

Numbers 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Numbers chapter 12. And the three of them came out.

And 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. And he said, Hear my words.

If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision. I speak with him in a dream, not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house.

With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles. And he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?

And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them, and he departed. When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, like snow. And Aaron turned toward Miriam, and behold, she was leprous.

[1 : 20] And Aaron said to Moses, O my Lord, do not punish us, because we have done foolishly and have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother's womb.

And Moses cried to the Lord, O God, please heal her, please. But the Lord said to Moses, If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be shamed seven days?

Let her be shut outside the camp seven days, and after that she may be brought in again. So Miriam was shut outside the camp seven days, and the people did not set out on the march till Miriam was brought in again.

After that the people set out from Hazaroth and camped in the wilderness of Paran. Numbers chapter 12 is a short but a strange passage relating an odd incident in the cycle of rebellions that Numbers describes.

It's an event of sibling rivalry. We should consider that in Exodus chapter 15, Miriam is described as Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron. Notably, she isn't mentioned as the sister of Moses.

[2 : 27] The bonds of the family of Moses, Aaron and Miriam are fragile at the moment. Moses hasn't been with his family for many, many years. He grew up outside of his family, and he's not really someone who's connected with his family fully yet.

While Aaron is connected with Moses more now, Moses still stands apart from him in many ways, and Miriam probably still hasn't truly connected with him. She was present at his deliverance as an infant, but she probably didn't see a great deal of him after he was weaned.

Now he's come back into her life almost 80 years later, and you can imagine that Aaron and Miriam would struggle to know how to relate to this brother of theirs, who's now leading their people, while still feeling like something of a stranger to them.

There are a number of questions that this passage raises. What is it about Moses' cush-eyed wife? Who is she, for starters? Is this someone different from Zipporah? And also, why does this lead to the second complaint?

The question, has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? What is this event doing here in the first place? Why is it recalled later on in Deuteronomy chapter 24, verses 8 to 9?

[3 : 38] It seems to be Miriam in particular who speaks against Moses.

The verb used to describe the speaking in verse 1 is third person feminine singular. Aaron may be party to the speech, primarily in willingly hearing it.

But the Lord heard it. There's no indication that Moses heard it, but God heard it, and he acted in the situation. There are some similarities between this situation and the situation in Numbers chapter 11, verse 1, where there's a general grumbling among the people, and God hears it and acts.

Who is Moses' wife then in this situation, the Cush-eyed woman? Is it Zipporah? Has Moses taken a second wife? Now, one of the questions here is the location of Cush.

Many people have identified Cush with Ethiopia, but in Habakkuk chapter 3, verse 7, there's a suggestion that it might be something else as well. I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction.

[4 : 50] The curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. So, in the parallelism here, Cushan and Midian seem to be associated Cush and Midian, and if she's a Cushite in that sense, a Midianite, it would explain what is going on here, that she is, in fact, Zipporah.

This isn't another woman that we've not been told about. Now, why would they complain about someone that Moses had married almost 40 years earlier? Well, because they had only just met her for the first time, perhaps only a month or so previously.

In Exodus chapter 18, verses 2 to 7, we read, Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her home, along with her two sons.

The name of the one was Gershom, for he said, I have been a sojourner in a foreign land, and the name of the other, Eliezer, for he said, The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.

Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God. And when he sent word to Moses, I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her, Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him.

[6 : 05] And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent. As I've argued elsewhere, Exodus 18 is probably not in its chronological place, but it's moved forward for reasons of the thematic unity of the text.

It most likely happened later on during their period at Sinai. Now, what was the objection to the Kushite woman? Presumably that she was a Gentile and a foreigner. She was not an Israelite.

She was an outsider from a nation that is quite distant from Egypt or from Israel. Miriam is not too keen on having this outsider as her sister-in-law, and there seems to be some sort of rivalry or opposition there, perhaps.

The opposition to Moses' wife Zipporah seems to move into something of a more general opposition to Moses himself and his leadership. Now, this is quite striking a development.

There's no need to presume that it happened immediately. Rather, there might have been quite a lot of intervening conversation between this initial complaining against Zipporah and then the complaining against Moses' leadership.

[7 : 11] However, what the text does is it shows the connection between the two things, that the later complaint against Moses' leadership grew out of this very petty opposition to Zipporah, the sister-in-law.

If we just had that second statement by itself, it may seem that there was some grand theological impulse there, some challenge to the implicit theology of leadership that led to the prophetic primacy of Moses.

But the first claim deflates the second, revealing it to be based upon nothing but petty personal squabbles and rivalries and prejudice against this outsider.

How many of our grand theological debates would be deflated in a similar manner if the petty impulses that provoked them were revealed? At this point, we encounter another question, which is why the humility of Moses is mentioned.

It seems to be a strange detail, maybe something extraneous to the narrative at this point. It seems to intrude upon their movement of the text. Miriam and Aaron's objections to Moses seem to insinuate that Moses' leadership is somehow ego-driven, that it's about him vaunting his authority over others, putting himself over others.

[8 : 24] And this statement about Moses' humility clearly declares that that impression is quite mistaken. God brings them all together and speaks to them. And there's a challenge here that is a premonition of the later rebellion of Korah.

They are rebelling against the divinely appointed leadership, suggesting that a wider body of people should enjoy this authority, a democratised, or at least, more widely shared spiritual authority and leadership.

God gives a poetic response. And this poetic response describes the different ways that God reveals himself to different persons. And Moses, however, is the one to whom God reveals himself most fully.

He speaks mouth to mouth with Moses. Moses sees the form of the Lord. Moses is the faithful servant, the most trusted servant. He's the one who's faithful in all of God's house.

Here, I think, we see another reason why the humility of Moses is highlighted. Moses' humility may be related to the intensity of the revelation that God gave to him and the intimacy that he enjoys with the Lord.

[9 : 28] Extensive revelation, power, or authority are all huge liabilities and can easily corrupt people. Moses' extreme humility is that which fits him to be the recipient of a unique level of revelation.

If, for a moment, Moses thought that the exceptional degree of revelation and authority that he received was about him, he would be in extreme peril of pride. It's not about him.

It's about the Lord. And he is the humble servant of the Lord who must be faithful and recognise that he's not being set apart by reason of his own personal merit. We could perhaps think of the Apostle Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 12, verses 7-9.

So, to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

[10 : 39] That connection between humility and divine grace and revelation and power is one that's found elsewhere in Scripture. These are important connections.

What is the meaning of Miriam's leprosy? Leprosy is spoken of as a sort of plague in Leviticus chapter 13 and 14, a touch by the Lord. It's considered as a punishment for violating God's holiness.

Miriam has violated God's holiness by speaking against his beloved servant. She is the chief culprit as well. And we should also remember that Aaron has just been touched by the Lord in being appointed as priest.

And if Aaron were cut off as a result of a judgment, the whole people would suffer because they would not have a high priest. Moses has to intercede for Miriam, as Abraham had to intercede for Abimelech and Job for his friends.

This underlines the Lord's claim that Moses has an intimacy with him that Miriam and Aaron and other of the prophets of Israel do not. Miriam is shamed on account of her action.

[11 : 45] If an earthly father had publicly shamed her, she would bear that shame for at least seven days. And her heavenly father should not shame her for anything less. Note that one of the things underlying this story is a conflict between two women, Miriam and Zipporah.

Miriam's opposition to Zipporah leads to her being excluded for seven days. Miriam is made completely white with leprosy. If there was some racial element to her objection to Zipporah, this would be especially fitting.

That Miriam's punishment was one of shame and exclusion should make us consider what it was that she sought to do to Zipporah. Was it not that she wanted Zipporah to be excluded?

Zipporah to be shamed and to be without honour. Furthermore, the sin against Moses had a similar character. It was a grasping for honour in a way that impugned the honour of someone who was the most meek of all men on the earth.

And so she is shamed as a result of that dishonourable way of treating an honourable servant of the Lord. Her exclusion from the camp doesn't seem to be the regular treatment of leprosy, which would have required at least 14 days in Leviticus chapter 13 verse 5.

[12 : 57] If she was healed at once, maybe it is the seven-day purification period discussed in Leviticus 14. Another possibility is that Miriam has complete leprosy. Leviticus chapter 13 verses 13 and 17, in which case a person was white all over, but clean.

And so the exclusion was for the sake of ostracisation and shame. It wasn't for the case of the leprosy itself. Miriam may be seen as an image of the people.

She's a leader of the people. She's a prophetess. She leads the people in song. And in her treatment of Moses, we're seeing something of the more general way in which the people treat Moses and his leadership.

And the defence of God against Miriam and her challenge to Moses' leadership is also a defence of Moses' leadership more generally, which has been under assault by the people and will be under assault from a number of further fronts in the chapters that follow.

A question to consider. What does this passage have to teach us about the inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God? A question to consider.