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WOMEN
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BY

The Eminent Divines

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MIRIAM

MIRIAM is the Hebrew form of that name so dear to the Christian world as Maria, Marie, or Mary. If we had to choose two symbolical figures to illustrate the difference between the Old Testament and the New, we might well take the two women who bore the same name—Miriam, the sister of Moses—Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The outline of Miriam's life is drawn in the Hebrew Scriptures with a few broad strokes. But it is wonderfully vivid and distinct.

There are three separate sketches of her, all made out-of-doors, *en plein air*, and with graphic realism. In each of them we see her in a different attitude.

In the first, she is a little girl, standing on the bank of the river Nile, watching over her baby brother as he floats, in his ark of reeds, among the tall flags by the water's edge.

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In the second, she is a woman, with a timbrel in her hand, exulting over the destruction of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, and leading the jubilant women of Israel in their choric song and dance.

In the third, she is an aged but animated prophetess, taking part with her elder brother Aaron in a public complaint against Moses, and speaking words of reproach against him.

In all three sketches we recognize the same figure. The character of Miriam has a marked individuality.

She is not a feminine cipher, a mild nonentity, a mere appendicle of man. She is a person of force, with a mind and a will of her own; lively, independent, fearless, and, although sometimes wrong-headed and perverse, on the whole a most important factor in the life of the people.

It is interesting to see how she touches, even in this brief outline of her life, the two extremes of that much-disputed region, that debatable land, "the sphere of woman."

In the domestic sphere she plays her part well. She is the faithful little nurse; the guar-



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dian of infancy ; quick, resourceful, devoted to her task.

In the public sphere she is fitted for a leading rôle. Her voice is inspiring; her action commands a following. She is recognized as a power in the community. Even when she goes wrong, she is thought of as one whose character and position entitle her to respect.

If to the scriptural account of her life we may add the Jewish traditions which are given by Josephus in the third book of his *Antiquities*, we must admit that she rounded out the primitive possibilities of a woman's career to the full. For Josephus tells us that she was the wife of that well-known leader among the Israelites, Hur, who was chosen to be one of the judges of the people while Moses went up into Mount Sinai (Ex., xxiv. 14). The names of her children are unknown; but her grandson, Bezaleel, was famous as the principal artist in the construction of the Tabernacle (Ex., xxxi. 2).

I propose in this little essay to retrace the three sketches of her that are given in the Bible, adding here and there a touch of local color

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drawn from the history of Egypt and the legends of Israel.

There will be no call for preaching or moralizing. If we can see Miriam as she really was, we shall hear her speak for herself.

I

When Jochebed, the mother of Moses (hearing that she could no longer hide her three-months-old boy from the people whom Pharaoh had commanded to destroy the male children of the Israelites), launched her baby on the waters of the Nile, she took every possible precaution for his safety. She made a little basket-boat out of the long, pliant, tenacious stems of the papyrus plant—a material often used in Egypt for that purpose. She plastered it inside with clay to make it smooth, and outside with bitumen to make it water-tight. The papyrus itself was supposed by the Egyptians to be a protection against crocodiles.

The careful mother did not send her baby-

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boat out on the broad current of the river. She laid it among the reeds, by the edge of the stream, in a place which she knew was frequented by the princess and the women of the court.

But her last precaution was the best of all. She left the little sister Miriam to mount guard over her brother's safety (Ex., ii. 4).

How old was the girl when she was intrusted with this charge? Ten years, say the legends. But there is no reason to make her so old. Children mature early in Egypt. The small water-girl, Amina, who ran beside me while I visited the ruined temples of the ancient Thebes was but seven years old. Yet she had all the self-possession and cleverness of a person three times her age—a miniature woman carved in brown sandal-wood.

Miriam was watching when the Egyptian king's daughter came down to the river with her maidens to wash.

To wash what? Herself, some answer; for it was the custom of great ladies at this time to bathe in the river Nile. It was supposed to be good for their health.

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Not at all, say others; it was never the custom for ladies of fashion to bathe in the river. When they wanted a bath, they had it in-doors. The princess and her maidens came down to the Nile to wash their clothes—just what the Princess Nausicaa and her maidens were doing when Ulysses, shipwrecked, was cast up by the waves on the shore of their island. Even the greatest ladies, in primitive times, were not above doing their own laundry-work.

Let us leave the question undecided. What is certain is that the tiny ark, floating among the reeds, was discovered and opened, and the baby beamed forth. A proper child; when the princess set eyes on him she fell in love with him; she must have him for her own.

But the baby lifted up his voice and wept. Royalty was nothing to him. He wanted his breakfast.

Then came Miriam's opportunity, and she made the most of it. How innocently she stepped up! just like any little girl strolling along the river-side by chance, and attracted by curi-

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osity to look at the screaming baby and the puzzled princess.

"A nurse," said this small philosopher—"a nurse, your Highness! That is what you want. Shall I fetch you one?"

No sooner is the permission given than young Presence-of-mind is running home to call her mother. The business is done. Moses is safe. The princess has taken him under her wing. His mother has taken him back to her breast. He is in no danger now, either of drowning or of starving. Everything is well settled by the ready wit of the girl Miriam.

II

Moses was worth saving.

I am not sure that the princess thought so after he had been the instrument of bringing the plagues on the land of Egypt.

But certainly Miriam thought so when the passage of the Red Sea had been accomplished, and she saw that her brother was indeed the

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emancipator of Israel, the founder of a new nation, the beginner of a glorious history for the Hebrew race. It was worth while to have had a share in the preservation of such a hero.

Miriam had a claim upon the gratitude and reverence of the people because she had rendered them this great service. The woman who protects a precious life enriches the world.

But it was not only by this indirect service that Miriam played her part in the national history of Israel. She was a direct contributor to the commonwealth. Out of her heart and from her lips came real and valuable additions to that treasure of common thought and feeling and aspiration which is the true wealth of the people. She was a prophetess (Ex., xv. 20). She shared with Moses and Aaron the most exalted place and office in the life of the Hebrew folk. A conscious ambassador and mouth-piece of the will of the Eternal, a personal exponent of the highest ideals and hopes of the nation, the woman Miriam spoke to Israel for Jehovah, and to Jehovah for Israel.

In the first great act of national rejoicing

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which followed the overthrow of the host of Pharaoh in the Red Sea, Miriam's place was in the foreground.

On the sea-shore of Arabia, where the rude waves were tumbling the fragments of the wrecked Egyptian army—horses, chariots, shields, spears, broken armor, and pallid corpses—the rescued Hebrews celebrated a festival of liberty, and chanted a mighty ode of public joy. The Song of Moses and Miriam is one of the oldest national anthems in the world. It is also one of the most splendid (Ex., xv.).

The spirit and movement of the song are well expressed in the English verse of Thomas Moore's paraphrase:

“Sound the loud timbrel o'er Egypt's dark sea!
Jehovah has triumphed,—His people are free!
Sing,—for the pride of the tyrant is broken;
His chariots, his horsemen, all splendid and brave,—
How vain was their boasting! the Lord hath but
spoken,
And chariots and horsemen are sunk in the wave.
Sound the loud timbrel o'er Egypt's dark sea!
Jehovah has triumphed,—His people are free!

“Praise to the Conqueror, praise to the Lord!
His word was our arrow, His breath was our sword.

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Who shall return to tell Egypt the story
Of those she sent forth in the shew of her pride?
For the Lord hath looked out from His pillar of
glory,
And all her brave thousands are dashed in the tide.
Sound the loud timbrel o'er Egypt's dark sea!
Jehovah has triumphed,—His people are free!"

This is powerful verse. But there is even greater majesty and force in the form of the ode as it stands in the Book of Exodus. How grandly the antiphonal ascriptions of praise to Jehovah come into the description of the overthrow of Egypt's pride and power!

*"Jehovah is a man of war :
Jehovah is his name !*

*"Thou didst blow with thy wind :
The sea covered them :
They sank as lead in the mighty waters.*

*"Who is like unto thee among the gods, Jehovah?
Who is like unto thee?
Glorious in holiness !
Fearful in praises !
Doing wonders !"*

Precisely what part Miriam had in the composition of this famous poem we cannot tell. But in weaving it into the conscious life of the

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people she had at least an equal share with Moses.

She took a timbrel in her hand, and all the Hebrew women followed her with timbrels and guitars, singing and dancing. She led the female voices in the grand chorus:

*"Sing ye to Jehovah, for he hath triumphed gloriously:
The horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea."*

The musical instruments used in this celebration were brought from Egypt. Their shapes and patterns may still be seen in the ancient wall-paintings of Thebes and Memphis. The freedom of women to take part in public life, their equal right in religious ceremonies and national festivals, are also in accord with Egyptian custom and tradition.

Israel's long sojourn in the land of the Pharaohs was not without its benefits. Civilization may be learned even in the hard school of bondage. A knowledge of music—the purest of the arts—is of inestimable value in the development of a people. Still more precious is a sense of the liberty and dignity of woman.

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One of the greatest treasures that the Hebrews brought out of Egypt was Miriam, their first prophetess.

There can be no true, complete national life unless womanhood has a vital share in its conflicts, its hopes, its ambitions, and its triumphs.

III

The limitations in Miriam's character came out in the third episode of her life, described in the twelfth chapter of the Book of Numbers.

She was now an old woman. But the position which she occupied among the people was unchanged. She was still an exalted personage, a leader of popular opinion. She appeared now as a leader of discontent and revolt. Her commanding figure was no longer a symbol of unity. It was a sign of discord and division.

Her brother, Moses, whose first wife was a Midianite (Ex., ii. 21), had married again. This time his bride was an Ethiopian, a Cushite, a dark-skinned woman from the African country south of the Nile cataracts.

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Criticism on second marriage is not uncommon, especially among relatives.

The new wife of Moses was not despised on account of her color. In that day the land of Cush was rich and royal. Its dark races spread to the east and to the west. Arabia and Babylonia acknowledged their power. The Queen of Sheba was probably a decided brunette. Egypt itself was ruled for many years by an Ethiopian dynasty.

But the bride of Moses was objectionable because she was a foreigner. The race-pride of the Hebrews took offence at her. Miriam and Aaron voiced the prejudice by speaking against Moses because he had married this foreign woman. Something of personal jealousy and fear for their own influence mingled with their feeling. For they said: "Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? Hath he not spoken also by us?"

Was this merely an utterance of what is called "a woman's prejudice," "feminine jealousy"?

That can hardly be true. Aaron was a partner in the complaint. Aaron was a man.

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But that Miriam's part in the attempt at social rebellion was the more important is clearly indicated by the course of the story. Her name is put first. She probably formulated the objection. Her influence was most to be feared in stirring up disaffection among the people against the man who had led them to liberty, and who, whatever his faults and mistakes may have been, was supremely entitled to their loyal following.

Moses may have erred in marrying his dark bride. But if so it was a personal mistake, not a public crime. To break down the authority of Moses was to imperil the hope of the nation. This was Miriam's error. It was greater than the fault of Moses because it was an offence against the commonwealth.

Her punishment is described as swift and signal. As she stood with her two brothers alone in the tabernacle, whither the Divine Voice had summoned them for judgment, the pale plague of Egypt smote her. She became a leper white as snow.

Aaron and Moses, filled with brotherly love and pity, joined instantly in prayers that her

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punishment might be removed and her disease healed. The prayers were granted. The sympathy of the nation was shown in their anxious waiting for the completion of the seven days of her purification. "They journeyed not till Miriam was brought in again."

Miriam died in Kadesh, while the children of Israel were still journeying through the desert, before they entered into the Promised Land. (Numb., xx. 1.)

Joseph says that they gave her a costly public funeral, and buried her on the mountain of Zin, and mourned for her thirty days.

In the time of St. Jerome a tomb was shown near Petra which was called, by tradition, the "tomb of Miriam." But even this tradition has faded out. The last resting-place of the prophetess, like the sepulchre of her greater brother Moses, is one of the secrets of God.

She belongs to the past. She is a heroine of the Exodus, a living symbol of the times of preparation, a forerunner of the coming woman.

HENRY VAN DYKE.