact extends beyond her recognized functions as prophetess, singer, or sister to Moses and Aaron, to the most practical realm of daily survival—access to water. By foregrounding her critical contribution, these exegetes reinforce an image of Miriam as more than an ancillary figure in the wilderness narrative. Indeed, in their view, she stands as a divinely appointed mediator whose presence carried ramifications for the entire congregation, ensuring that every member of Israel could drink freely in the desert. When she dies, the water ceases—a succinct but powerful reminder that a single righteous individual can be pivotal to the fortunes of an entire community.

In conclusion, one can easily see how the extensive tapestry of rabbinic sources paints a coherent theological portrait of Miriam's well. Far from being an isolated legend, it is presented as a central motif linking Miriam's righteousness and leadership to the physical and spiritual welfare of Israel. Her death in Num 20:1 then serves as a narrative juncture at which the community's vulnerability is exposed: the sudden absence of water dramatizes her essential function in ensuring God's providential care. Such textual and exegetical traditions illuminate how Miriam's significance extends well beyond her famous dance with the timbrel (Exod 15:20–21) or her challenge to Moses (Num 12:1–15). Within rabbinic mind, she stands as an emblem of sustaining grace, whose merit literally kept the people watered. Consequently, the well's disappearance upon her death underscores a potent lesson in communal interdependence—one that resonates through later Jewish thought and commentary, reminding readers that divine blessings are often channeled through

human agents, and that the loss of a righteous individual can unsettle the very foundations of a community's survival.

5. Conclusions

Num 20:1–2 often stands out for its stark concision: in one verse, the text reports Miriam's death and burial; in the very next, it announces that there is no water for the congregation. The juxtaposition of these two events, while superficially abrupt, proves to be a literary hinge upon which the subsequent narrative turns. By recording Miriam's death in such a succinct manner, the text invites the reader to ponder the deeper implications of her absence rather than dwelling on ritual or emotional details of mourning. This brevity, coupled with the immediate mention that there was no water for the community, underscores a direct thematic link. The crisis of water that follows so closely upon Miriam's burial signals a sudden vulnerability in the life of the nation and implicitly binds her role to Israel's survival.

Within the broader structure of the book of Numbers, these verses mark a critical point of transition. Prior episodes depict the ongoing challenges of life in the wilderness—murmuring, rebellions, and struggles over leadership—while the subsequent chapters will lead the Israelites closer to the Promised Land. Miriam's death crystallizes the fragility of this transitional generation. Her departure, occurring just before the community's renewed thirst, serves as a reminder that the desert wanderings are shaped as much by the loss of key leaders as by the unveiling of new crises. Although the text in Num 20 moves quickly to focus on Moses' and Aaron's actions (and Aaron's own death later in the same chapter), the moment of Miriam's passing foreshadows an impending era in which the original wilderness leadership will no longer hold sway. The abrupt shift from Miriam's burial to the lack of water suggests that her function—though never as overtly emphasized in the biblical text as that of Moses—carried both tangible and spiritual significance for the community's well-being.

Over the course of this study, Miriam emerges as a figure of profound narrative and theological importance. Even though her story receives fewer verses than those of Moses or Aaron, the traditions surrounding her in both the biblical text and rabbinic literature paint a portrait of a leader who mediates divine provision and community welfare in unique ways. Multiple rabbinic sources illustrate a deep-seated belief that Miriam's righteousness facilitated the presence of a portable well for Israel. This tradition underscores a broader biblical theme: God's blessings often flow through specific individuals who stand as bridges between divine grace and communal need. In the wilderness, water is the ultimate symbol of survival, making Miriam's connection to its availability all the more potent. By tying her merit to the community's physical sustenance, the narrative and its later interpreters highlight her indispensable role in maintaining Israel's life amid the desert's perils.

Miriam's portrayal in Num 12, where she challenges Moses, and in Num 20, where her death catalyzes a crisis, underscores a paradox central to the wilderness narrative: Israel is led by multiple figures, each with distinct gifts and flaws, yet the community's ultimate reliance must rest on God's ongoing provision. Miriam's confrontation in chapter 12 shows she is not without fault, but her death in chapter 20 reveals that her presence was integral enough that, without her, the community's vulnerability quickly intensified. In this sense, her life story underscores the balance of human imperfection and divine dependence that characterizes Israel's experience in the wilderness.

In the broader sweep of biblical tradition, Miriam is remembered as a prophetess (Exod 15:20) and as a guiding figure in Israel's formative journeys. Yet, her abrupt death, coupled with the water crisis that follows, highlights a theological conviction that persists through later Jewish interpretation: the significance of righteous individuals in mediating

God's care. For subsequent generations, Miriam's story serves as a reminder that a leader—however briefly mentioned—can become a conduit for God's sustaining power, while the loss of such an individual can plunge a community into sudden need.

In considering Num 20:1–2 within the larger wilderness narrative, one thus perceives Miriam as an essential, if at times understated, protagonist in the Pentateuch's unfolding drama. Her story knits together multiple threads—Israel's dependence on God, the complexities of shared leadership, and the poignant reality that even the greatest figures must eventually pass from the scene. As a bridge between divine provision and Israel's thirst, Miriam stands out not simply as Moses' sister, but as a theologically vital figure whose influence is felt long after the text quietly records, "Miriam died there and was buried there".

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Notes

1 The Bible identifies Moses, Miriam, and Aaron as siblings in several passages. Exod 2:1–10 narrates the birth of Moses, mentioning that he was placed in a basket by his mother and watched over by his sister, later identified as Miriam (cf. Num 26:59). Exod 15:20 explicitly calls Miriam "the prophetess, the sister of Aaron". Additionally, Num 26:59 confirms that Amram and Jochebed were the parents of "Aaron, Moses, and their sister Miriam".

2 Cf. (Gray 1903, pp. 260–61); (Noth 1968, p. 145); (de Vaulx 1972, pp. 220–21); (Wenham 1981, pp. 167–68); (Budd 1984, p. 216); (Milgrom 1990, p. 164); (Ashley 1993, pp. 377–78); (Sakenfeld 1995, p. 111); (Schmidt 2004, p. 89); (Knierim and Coats 2005, pp. 226–27).

3 Cf. Exodus 15–17; Numbers 11, 21.

4 Cf. (Kautzsch 1910, pp. 338–45).

5 Cf. (Waltke and O'Connor 1990, pp. 525–35).

6 Cf. (Joüon and Muraoka 2007, pp. 404–15).

7 See, for example, (Niccacci 2002, pp. 39–69).

8 Cf. (Westermann 1986, p. 37).

9 Cf. (Childs 1974, p. 18).

10 Cf. (Boling 1975, p. 165).

11 Cf. (McCarter 1980, pp. 49–66); (Jobling 1998, pp. 43–59).

12 Cf. (McCarter 1980, pp. 192–93).

13 Cf. (Morrison 2013, pp. 48–50).

14 Cf. (Levine 1993, pp. 487–88).

15 Cf. respectively Deut 34:1–12 and Num 20:22–29.

16 (Achenbach 2003, p. 310) interprets the news of Miriam's death and burial as a great misfortune for Israel, relating it to the absence of water for the people, because without water, the purification rituals prescribed in the case of death and burial could not be observed.

17 On this passage, cf. (Childs 1974, pp. 265–70).

18 Cf. (Coats 1999, pp. 123–25).

19 Cf. (Sarna 1991, pp. 84–85).

20 Cf. (Meyers 2005, pp. 128–29).

21 So, for example, Exod 2:23–25 describes the suffering of the Israelites under Egyptian oppression. Their groaning reaches God, who hears their cry, remembers His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and prepares to act on their behalf, marking the beginning of the Exodus narrative.

22 This pattern of longing, complaint, divine intervention, and instruction recurs in several wilderness episodes: Exod 16:1–36 (manna and quails); Exod 17:1–7 (water at Massah and Meribah); Num 11:4–35 (complaint over food and the plague of quails); Num 20:2–13 (water crisis at Kadesh, our text of study).

[23] *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 2:11.

[24] As I noticed before, some may raise the question of whether the community truly passes the test at Marah and thus transcends (or fails to transcend) its suffering. Equally pertinent is whether Miriam's name primarily recalls the bitterness of Israel's plight or points forward to healing and renewal. I will address these themes more fully when examining rabbinic interpretations, particularly Rashi's commentary. While the name "Miriam" does indeed evoke bitterness, rabbinic tradition often underscores the resilience and unity her presence confers—especially through the motif of her well—thus transforming the very memory of hardship into a source of sustenance and hope.

[25] On Miriam in Num 12, cf. (Burns 1987); (Trible 1994, pp. 166–86); (Jobling 1986, pp. 31–63); (Römer 1997, pp. 481–98); (Hymes 1998, pp. 3–32); (Sperling 1999, pp. 39–55); (Achenbach 2003, pp. 267–301); (Römer 2012, pp. 203–15); (Barton 2021, pp. 291–300); (Frevel 2020, pp. 401–24).

[26] On the theme of the Cushite wife of Moses, cf. (Achenbach 2003, pp. 270–75); (Römer 2012, pp. 203–16); (Olojede 2017, pp. 133–46); (Settembrini 2021, pp. 87–91); (Imes 2023, pp. 426–27).

[27] Cf. (Levine 1993, pp. 338–43).

[28] While Exod 15:20 explicitly designates Miriam as a prophetess leading the communal song of triumph after crossing the Sea of Reeds, some interpreters also connect Miriam's prophetic role to Exod 4:16, where God provides Moses with a spokesperson (traditionally Aaron, but understood in certain readings to include Miriam's voice as well), and Micah 6:4, which places Miriam on a par with Moses and Aaron as a divinely appointed leader in the deliverance from Egypt. Cf. (Milgrom 1990, p. 94). Other commentators disagree with Miriam's prophetic designation: cf. (Burns 1993, pp. 112–15).

[29] Cf. (Trible 1994, pp. 166–72).

[30] According to (Settembrini 2021, p. 81), the use of the singular verb with a plural subject ("Miriam and Aaron") could suggest that Aaron was added later. Many commentators identify two distinct narratives in Numbers 12: one centered on Miriam alone and another where Aaron appears alongside her. Originally, Miriam may have been the sole speaker regarding the Cushite woman. Ancient versions (LXX, Syriac, Vulgata, Targum Onkelos, Targum Neofiti) confirm the singular verb, while the plural appears in Targum Jonathan.

[31] Cf. (Trible 1994, p. 175).

[32] This Hebrew expression literally means "mouth to mouth," signifying an immediate and direct connection between YHWH and Moses.

[33] Cf. (Milgrom 1990, pp. 94–95).

[34] As for why only Miriam was punished while Aaron was not, cf. (Sakenfeld 1995, pp. 82–84).

[35] Cf. (Levine 1993, p. 333).

[36] (Trible 1994, p. 180).

[37] Cf. (Trible 1994, pp. 180–81).

[38] Cf. (Ruiz Morell and Salvatierra Ossorio 2001, pp. xviii–xxxvii).

[39] I will address this more fully in the subsequent discussion of rabbinic commentary on Miriam's well.

[40] On the figure of Miriam in Midrashic tradition, cf. (Aleixandre 1996, pp. 334–37).

[41] *Bamidbar Rabbah* is a midrashic collection on the book of Numbers, part of the broader *Midrash Rabbah* corpus. Composed over several centuries, it combines homiletic interpretations, haggadic narratives, and moral teachings, reflecting rabbinic engagement with the text of Numbers. While some sections date to the early rabbinic period, the final redaction likely occurred in the early medieval era.

[42] English translation by (Slotki 1939, p. 5).

[43] Regarding whether this constancy was disrupted during Miriam's quarantine in Numbers 12, rabbinic sources do not generally highlight any temporary disappearance of the well. On the contrary, many interpreters suggest that because the entire camp waited for her before moving on, her merit—and thus the divine supply she embodied—remained in force even during that episode.

[44] On the interpretation of manna as a sign of divine providence, whose maternal care is manifested through the mediation of Moses, see (Claassens 2004, pp. 4–9).

[45] So, for example, in *Midrash Tehillim* 23:2, interpreting "He makes me lie down in green pastures", the text compares God's care for Israel to a mother nursing her child, symbolizing abundant nourishment and intimate provision. Further, in *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 4:5, the description of "Your two breasts are like two fawns" is interpreted allegorically. The "breasts" represent Moses and Aaron or Torah and Mitzvot, through which God "feeds" Israel spiritually, much like a mother nourishes her child. Likewise, in *Devarim Rabbah* 5:7, the Hebrew word *rahamim* (mercy) is derived from *rehem* (womb), portraying God's mercy as maternal compassion, like that of a mother for the child of her womb.

[46] On Miriam's song after crossing the Sea of Reeds, cf. (Trible 1994, pp. 166–86); (Janzen 1994, p. 197); (Meyers 1994, p. 228); (Bach 1999, pp. 419–27); (Ackerman 2002, pp. 47–80); (Feldman 2013, pp. 905–11); (An 2016, pp. 7–35); (Apple 2017, pp. 99–102); (Imes 2023, pp. 426–40).

[47] Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040–1105), universally known as Rashi, was a prominent medieval Jewish scholar, considered one of the most influential commentators on the Torah and the Talmud. Born in Troyes, France, Rashi is especially known for his ability to provide clear and concise explanations that make rabbinic and biblical texts accessible even to non-expert readers.

[48] In Jewish exegesis, *peshat* seeks the most direct meaning of the text, considering its linguistic, historical, and contextual dimensions.

[49] Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (1194–1270), universally known as Ramban or Nachmanides, was a prominent medieval Jewish scholar, considered one of the most influential commentators on the Torah and Jewish law. Born in Girona, Catalonia, Ramban is especially known for his profound and multifaceted Torah commentary, which integrates plain meaning (*peshat*), rabbinic tradition (*derash*), and mystical insights. His writings combine clarity with depth, making them foundational for both legal and spiritual understanding within Judaism.

[50] *Ramban (Nachmanides) on Numbers* 20:2.

[51] Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1167) was a prominent medieval Jewish scholar, considered one of the most influential biblical commentators of his time. Born in Tudela, Spain, Ibn Ezra is especially known for his rational and linguistic approach to the Torah, focusing on grammar, syntax, and context (*peshat*). His commentary emphasizes the plain meaning of the text while engaging with philosophical and scientific ideas, making his works a cornerstone of Jewish biblical exegesis and a bridge between tradition and reason.

[52] *Ibn Ezra on Numbers* 20:1–2.

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