



Numbers - Chapter Twelve

II Numbers 10:11-12:16 - Marching from Sinai to Kadesh (continues/concludes)

II.b Hebrews 11:1-12:16 - Three protests (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Twelve

After the protests of the people comes an even more painful challenge to Moses' authority. His brother Aaron, the high priest, and his sister Miriam, a prophetess (Exodus 15:20), contest his unique position. Once again their initial remarks, concerning Moses' Cushite wife, are only cover for their real complaint: "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?"

II.b.iv Numbers 12:1-16 - Aaron and Miriam Jealous of Moses

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had indeed married a Cushite woman); ² and they said, 'Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?' And the Lord heard it.

Numbers 12:1-2

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses. This represents a further challenge to Moses' supreme authority, which has many points in common with the previous two challenges. Moses might have expected support from his own family but that is not always the case: <<*And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house'>>* (Matthew 13:57), and: <<*For not even his brothers believed in him*>> (John 7:5).

Nothing is known about the Cushite woman beyond this brief mention. She may be the same person as Zipporah in Exodus 2:16-22, although she is usually described as a Midianite. Some texts, however, suggest Midian and Cushan are the same, as indicated by: <<*I saw the tents of Cushan under affliction; the tent-curtains of the land of Midian trembled*>> (Habakkuk 3:7). Since Cush normally refers to ancient Ethiopia, most interpreters think that the Cushite woman probably was Moses' second wife, and that she came from Ethiopia. This leads some commentators to suggest that racial or ethnic prejudice may have been involved, the objection being to someone of African descent. In any case it becomes clear that Miriam and Aaron's objection to the Cushite woman was pretence, and that the real issue was their challenge to Moses' supreme authority.

Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? This attack attempted to put Moses down, making him seem proud. After all, it should matter nothing to Aaron and Miriam if indeed the Lord had spoken only through Moses. Their real charge was that Moses 'goes about acting as if he is the only one the Lord speaks through,' accusing Moses of pride. Did the Lord indeed only speak through Moses? No and yes. Of course, the Lord had spoken through many in the Book of Exodus already: the Lord spoke the people through Aaron in Exodus 4:30; he spoke to Aaron in Exodus 12:1; Miriam herself spoke words inspired by God in Exodus 15:21. However, in the sense of there being one primary leader for Israel, there was only one. Moses, under God's hand, had the authority and the accountability to lead the people.

Has he not spoken through us also? This question was meant to lift Miriam and Aaron up. "After all, God speaks to us also. Should not we get some of the credit around here?" Of course, God had spoken to Miriam and Aaron in the past, but he had not given them the authority to lead the nation. Can God give one man the authority to lead his people? Of course he can. The Old and New Testaments are filled with this kind of leadership, e.g. Moses, Joshua, David, Daniel, James, Peter, Paul, Timothy, Titus, and of course Jesus, whose leadership style Christians are commanded to imitate.

And the Lord heard it. Of course God heard it. God always does, and he hears according to truth, not according to mere appearance. Miriam and Aaron, as is often the case, were accusing Moses of the very same sin motivating them to make the accusation, pride.

³ Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth. ⁴ Suddenly the Lord said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, 'Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting.' So the three of them came out.

Numbers 12:3-4

Now the man Moses was very humble. The Hebrew term here translated humble, Hebrew *'anaw*, is more often translated meek or poor. The focus is more on Moses' attitude than on his demeanour. Some have argued that Moses could not have written in this way about himself, thereby challenging Moses' authorship of Numbers. It is clear, however, that the inclusion of this description of Moses' character is both accurate and necessary for understanding the account. Jesus, too, spoke of himself in this way: <<***Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls***>> (Matthew 11:29).

On the face of the earth indicates that Moses was highly respected, certainly by Pharaoh and the people of Egypt, but also when he encountered other peoples during the 40 years in the wilderness, e.g. the defeat of the Amorites (21:21-35), and Balaam and the dread of the Moabites (Chapters 22-24). Here Moses relies on divine vindication rather than defending himself.

Suddenly. There was no long delay. Many of God's judgements are long in coming, at least from a human perspective, but on occasion, he does bring his justice suddenly.

Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting. Vindication comes quickly, as all three, Miriam, Aaron, and Moses, are summoned by God, who then points out Moses' unique qualities, as seen in the 11-line poem in vv.6-8. Christian readers may see in this description of Moses' unique mediating role as a foreshadowing of Christ, the prophet greater than Moses: <<***The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet***>> (Deuteronomy 18:15), <<***Moses said, "The Lord your God will raise up for you from your own people a prophet like me. You must listen to whatever he tells you"***>> (Acts 3:22), and: <<***This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, "God will raise up a prophet for you from your own people as he raised me up"***>> (Acts 7:37).

⁵ Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the entrance of the tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forward. ⁶ And he said, 'Hear my words:

When there are prophets among you,
I the Lord make myself known to them in visions;
I speak to them in dreams.

⁷ Not so with my servant Moses;
he is entrusted with all my house.

⁸ With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles;
and he beholds the form of the Lord.

Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?’

Numbers 12:5-8

Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud. God took a personal, powerful interest in this important matter. He wanted to make his will plainly known.

This sets Moses apart from the ordinary prophets, who receive their revelations in visions and dreams, which thus involves much more imagery. By contrast, God speaks to Moses face to face, that is, as one person facing another and conversing: <<*Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent*>> (Exodus 33:11). This implies two-way verbal communication, often extensive, as well as extended dialogue between God and Moses. One NT author goes further in his analysis of communication from God: <<*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs*>> (Hebrews 1:1-4).

He is entrusted with all my house. In other words, he is like the trusted manager of a man’s household, such as was Eliezer (Genesis 24:2), or Joseph (Genesis 39:4). He is someone with whom the owner speaks directly and explicitly, clearly, not in riddles. There were times when those closest to Jesus did not always understand what he was saying, but towards the end it became clear to them: <<*His disciples said, ‘Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech! Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God’*>> (John 16:29-30).

The form of the Lord. Form, Hebrew *Temunah*, is sometimes translated ‘likeness’, e.g. <<*You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth*>> (Exodus 20:4). At Sinai, Israel did not see God’s likeness but only heard his voice: <<*Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. He declared to you his covenant, which he charged you to observe, that is, the ten commandments; and he wrote them on two stone tablets. And the Lord charged me at that time to teach you statutes and ordinances for you to*

observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy. Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely>> (Deuteronomy 4:12-15). It is not entirely clear how seeing God's form or likeness differs from seeing his face, but it apparently involved a less intensive kind of vision. The point here is that Moses was allowed to see what most ordinary believers must wait until after death to see: <<As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness>> (Psalm 17:15).

Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? To oppose Moses, whom God had put in this position, was also to oppose God himself. As much as Miriam and Aaron did not want to recognise it, Moses did have a unique calling and equipping before the Lord. They did not speak against Moses as the leader of Israel as much as they spoke against Moses the servant of God.

Moses is still considered to be one of the greatest Hebrews to have ever lived, yet he was a servant: <<And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: 'Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!''>> (Revelation 15:3). Several NT writers considered themselves to be servants of the Lord also: <<Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons>> (Philippians 1:1), <<Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness>> (Titus 1:1), <<Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ>> (2 Peter 1:1), and: <<Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ: May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance>> (Jude 1-2).

⁹ And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them, and he departed. ¹⁰ When the cloud went away from over the tent, Miriam had become leprous, as white as snow. And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she was leprous. ¹¹ Then Aaron said to Moses, 'Oh, my lord, do not punish us for a sin that we have so foolishly committed. ¹² Do not let her be like one stillborn, whose flesh is half consumed when it comes out of its mother's womb.'

Numbers 12:9-12

Moses' unique access to God should have been evident all along to Miriam and Aaron; their obtuseness prompts the anger of the Lord. After making his anger

evident, the remarkable presence of God departed. This left an extremely uncomfortable pause for Miriam and Aaron.

Miriam had become leprous, as white as snow. Biblical leprosy covers a variety of skin conditions, characterised by sores and peeling skin; refer to the comments on Leviticus 13:1-59. The flakiness of Miriam's skin, not necessarily its whiteness, causes her affliction to be compared to snow and the skin of a stillborn child.

Israel often treated leprosy as a sign of God's judgement on sinners. This was, of course, rarely the case. However, in Miriam's case it was judgement for her disobedience to God, as it was also with King Uzziah: <<*Then Uzziah was angry. Now he had a censer in his hand to make offering, and when he became angry with the priests a leprous disease broke out on his forehead, in the presence of the priests in the house of the Lord, by the altar of incense*>> (2 Chronicles 26:19).

And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she was leprous. It seems that Miriam did not immediately know this; the sense seems to be that Aaron noticed it first as he turned and looked.

Oh, my lord, do not punish us for a sin that we have so foolishly committed. Aaron seems a man easily swayed; swayed by a crowd wanting an idol, swayed by his sister, who seemed to be instigator, because she is named first and was first struck with leprosy, and now swayed quickly back to a humble submission before Moses. Now Aaron called Moses his lord or master, attributing to Moses the power to strike Miriam with leprosy, and he confessed his previous criticism as foolish and sinful. Sadly, it is not possible to separate Aaron's immediate and dramatic change of heart from the threat that he might be the next victim of God's judgement. His confession seems full of self-interest rather than true repentance or even concern for his sister.

¹³ And Moses cried to the Lord, 'O God, please heal her.' ¹⁴ But the Lord said to Moses, 'If her father had but spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and after that she may be brought in again.' ¹⁵ So Miriam was shut out of the camp for seven days; and the people did not set out on the march until Miriam had been brought in again. ¹⁶ After that the people set out from Hazeroth, and camped in the wilderness of Paran.

Numbers 12:13-16

And Moses cried to the Lord. This was the first word spoken by Moses in this chapter. He had not spoken the entire time he was accused, leaving it up to God

to answer his critics. When a leader perceives accusations are petty, false, or self-motivated, the right thing to do is to ignore them, leave them up to God, and keep busy with what the Lord has called the leader to do, even as Jesus was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he remained silent before his accusers, as foretold in Isaiah 53:7.

O God, please heal her. When Moses spoke, it was in prayer for his accusers. Moses certainly was a man faithful in the Lord's house. God heard Moses' cry and healed Miriam because he is a compassionate God who hears prayers and answers them according to his will: <<***He heals the broken-hearted, and binds up their wounds***>> (Psalm 147:3), <<***Moreover, the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, like the light of seven days, on the day when the Lord binds up the injuries of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow***>> (Isaiah 30:26), <<***Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved; for you are my praise***>> (Jeremiah 17:14), and: <<***Come, let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up***>> (Hosea 6:1). Above all, Christians are healed because of the sacrificial death of Jesus: <<***But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed***>> (Isaiah 53:5).

As final proof of Moses' status, his prayer for his sister's healing is immediately answered. However, like other healed lepers, she must **be shut out of the camp for seven days** before being readmitted; refer to Leviticus 14:1-9 and Numbers 5:2. This punishment is justified by comparison with family custom, where a child must be disciplined for shaming her father.