

The Book of Miriam

By Tom Moran

Setting

The place - The Sinai desert

The time - 6,000 years ago

Cast of Characters

MIRIAM - A determined but harried woman in her 30's - 40's

MOSES - MIRIAM's older brother, an overbearing man in his 40's

AARON - MIRIAM's younger brother, a manic man in his 30's - 40's

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Scene 1

(The interior of a tent in the desert. Flaps lead out stage left and right. MIRIAM sits at a table stage center, scribbling on papyrus with a quill. She writes, stops, thinks, makes vague noises. She rests her chin on her hand, taps her finger, goes to the flap stage right and opens it.)

MOSES (O.S.)

And the children of Israel removed from Rameses, and pitched in Succoth. And they departed from Succoth, and pitched in Etham. And they removed from Etham, and turned again unto Pi-hahiroth, which is before Baalzephon: and they pitched before Migdol...

(MIRIAM closes the flap and sighs. She sits down and picks up the quill again. AARON pokes his head in the flap stage left.)

AARON

Hey Miriam. You seen Moses?

MIRIAM

(gestures toward flap stage right)
Addressing the flock.

AARON

Oh right. How's he doing?

MIRIAM

We're boned.

(AARON walks over and opens the flap.)

MOSES (O.S.)

And they departed from Rithmah, and pitched at Rimmon-parez. And they departed from Rimmon-parez, and pitched in Libnah. And they removed from Libnah...

(AARON winces and drops the flap.)

AARON

Wow, he's dying out there.

MIRIAM

(shrugs)

No one's going to take this much longer. I toldeth him to stick to the highlights, but no, he's got to run down every damn caravanserai we stopped at for a pee break. At this rate, he'll be listing campsites for another three or four days.

AARON

Really? That long? How much time have we been wandering around this desert anyway?

MIRIAM

Just 20 or 25 years. But it feels like forever.

AARON

Well, I'm sure we'll make it out in a month or two.

MIRIAM

Try telling them that. They're getting really restless out there.

AARON

Well, what can we do? We can only repeat the Word as it is given to Moses and recited to us.

MIRIAM

Repeat it. Right. Of course. But Moses can pick and choose, you know. Have you seen this?

(She hands him a scroll.)

AARON

Hmm - abhor my judgments - break my covenant - terror, consumption, and the burning ague - oh, burning ague, I like that - ye shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. Oh, yeah. Nice. Real rhythm here. This came from Moses?

MIRIAM

No, it's mine. (Pause.) I mean, that is, God told it to me. In a dream. And all.

AARON

Is Moses proclaiming this soon?

MIRIAM

No, he goeth with this.

(MIRIAM hands AARON another scroll.)

AARON

Nuh-nuh-nuh nuh - and I put the plague of leprosy -
nuh nuh nuh nuh - if the plague be in the walls of the
house with hollow strakes, greenish or reddish - house
shall be scraped roundabout - nuh nuh nuh - break down
the house, the stones of it, and the timber thereof -
(pause. He looks up.) What the h-e-double shepherd's
staffs am I reading?!

MIRIAM

It's what to do if your house gets leprosy.

AARON

What?

MIRIAM

You know, if the walls get all moist and green.

AARON

You mean mildew.

MIRIAM

Yeah, mildew.

AARON

Wow. This is even worse than that week he spent
reciting manna recipes. What happened to the
storyline, man? The old stuff was so great.

MIRIAM

It sang! The flight into Egypt. The frogs! The
locusts! Blood of the first-born! It wrote itself.

AARON

Of course it wrote itself.

MIRIAM

Uh, right.

AARON

But now. Mildew. Hmm. Hath the Lord perhaps appeared to you in any other dreams?

MIRIAM

I don't think so. My last dream, I was a shepherd, right, and I had this rod and staff, and I was walking through this valley, with green pastures and still waters. I was carrying this cup, and it was overflowing. And there was this signpost, that said "The Valley of Death."

AARON

Huh, that doesn't sound like Him, huh?

MIRIAM

No, not really.

AARON

Well, you must continue to listen to our brother. What Moses bespeaks unto you, it is the Word of the Lord, and must remain unaltered. We can experience Jehovah through dreams, but only Moses may speak with Him directly.

MIRIAM

Oh, Aaron. You know that's just -

AARON

No no, not this again.

MIRIAM

Oh, comest thou on! You really believe that -

AARON

The Word of the Lord!

MIRIAM

Look, I saw all the lightning and the dust cloud when Moses went up the mountain. When he comes down, the commandments. Simple. Elegant. I see those, I think, sure, straight from the mouth of the Creator to the hands of our brother.

(AARON looks indignant.)

MIRIAM

But this. Hold on. (She digs through and finds a scroll.) Blessed shalt thou be when thou comest in, and blessed shalt thou be when thou goest out. Really? Or here: Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together. Thou shalt not wear a garment of divers sorts, as of woollen and linen together.

(AARON has stuck his fingers in his ears.)

AARON

(loudly)

I'm not listening! La la la la la!

MIRIAM

(voice growing louder)

God. Creator of the universe. Bringer of life to the void. And he's telling us not to mix fabrics?!

(The left flap opens and MOSES walks in. He looks pissed.)

MOSES

All right, what's all the ruckus? I was just getting to the good part.

MIRIAM

Oh, you mean when we camped at that one place?

AARON

(points at MIRIAM)

She was doubting the Lord's omnipotence again! I heard her!

(MIRIAM rolls eyes.)

MIRIAM

I was not. I was only wondering how we can keep this together. Where all this goeth.

MOSES

Where it goeth? To Canaan. Land of milk and honey. We'll get there any day now. Then all we have to do is defeat the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the - help me out here -

AARON

Amorites.

MOSES

Right. And then -

AARON

Oh. Oh. Also the Perizzites.

MIRIAM

The Hivites.

MOSES

And the Jebusites. That's it. Then we're home free!
Milk and honey.

AARON

Milk and honey.

MIRIAM

Then the land will be ours?

MOSES

Yes. And no one else will ever be interested in it
again. Never. Ever.

AARON

Ever.

MIRIAM

Well, that'll be nice. But I wasn't talking about
Canaan. I was talking about this. (Shakes a scroll.)
This charade. This farce of a scripture.

AARON

(points)

Hey, blasphemy!

MOSES

Oh, this again. What do you want? You want me to go
out there and tell those people that God has fallen
silent? That we've been wandering around the desert
without any direction from above?

AARON

(stunned)

What?

MIRIAM

Have we?

MOSES

Well, I...um...

MIRIAM

Yeah?

MOSES

Look, just because there's no lightning and thunder anymore it doesn't mean we aren't being inspired.

MIRIAM

That's the same old cop-out and you know it.

MOSES

Look, what is it you want? You want credit? You want me to go out there and tell them we've just been - extrapolating?

AARON

We've been what?

MIRIAM

Extrapolating? Don't you mean 'winging it'?

MOSES

So you want everyone to know about your contribution. Is that it? Your hours of labor behind closed flaps.

MIRIAM

Maybe, yeah.

MOSES

Then you should go on out there yourself. Tell them you made everything up. They'll love it.

MIRIAM

Oh, right, so I get blamed for two decades of wandering! You're just trying to make me the scapegoat.

MOSES

The what?

MIRIAM

(shuffles through scrolls)

Oh, yeah. I haven't - shown you that yet -

(MIRIAM hands a scroll to MOSES,
who skims it, then looks up.)

MOSES

No I'm not!

MIRIAM

Tell you what, how about I just stop writing
altogether. You don't use half my stuff anyhow. Let
God find a new personal assistant.

MOSES

You would do that?

MIRIAM

Why shouldn't I?

MOSES

Why? They'll see right through me! Today I had to turn
my staff into a serpent, like, three times to get
their attention. It barely registers with them
anymore.

AARON

I can't believe I'm hearing this! Where is your faith?
Where is the strength of the word?

MOSES

(exasperated)

Come on, Aaron, relax. It's not like people would ever
take all this stuff literally!

(AARON tries to speak, but just
makes an indecipherable squeal and
runs out of the left-hand flap.
MOSES and MIRIAM look at each
other and sigh.)

MOSES (cont.)

Seest thou what I'm talking about? People would scatter. They'd revolt. It would rend asunder everything we've built.

MIRIAM

Maybe he needed to hear it.

MOSES

Look, if it's recognition you want, I can't give it to you. You must know that.

MIRIAM

Maybe they can't, but you can. How about using more of my writing, instead of just telling me my new stuff isn't what it used to be? How about a 'thank you' once in a while? How about acknowledging that maybe, just maybe, a woman can play a fundamental role in shaping this faith?

MOSES

(sarcastic)

Oh. Sure, why not. All right. Done. From here on out our religion shall embrace equality for all genders, and indeed for all races, creeds, colors and sexual preferences. Except for bestiality. That's still gross.

MIRIAM

Now you're just screwing with me.

MOSES

What can I do. I'm in a corner here.

MIRIAM

I want out of this tent. I want my stuff being read out there along with yours. And I want to be the one reading it. Otherwise I'm through with the writing.

MOSES

I really should have stuck in a commandment about blackmail.

MIRIAM

Too late now.

MOSES

Hmm. How about I bring you out for my next speech, tomorrow. You introduce me. You stand behind me and hand me the scrolls.

MIRIAM

A family?

MOSES

A family. How's that sound?

MIRIAM

A family. Together we present an image of strength, of gravity. We can ground everyone in the Word, tether them to it. I can be your - your co-anchor.

MOSES

All right, fine, let's try it. They put up with sixteen days of reciting the dimensions of the Ark of the Covenant, they can hack this.

MIRIAM

One more thing. I want you to listen to my ideas more. I think I can send us in a bold new direction.

MOSES

All right. What are you thinking?

(MIRIAM pulls out a scroll.)

MIRIAM

(reads)

And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

(Pause.)

MOSES

Yeah. I don't think they're quite ready for that yet.

(End of play.)