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**Abstract**

In English, we are used to hearing the mother of Jesus called 'Mary'. In the Greek, however, she has two names: Maria and Mariam. The latter name has caused her to be associated typologically with Miriam, the sister of Moses, since it is a Greek transliteration of her name in Hebrew, and parallels have been drawn between the Miriam of the Old Testament and Mary the Mother of Jesus since the time of the Church Fathers. However, Jesus is often held by scholars to be depicted as a 'New Moses' figure in the Gospels. There is an obvious issue here — Mary is not Jesus' sister, but his mother. By considering and contrasting both ancient Jewish and ancient Christian sources, this paper examines the association between the two Miriams and ask whether we would do better to look at the New Testament Miriam in terms of Jochebed, Moses' mother, particularly taking into account ancient Jewish stories surrounding Moses' birth and positing that perhaps the New Testament offers the first hints at a Moses tradition found in the Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 12a. Indeed, upon remarriage, Jochebed is said to become like a young woman again—that is, might one argue, like a virgin?

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## Is Mary Miriam or Jochebed?

In English, we are used to hearing the mother of Jesus called 'Mary'. In the Greek, however, she has two names: Maria<sup>1</sup> and Mariam.<sup>2</sup> The former is favoured by Matthew in his infancy narrative, whilst the latter is favoured by Luke. The latter name has caused her to be associated typologically with Miriam, the sister of Moses, since it is a Greek transliteration of her name in Hebrew. Jesus is often held by scholars to be a 'New Moses' figure and the close association of a Miriam with this characterisation has led to typological readings of Miriam in the Old Testament in association with the Blessed Virgin in the gospels. Her name has to be significant, surely? However, there is an obvious issue here—Mary is not Jesus' sister, but his mother. This paper will look at the common association between the two Miriams and ask whether we would do better to look at the New Testament Miriam in terms of Jochebed, Moses' mother, taking into account ancient Jewish stories surrounding Moses' birth and positing that perhaps the New Testament offers the first hints at a Moses tradition found in the Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 12a, in which Amram decides to divorce his wife and then remarries her on the warning of Miriam that he is doing even more harm than Pharaoh. This article will argue that there are a number of similarities in the plot points between the Gospel of Matthew's nativity narrative and this later rabbinic tradition, which make it worth considering that perhaps the rabbinic tradition is older than first assumed. Indeed, upon remarriage, Jochebed is said to become like a young woman again—that is, might one argue, like a virgin?

### The First Miriam

Firstly, what do we know about Miriam the sister of Moses from the Bible and why might we associate Mary the Mother of Jesus with her? Miriam first makes a named appearance in Exodus 15:20-21:<sup>3</sup>

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them:

"Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

In this passage, she is listed as Aaron's sister, but given Aaron is Moses' brother, that would also make her a sibling to Moses and she appears as such in Numbers 26:59 and 1 Chronicles 5:29. Here, in Exodus 15, the Israelites have just crossed the Sea of Reeds and are rejoicing in the defeat of the Egyptian army as the waters collapsed over them once the Israelites had

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Mt. 1:18, 1:20, 2:11; Lk. 2:19.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Lk. 1:27; 1:30; 1:34; 1:39; 1:46; 2:5; 2:16.

<sup>3</sup> Biblical texts are quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition.



reached land dry-shod. Miriam is the leader of the women's chorus and leads the women in song as a mirror of Moses' own, who had just recited a victorious canticle (Exod. 15:1-18). However, she is more than just a choir mistress. This act symbolises her role in Israel's salvation and she is listed alongside both Moses and Aaron in Micah 6:4 as one of Israel's deliverers, where she is placed alongside her brothers and on an equal level with them:

For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,  
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;  
and I sent before you Moses,  
Aaron, and Miriam.

She also appears in Numbers 12 in this regard; however, this time things are not so favourable. Miriam and Aaron grumble against Moses, who has married a Cushite woman, and then complain that God has spoken through them, too. This is taken as an act of pride by God, who strikes Miriam down with *tzaraat*, a skin condition that will be, on her account, associated in later rabbinic tradition with the sin of *lashon hara*, having an evil, gossiping, tongue.<sup>4</sup> Her sufferings are relieved at the intercession of Moses, but she still has to suffer her punishment for seven days (Num. 12:10-16), delaying the Israelites' onward journey through the desert.

As she is the only sister of Moses mentioned in the Bible by name, Miriam is also associated with the unnamed sister in Exodus 2, who stands watching as her brother is laid in the reeds and is found by Pharaoh's daughter. This anonymous sister then convinces her to let the boy's real mother nurse him. Interestingly, a Tannaitic<sup>5</sup> midrash recorded in *B. Sotah* 11b associates her with one of the midwives who saved his life in the first place. Pharaoh had issued a decree that every Hebrew male child was to be killed, but the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, fear God and do not follow out his evil command (Exod. 1:15-17). The tractate, citing an associated *baraita*,<sup>6</sup> claims that Shiphrah was in fact Moses' own mother, Jochebed, and Puah was Miriam. The latter association is made, firstly, because the name 'Puah' sounds like a cooing noise in Hebrew and so was not read as a proper name. The rabbis tell us the midwife was Miriam, who used to coo as she encouraged the women to give birth and so acquired this nickname. Secondly, the rabbis read into the text a pun on the Hebrew verb, *po'a*, to speak. It is said that Miriam would speak (*po'a*) through divine revelation and this was why she was also known as Puah. Specifically, Miriam would purportedly prophesy and claim that 'in the future, my mother will give birth to a son who will redeem Israel'. Miriam's prophetic role, then, is connected in the rabbinic tradition back to the very start of the Exodus

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Tumat Tzarat* 16:10. See Leviticus 13 on the punishment of this disease and the regulations for purification and temporary life outside the camp. It is likely that this is referred to in the New Testament when it mentions leprosy. This is the common translation of this Hebrew word in the LXX and the NT usage in passages like Mt. 8:1-4; Mk 1:40-45, Lk. 5:12-15; and 17:11-19. All probably refer to this condition, rather than Hansen's disease, since the gospel accounts generally seem to presume the necessity of the cleansing mandated in Leviticus.

<sup>5</sup> The Tannaitic period runs from about 10-220 CE, making it the earliest recorded stage of rabbinic tradition.

<sup>6</sup> An oral tradition that did not make it into the Mishnah – likely Tannaitic.

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story and there to the salvation that Moses would help bring to his people, making her a key figure in Israelite salvation history as her New Testament counterpart would become for Christians.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, in *B. Sotah* 12b, Miriam wishes to see Moses nursed by his mother on account of the ritual impurity of an Egyptian midwife and the fact Moses will one day speak with the divine presence itself and so her role is also protective over the new-born prophet.<sup>8</sup> We do not know from the biblical account that Miriam had any children herself, however. She is never listed as having either a husband or a family of her own in the biblical account. We shall return to Miriam in rabbinic traditions a bit later on in this paper and discuss some more early traditions concerning her.

### Miriam and Mary

Apart from the mentions above in the Bible, we do not know much about Miriam from the biblical text itself, but the passages above contain the basis for the traditional association of Miriam in the OT with Miriam in the NT. Whilst, on the one hand, some early Christian writers were keen to downplay the original Miriam's role as being relegated to the women only and superimpose upon her the restrictions on women imposed by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 regarding speaking in public,<sup>9</sup> it is worth noting that the canticle of Miriam proved a point of connection to the more recent figure of Mary in the patristic mind – not in as much detail as Hannah's song in 1 Sam 2:1-10, but more loosely in terms of her role in salvation history— and the Exodus 15 narrative has been employed by various Christian thinkers in relation to Mary's virginity. Miriam's striking the timbrel was read allegorically by some Church fathers as a symbol of Mary's virginity. Firstly, Miriam herself was described as a virgin because of her lack of a husband in the biblical account and then this was connected to Mary's own virginity. Then, the timbrel was interpreted allegorically on account of its dryness, which was likened to the virginal life's denial of bodily passions. This is recounted by Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c. 394):

But besides other things the action of Miriam the prophetess also gives rise to these surmisings of ours. Directly the sea was crossed she took in her hand a dry and sounding timbrel and conducted the women's dance By this timbrel the story may

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<sup>7</sup> It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the Miriam traditions in detail as our concern is rather with the NT account and our consideration of the second Miriam. However, for more on this and other traditions, see D Steinmetz, 'A Portrait of Miriam in Rabbinic Midrash', *Prooftexts* 8.1, 1988 35-65.

<sup>8</sup> Steinmetz, 'Portrait', 41. One might also note that, in the Protoevangelium of James, it is said that Mary gives birth before the midwife arrives – just as the Hebrew women are said to do in the story of Moses being hidden in the bulrushes. The idea that Mary gave birth with strength (again, perhaps echoing the story from Exodus) is found in Ode of Solomon 19. See below.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Theodoret, *Commentary on Psalms*, Psalm 106/105:12. See Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 73-150, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation Series*, trans. Robert C. Hill (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 180-187.

mean to imply virginity, as first perfected by Miriam; whom indeed I would believe to be a type of Mary the mother of God. Just as the timbrel emits a loud sound because it is devoid of all moisture and reduced to the highest degree of dryness, so has virginity a clear and ringing report among men because it repels from itself the vital sap of merely physical life. Thus, Miriam's timbrel being a dead thing, and virginity being a deadening of the bodily passions, it is perhaps not very far removed from the bounds of probability that Miriam was a virgin. However, we can but guess and surmise, we cannot clearly prove, that this was so, and that Miriam the prophetess led a dance of virgins, even though many of the learned have affirmed distinctly that she was unmarried, from the fact that the history makes no mention either of her marriage or of her being a mother; and surely she would have been named and known, not as *the sister of Aaron*, but from her husband, if she had had one; since the head of the woman is not the brother but the husband ... In the same strain the womb of the Holy Virgin, which ministered to an Immaculate Birth, is pronounced blessed in the Gospel; for that birth did not annul the Virginity, nor did the Virginity impede so great a birth.<sup>10</sup>

To Christian authors, the role of Miriam in Israel's salvation history was closely connected to her unwed, and thereby virginal, status and this proved to be a point of typology for the Virgin Mary and her own participation in the salvation of the world.<sup>11</sup>

There is, however, a lacuna here. We cannot discuss portrayals of Mary without those of Jesus, and Jesus is clearly depicted in the Gospel accounts as a new Moses. This has been the subject of much research.<sup>12</sup> Let us take Matthew as an example. Matthew's account of Herod's slaughter of the innocents, in which Jesus is saved from the hands of Herod just as Moses was miraculously delivered from Pharaoh's deadly decree against Israelite boys in Exodus 1-2 (see Mt. 2:16-18), is probably the most obvious example of Jesus' being portrayed

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<sup>10</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, 'On Virginity', trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, Chapter 19, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 5, Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893, rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight. Accessed March 4, 2026. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2907.htm>

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of this topic, see A. Siquans, 'Miriam's Image in Patristic and Rabbinic Interpretation', *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 96. 3, 2020, 521-536, esp. 225-227. This helpful article also discusses how Miriam was sometimes viewed as a type of the Church.

<sup>12</sup> Views on this subject are not uniform however, and some scholars argue that at least at certain points, Jesus is portrayed as the nation as a whole rather than Moses alone. For instance, in the quotation from Hos. 11:1 in Mt. 2:15, some have argued that Jesus is being treated as a new Israel, since the original quotation refers to the exodus as an overall event. Hagner, for instance, comments that it is not making a prophecy about the future and so it is hard to understand why Matthew thinks this citation has been fulfilled. He says the point being made is that there is a substantial similarity between the two moments of redemptive history, such that they are seen in continuity. Cf. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13. Word Biblical Commentary* 33A, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018 Perlego, 37. For discussion, see D. Hill, *On the Use and Meaning of Hosea vi.6 in Matthew's Gospel*, *New Testament Studies* 24, 1977, 107-19. However, various studies have been done on the various biblical accounts and how Jesus is related to Moses, e.g. Stanley Harstine, *Moses as a Character in the Fourth Gospel: A Study of Ancient Reading Techniques*, London: Bloomsbury, 2002; Stanley Porter (ed.), *The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007; Serge Ruzer, 'Jesus as the New Moses – Signs and Wonders', in *Early Jewish Messianism in the New Testament*, Leiden: Brill, 2020, 124-139, to name a few.

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as a new Moses. Herod learns that the 'King of the Jews' has been born and seeks to destroy him, ordering the Magi to seek him out, but when they do not return, he orders all male children in the area, under the age of two, to be slaughtered. This harkens back to Pharaoh in Egypt, who ordered the destruction of all the new-born male Hebrews (Exod. 1:10-16). Moses is spared by his mother, who places him carefully in a lined basket in the river, where he is rescued by none other than Pharaoh's daughter. The haggadic lines of Matthew's tale in relation to this story have indeed been long discussed.<sup>13</sup> When we consider that there was a contemporary tradition of a secret scribe who told Pharaoh that a child would be born to the Israelites who would humble the Egyptians (Josephus, *Antiquities* 2.205-6), we start to see further parallels with Matthew's Magi. Given the fact that after the death of Herod, the angel tells Joseph to take the child and his mother back to Israel because 'those seeking his life are dead (Mt. 2:20), an almost identical phrase to Exodus 4:19 where God tells Moses, 'for all those seeking his life are dead', it is plain to see that Jesus is outlined as the New Moses from the outset of the Gospel.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, in Matthew, the new Moses motif seems to be connected to the idea of a new Exodus from the Exile. His genealogy has only 13 generations from this cataclysmic event to the birth of Jesus, not the usual 14 as per the other denominated eras in his reckoning, and thus, the nation is still seen to be in need of a saviour and this is connected to Jesus.<sup>15</sup> As the gospel continues, we see that Jesus is portrayed in various other ways as this new Moses.<sup>16</sup> Jesus also fasts for 40 days and nights before ascending to give the Sermon on the Mount just as Moses fasted for the same period before ascending Sinai (Exod. 34:28, Mt. 5).<sup>17</sup> In Mt. 5:1 we see that Jesus 'goes up on a mountain',

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<sup>13</sup> The historicity of the Herod account is particularly difficult to prove given that we have no external proof it happened. The passage in Matthew is therefore sometimes seen as Midrash or Haggadah based on the Moses narrative. Much of the discussion surrounds the use of Jeremiah 31:15 and Rachael's weeping, or LXX Isaiah 7:14 cited in Mt. 1:23, since Midrash is usually based around a referenced biblical text, but as France points out, the most obvious base text would be the account of Pharaoh's massacre of the innocents. See R. T. France, *Herod and the Children of Bethlehem*, *Novum Testamentum* 21, 1979, 98-120, here 105. However, miraculous birth stories, especially involving exposure were not uncommon in the Ancient Near East, and we also see miraculous birth narratives attributed to Abraham. See France's article for a fuller discussion.

<sup>14</sup>W. S. Baxter, 'Mosaic Imagery in the Gospel of Matthew', *Trinity Journal*, 20:1, 1999, 69-83, 70.

<sup>15</sup> For a helpful outline of the main issues, see Baxter, *Mosaic Imagery* 71. This is the subject of much scholarly discussion and is handled in most major commentaries.

<sup>16</sup> In Deut. 18:15, God promises to send a prophet like Moses in the future, and the Gospel is likely making the claim Jesus is he.

<sup>17</sup> Some argue that he here represents the people, given he is tempted three times by the devil: firstly to stop his hunger by turning stones into bread, secondly to jump from the temple and thirdly to worship the devil for godly power (Mt. 4:3-10). These arguably reflect the grumbling of the Israelites that resulted in the gift of the manna (Exod. 16:2-8); the idolatry of the golden calf (Exod. 32:1-9) and the testing of God in Exodus 17:1-7 over the provision of water, which was then caused to come forth out of a rock. See Baxter, 'Mosaic Imagery', 73. However, this might just be an additional layer to the exodus motif and does not preclude also seeing the parallels between Jesus and Moses. The addition of 'forty nights' detracts from the number forty on its own, which would prove the link to the forty years in the wilderness, in that Moses' fast was specifically said to last forty days and nights. See Dale Allison, *The New Moses*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013, Perlego, 167 (using original pagination, 183 using Perlego pagination). Allison's book is perhaps the most detailed available on Mosaic imagery in the gospel of Matthew.



which made Eusebius note that Moses and Jesus acted in similar ways (*Demonstration of the Gospel* 3:2)<sup>18</sup>—indeed, the phrase above cited occurs twenty-four times in the LXX, eighteen of which are in the Pentateuch and most of those pertain to Moses.<sup>19</sup> Jesus also feeds the multitudes with miraculous bread (Mt. 14-15), just as Moses convinced God to give the Israelites manna in the desert. This narrative account is also traditionally connected to the institution of the Eucharist, which entails the establishment of a New Covenant (Mt. 26:28).<sup>20</sup> The very fact that Jesus institutes a New Covenant is itself reminiscent of the covenantal theology associated with Moses (cf. Exod. 19-24).

The lacuna I mentioned above is therefore that Mary is not Jesus' sister but his mother, and Miriam is not Moses' mother, she is his sister. As such, typologically, her virginity, some would argue, would have little to do with Mary, save for the obvious connection to her name. Furthermore, in Jewish tradition, Miriam is neither unwed nor a virgin. As Siquans points out, this is also not a much later rabbinic tradition, but one found as early as Josephus, who has Hur as her husband (cf. Exod 17:10) and Miriam's child as Bazalal (cf. Exod. 31:2).<sup>21</sup> Commenting on the battle with Amalekites in Exodus 17, he says:

So the armies joined battel[sic] and it came to a close fight hand to hand: both sides shewing great alacrity; and encouraging one another. And indeed while Moses stretched out his hands towards heaven, the Hebrews were too hard for the Amalekites. But Moses not being able to sustain his hands thus stretched out, (for as often as he let down his hands, so often were his own people worsted:) he had his brother Aaron, and Hur, their sister Miriam's husband, to stand on each side of him, and take hold of his hands, and not permit his weariness to prevent it, but to assist him in the extension of his hands. When this was done, the Hebrews conquered the Amalekites by main force.<sup>22</sup>

Given the proximity in date to the gospel writings-Josephus lived from around 37 AD to 100 AD-it is plausible that this is the older tradition and that the Christian writers, wishing to find types of Mary's virginity in the Old Testament, argued erroneously from silence concerning this topic. An unwed Miriam would certainly have suggested a virginal Miriam and so proved

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<sup>18</sup> For an accessible translation, see Eusebius of Caesarea, *Demonstratio Evangelica*, trans. W.J. Ferrar (London: SPCK, 1920, Repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001; transcribed Ipswich, Roger Pearce, 2003), accessed April 30, 2026 [https://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearce/morefathers/files/eusebius\\_de\\_00\\_epreface.htm](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearce/morefathers/files/eusebius_de_00_epreface.htm)

<sup>19</sup> Allison, *Moses Typology*, 173 and 175.

<sup>20</sup> This is not as clear cut as it might seem. There is certainly an exile motif in Matthew.

<sup>21</sup> Siquans, *Miriam's Image*, 528.

<sup>22</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, III. 2, 4, in Flavius Josephus, *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus the Jewish Historian*, trans. W Whiston, London, Unknown Publisher, 1737. Accessed March 5, 2026. [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-3.html?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-3.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

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aa strong type of Mary.<sup>23</sup> If Miriam were married, she would not be a virgin, and the typology might fall apart completely.<sup>24</sup>

### **Miriam and Jochebed**

Now, rationally, Jesus's own name pertains more to Joshua than to Moses. Names do not necessarily have to reflect exactly the types so obviously signified in the gospel accounts. They might also carry connotations in and of themselves as distinct from these portrayals. That said, if we accept, as Tradition attests, that Jesus' mother really was called Mary, one might be reading too much into her name to see a direct connection with Miriam—perhaps her name was simply chosen by Anne and Joachim for familial reasons. However, in biblical tradition names generally reflect something of a person's personality or role in God's plan, and one might see in Mary's name the Hebrew root, *mar*, which means bitter, and calls to mind her bitter anguish as she saw the suffering of her only Son. Nevertheless, the depiction of Jesus as a New Moses is evident in the biblical text and this makes one wonder if perhaps we might be missing something if we do not consider Jochebed as a type of Mary, too. The problem is that we know very little about her from the biblical account, save that she gave birth to Moses. She is mentioned by name in Exodus 6:20 as Amram's father's sister whom Amram took for a wife and again in Numbers 26:59 where she is said again to be Amram's wife and the daughter of Levi. In the first passage, she is said to be the mother of Aaron and Moses and in the latter to be the mother also of Miriam. The only other references to her are implicit in Exodus 2:1-10, the story of Moses' birth and rescue.

However, there are some Jewish traditions concerning Jochebed. We have already mentioned above that she is associated in *B. Sotah* 11b with one of the midwives who saved the Hebrew children from the fate ordained by Pharaoh. Above, we also mentioned Miriam's prophecy concerning the birth of Moses in particular, and promised to return to rabbinic interpretations of her. It is right that we now consider how she appears alongside her mother in rabbinic thought because there is another tradition found in the same Talmudic tractate,

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<sup>23</sup> Some might argue the Christian reading is earlier, but such arguments are usually based on later rabbinic texts such as *B. Sotah* 11a-13a. It might even be presumed by some that the rabbis in some way wanted to deny Miriam's virginity in contrast to the virgin Mary. Siquans points out that the Rabbinic ideal is one of fertility and children, whereas the Church fathers promote asceticism and virginity. It is more natural for the rabbis that an adult woman is married and has children (Siquans, 'Miriam's Image,' 529). However, this earlier text shows that such a tradition was in much earlier circulation and would have been known at the time of the gospels themselves, making it more plausible that the gospel writers would have been familiar with the Jewish tradition.

<sup>24</sup> It would also fit with the gospel ideal of Jesus being a son of David, since Hur is an ancestor of David, though, if this be the case, why is he not mentioned in the genealogies of Matthew and Luke? However, the name Miriam might still be significant if we consider that in Jewish tradition, Miriam is seen as 'the origin of the "house of the monarchy" and thus also of David'. See Siquans, 'Miriam's Image' 529.



B. *Sotah* 12a, that is worthy of mention in relation to the gospel. It is cited below in full for clarity.

The verse states: “And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took for a wife a daughter of Levi” (Exod. 2:1). The Gemara asks: To where did he go? Rav Yehuda bar Zevina says: He went according to the advice of his daughter Miriam, as the Gemara will proceed to explain. A Sage teaches: Amram, the father of Moses, was the great man of his generation. Once he saw that the wicked Pharaoh said: “Every son that is born you shall cast into the river, and every daughter you shall save alive” (Exodus 1:22), he said: We are labouring for nothing by bringing children into the world to be killed. Therefore, he arose and divorced his wife. All others who saw this followed his example and arose and divorced their wives. His daughter, Miriam, said to him: Father, your decree is more harsh for the Jewish people than that of Pharaoh, as Pharaoh decreed only with regard to the males, but you decreed both on the males and on the females. And now no children will be born. Additionally, Pharaoh decreed to kill them only in this world, but you decreed in this world and in the World-to-Come, as those not born will not enter the World-to-Come. Miriam continued: Additionally, concerning Pharaoh the wicked, it is uncertain whether his decree will be fulfilled, and it is uncertain if his decree will not be fulfilled. You are a righteous person, and as such, your decrees will certainly be fulfilled, as it is stated with regard to the righteous: “You shall also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto you” (Job 22:28). Amram accepted his daughter’s words and arose and brought back, i.e., remarried, his wife, and all others who saw this followed his example and arose and brought back their wives. The Gemara asks: If Amram remarried Jochebed, rather than say: “And took for a wife a daughter of Levi” (Exod. 2:1), it should have stated: “And returned for a wife the daughter of Levi.” Rav Yehuda bar Zevina says: He performed an act of marriage just as one would do for a first marriage. He sat her on a palanquin [*appiryon*], and Aaron and Miriam danced before her, and the ministering angels said: “A joyful mother of children” (Psalms 113:9).<sup>25</sup>

You will notice that above the focus was on Matthew’s gospel and his depiction of Jesus in relation to Moses. This was deliberate. When we compare the account in Matthew 1:18 – 2:23, we see a number of similarities. Firstly, both passages have the Exodus 1:1-2:10 narrative in the background. It is reasonable to think that they might therefore share some elements in common. However, some of the similarities are very striking. In the first instance, it should be noted that the idea of being engaged in Matthew would actually have meant much more than it does today—it was the first stage in marriage, *Erusin*. The reason Joseph would have had to divorce Mary is that it is considered legally binding and whilst today it takes place just before the *Nissu’in* or marriage proper, in the time of Jesus, there probably would have been a gap of up to about a year. Mary and Joseph, then, are technically married

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<sup>25</sup> B. *Sotah* 12a, Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz (ed. and comm.), Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2015. Accessed March 5, 2026. <https://www.sefaria.org/Sotah.12a.15?lang=bi&with=About&lang2=en>

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already, at least to some extent. This brings me to the next key point: Amram divorces his wife. This is exactly what Joseph plans to do when he finds out that Mary is pregnant. Interestingly, in the continuation of this tractate, we learn that Jochebed is already pregnant with Moses when he makes this decision, just as Mary is in Mt. 1:18-19:

The verse states concerning Moses: “**And the woman conceived, and bore a son**; and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months” (Exod. 2:2). The Gemara asks: **But Jochebed was pregnant with Moses for three months at the outset**, before Amram remarried her, as will be explained further. [Emphasis mine]<sup>26</sup>

It is notable that the rabbinic account refers to Exodus 2:2, which says that Jochebed conceived and bore a son, because in the Matthean account, when the angel appears to Joseph, he tells him that she has conceived by the Holy Spirit and will bear a son (Mt. 1:20-21). The reference might be to Isaiah 7:14 in Mt. 1:23, but here it is more like that of LXX Exodus 2:2, as can be seen more clearly in the Greek, where we have the same concepts of being conceived in the womb and giving birth to, specifically, a male child:

καὶ ἐν γαστρὶ ἔλαβεν καὶ ἔτεκεν ἄρσεν· ἰδόντες δὲ αὐτὸ ἀστεῖον ἐσκέπασαν αὐτὸ μῆνας τρεῖς. (Exod. 2:2, LXX)

And **she conceived** [lit. in her belly] and **bore a male child**. Now when they saw it was handsome, they sheltered it for three months. (New English Translation of the Septuagint)

ταῦτα δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐνθυμηθέντος ἰδοὺ ἄγγελος Κυρίου κατ’ ὄναρ ἐφάνη αὐτῷ λέγων· Ἰωσήφ υἱὸς Δαυεὶδ, μὴ φοβηθῆς παραλαβεῖν Μαρίαν τὴν γυναῖκά σου, τὸ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν ἐκ Πνεύματός ἐστιν Ἁγίου· **τέξεται δὲ υἱὸν** καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν· αὐτὸς γὰρ σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν. (Mt. 1:20-21)

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is **conceived in her** is from the Holy Spirit. **She will bear a son**, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (English Standard Version)

The strongest link is the use of the identical verb, ἔτεκεν ↔ τέξεται, but the ideas of being ‘in the womb’ and ‘in her’ show a structural and conceptual parallel, too, even if the exact wording differs. This is more apparent when we remove ἐκ Πνεύματός ἐστιν Ἁγίου, ‘by the holy spirit’, which is simply an inserted explanatory gloss demarcating the method of the conception. Interestingly, the rest of what the angel says seems to reflect the prophecy made

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

by Miriam that was mentioned earlier on in the same tractate, when suggesting that Miriam was also the midwife, Puah:

**Alternatively, the word Puah is related to one of the verbs that describe speaking, as she would speak [po'a] through divine inspiration and say: In the future, my mother will give birth to a son who will save the Jewish people.<sup>27</sup>**

The angel says: 'She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, **for he will save his people from their sins**' (Mt. 2:21). Moses is the saviour of the Jewish people from Egypt, and in Matthew this seems to have been transposed onto Jesus and applied to a spiritual rescue. This would be quite in continuity with his idea that despite being in the Holy Land the people were still in exile, in conjunction with his regular citations of Isaiah who connected the punishment of the exile to sin and who also promised a day of redemption figured in a suffering servant.<sup>28</sup> If a similar tradition does lie behind Matthew, it would seem that the words of Miriam have been put onto the lips of an angelic being, but the parallel is striking in context. Even if we were to discount this earlier part of the tractate as being from a slightly different tradition, it is also striking that when Amram remarries Jochebed, apparently aged 130, he is said to perform an act of marriage with her *as one would when first married*. Has she been, despite her pregnancy, returned to some kind of virginal state? The text continues:

This interpolation concerning her birth is interpreted: Her birth was in Egypt, but her conception was not in Egypt. Since the Jewish people were in Egypt for two hundred ten years and Moses was eighty years old at the time of the exodus, Jochebed was one hundred thirty years old when Moses was born. In light of this, the Gemara is asking how the verse can refer to her as a daughter. **Rabbi Yehuda says: The signs of a young woman were born in her when her husband remarried her, and she became like a young girl again.<sup>29</sup> [Emphasis mine]**

A 'young girl', especially in this context of a newlywed bride, is arguably another way of saying a virgin. Now, it is true that Mary is said to be an *actual virgin* at the time of Jesus' conception, a notable difference with the already pregnant Jochebed, but it is nonetheless interesting to find, arguably, virginity associated with the mother of the saviour of Israel in both accounts. It is notable, too, that we have angels occurring in both accounts who announce miraculous births, setting both Mary and Jochebed in line with biblical women like Hagar (Gen. 16:7-12), Sarah (Gen. 18:1-5) and Manoah's wife (Judg. 13:2-7). If we understand the gospel account in

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<sup>27</sup> B. *Sotah* 11b, I Steinsaltz, accessed March 5, 2026, <https://www.sefaria.org/Sotah.11b.13?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

<sup>28</sup> It was said above that he hinted at this exilic theology in his genealogy and elsewhere in the Gospel. See Baxter, *Mosaic Imagery*, esp. 71-79 where he discusses the connection between the Exodus and the Exile in Matthew's theology. For Matthew's connections to Isaiah's exilic theology, see Mt. 3:3 in context, quoting Isaiah 40:3; Mt. 4:15-16 quoting Isaiah 9:1-2; Mt. 8:17 in relation to Isaiah 53:4; Mt. 12:17-21 in relation to Isaiah 42:1-4; Mt. 13:14-15, which quotes Isaiah 6:9-10; and Mt. 15:7-9 quoting Isaiah 29:13.

<sup>29</sup> B. Talmud *Sotah* 12a. Accessed March 5, 2026. <https://www.sefaria.org/Sotah.12a.15?lang=bi&with=About&lang2=en>

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light of this tradition, Mary is not a new Miriam – she is a new Jochebed, the new mother of the new Moses.

### **Are We Being Realistic?**

How likely is it, though, that Matthew knew a similar story? To suggest that Matthew is reliant on the much later Talmud would of course be utterly absurd. Might it even be that the rabbis are trying to ape the Matthean account in some way? However, when we consider the rabbis mentioned in relation to this tractate, the possibility that there be a shared tradition somewhere behind both texts becomes more likely. Rabbi Hama ben Hanina probably dates to c. 250-290 AD. I have not been able to find a secure date for Yehuda bar Zevina and the name of the sage who teaches about Amram's divorce is missing, but the text continues to say that Rabbi Yehudah, probably ben Il'ai, said the signs of a young woman were born in her, and he dates to around 135-170 AD, getting us back even closer and rooting us in the Tannaitic tradition once more. This also places us less than a century after the usual dating of Matthew, from around 80-90 AD.

We also know that there were other Amram narratives circulating at that time. Josephus recounts that Amram was afraid for his whole nation because his wife was with child, and prayed to God to have compassion on the righteous men of his people and that their enemies be destroyed. In response, he has a vision in a dream where God says to him:

Know therefore that I shall provide for you all in common what is for your good; and particularly for thy self what shall make thee famous. For that child, out of dread of whose nativity the Egyptians have doomed the Israelite children to destruction, shall be this child of thine: and shall be concealed from those who watch to destroy him. And when he is brought up, in a surprising way, he shall deliver the Hebrew nation from the distress they are under from the Egyptians. His memory shall be famous while the world lasts; and this not only among the Hebrews, but foreigners also. All which shall be the effect of my favour to thee, and to thy posterity. He shall also have such a brother, that he shall himself obtain my priesthood, and his posterity shall have it after him to the end of the world.<sup>30</sup>

When Amram awakes, he tells this to Jochebed. Both are fearful, understandably, but the fear they experience is a holy one, concerned for happiness that will also come to their son. Now, there is no mention of a divorce here, but the angelic appearance to Amram does bear some resemblance to our dreaming Joseph in Matthew. Furthermore, there is also something miraculous about Moses' birth in that Jochebed does not feel any pain. Josephus continues to tell us that she experiences no pain in childbirth because the punishment given to Eve does not fall on righteous women and this is said to be confirmation to her of the vision given to

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<sup>30</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* II. 8, 3. Accessed March 5, 2026. <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-2.html>

Amram.<sup>31</sup> Notably, similar is said of Mary, that her birth-giving was painless. In the *Odes of Solomon* 19,<sup>32</sup> a Coptic Christian hymn discovered in 1909 but dated to the first century by many, we are told that she bore Jesus without pain and did not require a midwife; and there are also traces of similar thought in patristic texts, such as Irenaeus' *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 54.<sup>33</sup> Could this be another point of contact between Christian tradition and the Jochebed tradition? It is notable that the Protoevangelium of James, from around AD 140-150, also recounts how Salome confirms that the birth of Jesus did not even break Mary's hymen, and therefore, I would posit, caused no pain. Also, the child is said simply to appear after a bright light shines – there is no discussion of Mary's labour. Perhaps the author knew a similar tradition, too?<sup>34</sup>

At the very least, virtually contemporaneous accounts of an announcement to Moses' father of his son's salvific role could prove a point of contact with the angelic announcement made to Joseph. It seems that comparable Jewish traditions concerning Moses' birth were in circulation, and given that Christianity was originally a Jewish sect, it would make perfect sense for the gospel writers to have taken them into account. This cannot, of course, prove the proposal above that the author of Matthew knew the same, or a very similar, account of Moses' birth as the Talmudic rabbis, and in fact it might be argued that Matthew knew the same story as Josephus, but it does make the possibility that Matthew was using traditions surrounding the birth of Moses more likely, and therefore it is posited that perhaps, in view of all the similarities above, Matthew's gospel might in some way be the earliest evidence we have of the Moses tradition ascribed to only slightly later rabbis in the Talmud.

Other scholars have also noted the parallels between Jewish accounts of Moses' birth and the birth narrative of Jesus in Matthew's gospel. Raymond Brown discusses at length the possibility of an underlying Moses legend and a pre-Matthean Jesus infancy narrative, noting that a dream motif is widespread and may be 'original in the Moses legend'.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, we also find it in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* to Exodus 1:15, where Pharaoh sees Egypt on a scale in a dream – which is interpreted by his magicians as saying a child will be born in Israel who will destroy Egypt – and it is notable that in the *Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo-Philo* 9 [*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, abbrev. LAB], *Miriam* has a dream in which an angel comes to her and tells her to tell her parents that they will have a son who will be cast into the water because by him the water will be dried up (cf. Mt. 2:1-2). Brown suggests that perhaps, in the pre-Matthean sequence, the warning to Herod in a dream preceded the angel's appearance

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<sup>31</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews II*, 8.4.

<sup>32</sup> James Hamilton Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon: The Syriac Texts* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1977), 82.

<sup>33</sup> For an accessible translation, see Irenaeus of Lyon, *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. Armitage Robinson (London: SPCK, 1920), 29.

<sup>34</sup> Protoevangelium of James 11-12 tells how Salome physically examines Mary to see that her hymen has not been broken. PE 11 seems to know Matthew's account, or perhaps another source that underpinned it, since it has Mary being visited in much the same way as Matthew's gospel. Was there a common Jochebed tradition lurking in the background?

<sup>35</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, rev. Ed., New York: Doubleday, 1993, 114, esp. n. 42.

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to Joseph. This is because Josephus also recounts t, in Egypt, the scribes warned Pharaoh about the coming birth of the Hebrew deliverer before God appeared to Amram on account of his fears, which leads Brown to suspect Matthew has based his account on a similar narrative, but altered the order of events to suit his Christological purposes. Brown suggests that a different sequence in the pre-Matthean narrative might explain Joseph's hesitancy about taking Mary as a wife into his home, and that the order was changed in Matthew because he had already introduced the theme of the virginal conception.<sup>36</sup> Allison also notes the same discrepancy between Josephus and Matthew's ordering. In Josephus, the parent's dream is in second position, not first, but other themes of the three main sections are quite similar, he claims. Allison, in fact, sees a greater connection to *The Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo-Philo* 9 (LAB), probably datable to around 70-100 AD and so in the same time frame as our Gospel, in which Pharaoh also has a dream that is interpreted in terms of a child born to Israel who will spell disaster for the Egyptians and is advised to slaughter all the male children.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, LAB 9:1-2 has the Jewish men resolved to separate from their wives, saying:

...the elders of the people gathered the people together in mourning, and they mourned and groaned, saying, "The wombs of our wives have suffered miscarriage; our fruit is delivered to our enemies. And now we are lost and let us set up rules for ourselves that a man should not approach his wife lest the fruit of their wombs be defiled and our offspring serve idols. For it is better to die without sons until we know what God may do."<sup>38</sup>

It is not hard to imagine that the suggestion for this was elsewhere attributed to Amram in the same era, as per the Talmudic account, though it should be noted that Amram in LAB 9.3 refuses to take part in this activity, citing God's providential care over Israel and instead says he will 'take his wife'. This pleases God (9:7) and God promises to do wonders in the house of Jacob on account of his righteousness through his son. That said, on those very grounds, the closest tradition to Matthew still seems to be one in *Sotah* 12a. Indeed, it is notable that Jochebed is barely referenced in these other texts. Only a tradition like that in *Sotah* 12a could rightly account for Joseph's decision to divorce Mary, and it is here also argued that the seemingly virginal state of Jochebed in that text could bear some relation to Mary's virginity in the Gospel account.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we first looked at the possibility that Mary and Miriam were symbolically connected in Matthew. A cursory view of the Miriam traditions, however, seemed to suggest

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<sup>36</sup> Brown, *Birth*, 115-17. For other traditions about a scribe warning Pharaoh, such as the *Chronicle of Moses*, see Allison, *New Moses*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 158-9.

<sup>37</sup> Allison, *New Moses*, 158 original pagination, 158,

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*



that the connections were not as obvious as many early Christian writers had presumed when contemporary Jewish sources to our gospels were taken into consideration. From here, the discussion moved to whether we might better conclude that Mary is more appropriately identified typologically with Jochebed, the mother of Moses. In particular, it seemed that the Matthean account seemed to be drawing on a tradition similar to one found much later in the Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 12a. It was argued that a number of parallels might be drawn between Matthew's account of Jesus' conception and birth. At first, reliance on such a tradition seemed impossible, given the late dating of the Talmud itself, but a look at the dates of the rabbis to whom it was attributed gave rise to the question of whether it might in fact be a much earlier tradition. Some other texts more or less contemporary to the Gospel account, namely Josephus, *Antiquities* and *LAB*, and their accounts of Moses' birth were then discussed. Whilst it was possible to demonstrate some similarities between Josephus and Matthew, on balance, it still seemed as though Matthew was likely referencing a contemporary Jewish tradition, but not one exactly as found in either of these texts. That said, combined with the dating of the rabbis and the fact that myths about Moses' birth were circulating that contained similar ideas to that found in B. *Sotah* 12a at the time of Matthew's composition, it lent credence to the possibility that B. *Sotah* 12a had much earlier origins than just the Talmud. Following from this, both these possible ur-texts or ur-traditions seemed not quite to fit the pattern in Matthew as well as that tradition found in B. *Sotah* 12a. This author therefore argues that perhaps Matthew did know a similar account to B. *Sotah* 12a and possibly even B. *Sotah* 11b, and transposed certain elements in order to construct Jesus' birth narrative. If this be true, then Matthew's gospel is, in fact, the earliest evidence for the antiquity of the tradition behind *Sotah* 12a, and if this be the case, then we need to consider Mary not in terms of Miriam, but in terms of Jochebed.