

Lessons in Adversity: *Moses and His Siblings* (Numbers 12:1-16)

“God’s choice acquaintances are humble men.”
~ Robert Leighton

I. Investigation: An Examination of Numbers 12:1-16

A. Introduction

Criticism from those closest to us breeds the greatest hurt and disappointment. The truthfulness of this statement is observed in Numbers 12. While this is not the first time Moses has been criticized, it is the first time his own siblings grumble against him. Instead of retaliating, Moses remains silent. However, the Lord does not. He takes such criticism of His servant, Moses, as ultimately a personal attack on His sovereignty.

B. Miriam and Aaron’s Opposition (12:1-3)

v. 1 - The feminine singular form of the verb, “speak,” and the reversal of the normal word order (i.e., Miriam mentioned before Aaron) indicates that Miriam was the principal instigator of this complaint. Also, significant is the preposition associated with this verb. Together, they indicate a hostile complaint, similar to the grumbling of the Israelites (cf. 21:5).

To discredit Moses and undermine his leadership, Miriam and Aaron attack Moses’ marriage to a Cushite woman. Note that they did not voice their concern directly to Moses, nor did they speak to the Lord about this matter.

This term has been interpreted in two different ways:

- Cush was seen as part of the Midianite territory (cf. Hab 3:7). Thus, this woman is Zipporah.
- Cush is normally equated with Ethiopia (Isa 20:3; Nah 3:5); and thus, this is a different wife (cf. Exod 18:2).

“Regardless of whether Moses’ wife was Ethiopian or Midianite, the objection to her, it is implied, was ethnic (cf. Lev 24:10)” (Milgrom, *Numbers*, 93).

v. 2 - Miriam and Aaron’s criticism of their brother, Moses, was only a pretext of something far more sinister. They were jealous of Moses’ sole leadership of the Israelites and his relationship with the Lord. As leading prophetess (Exod 15:20) and high priest, they viewed themselves as equals to Moses.

v. 3 - Refraining from responding to his siblings, Moses demonstrates his humility. This term, “humility,” denotes one who is devout or trusting of the Lord (cf. Ps 22:27). It can also speak of one who is weak and exploited (Amos 2:7; Isa 11:4). Moses serves as a stark contrast with his self-asserting siblings.

C. The Lord's Response to Miriam and Aaron (12:4-10)

vv. 4-5 - All parties are called to appear before the Lord. Note the irony of this scene. The very two that are upset that the Lord never talks to them, now have the opportunity to have the Lord address them directly!

Coming out of the tent ensured that the tabernacle would not be unclean from what was about to happen to Miriam (i.e., leprosy).

vv. 6-8 - These verses are poetry, constructed with an emphasis on verse 7. Although identified as a prophet elsewhere in Scripture (cf. Deut 18:15), Moses is distinguished from the other prophets, such as Aaron and Miriam (cf. Exod 4:16; 15:20; Mic 6:4). As the Lord's servant (repeated twice in the Lord's response; also, cf. Exod 14:31; Deut 34:5), Moses oversees God's household.

This unique role affords Moses the opportunity to have an intimate relationship with the Lord. This is noted by the following descriptors:

- "mouth to mouth" - This expression indicates direct dialogue with the Lord (e.g., the "king's confidant" - 2 Kings 25:19).
- "plainly and not in riddles" - This phrase suggests that no interpretation was necessary for God's revelation to Moses.
- "see the form of the Lord" - Moses did not merely hear the voice of God, He caught a glimpse of God Himself (cf. Exod 33).

Note that Miriam and Aaron commented *only* on the Lord speaking to Moses (v. 2). Thus, the Lord's response could imply that Moses' siblings failed to grasp the full extent of His relationship with Moses.

vv. 9-10 - The Lord's hearing in verse 2 implies the beginning of His anger—anger which is now unleashed in judgement upon Miriam and Aaron. The Lord's departure could imply the removal of the prophetic gifts that had been given to Moses' siblings. This point seems to be underscored by Aaron's plea for Moses to intercede—an intercession Aaron could no longer perform.

Ironically, the very issue Miriam was upset about—not having direct access to the Lord—resulted in her struck with a disease that not only barred her from the presence of the Lord, but also, excluded her from the community (cf. Duguid, *Numbers*, 164). "Aaron was spared, perhaps because as high priest his role was vital to the divine economy" (Wenham, *Numbers*, 128).

Often depicted as judgment from the Lord, leprosy captured both the horror that a person experienced from the disease and the repulsion that a person experienced in the community (cf. Hartley, "Holy and Holiness," in *DOTP*, 427). In addition, later Jewish writings taught that the chief cause of leprosy was defamation or slander (cf. Sif. Num. 103).

D. Moses' Intercession for Miriam (12:11-16)

vv. 11-12 - Ironically, the one whom Miriam and Aaron wronged is the only one who can save Miriam. Not only are they forced to recognize their sin and turn to Moses for help, they also must recognize Moses' leadership (i.e., "my lord").

vv. 13-14 - One scholar argues that the brevity of Moses' prayer indicates his "lack of enthusiasm and minimal compliance with Aaron's plea, an attitude supported by the fact that Miriam is not referred to by name but by the impersonal third person [pronoun]" (Milgrom, *Numbers*, 98).

The Lord hears Moses' prayer and completely heals Miriam. The seven days were the seven days of ritual purification (Lev 14:1-20). Observe that her affront to Moses' authority is as disgusting as a father spitting in her face (cf. Deut 25:9).

vv. 15-16 - All of Israel is penalized for Aaron and Miriam's sin as their journey to the Promised Land is delayed.

II. Intersect

A. During adversity, those secure in their relationship with the Lord rest in His presence, claim the His promises, and allow Him to vindicate.

Psalm 135:13-14 -

B. Envy can easily distort reality and result in failure to assess accurately a situation.

2 Corinthians 4:5 -

C. A humble person depends upon the Lord and recognizes His provisions. An arrogant individual, on the other hand, is a direct affront to the Lord and His sovereignty.

1 Peter 5:6-7 -

"Some persons are always ready to level those above them down to themselves, while they are never willing to level those below them up to their own position. But he that is under the influence of true humility will avoid both these extremes. On the one hand, he will be willing that all should rise just so far as their diligence and worth of character entitle them to; and on the other hand, he will be willing that his superiors should be known and acknowledged in their place, and have rendered to them all the honors that are their due." ~ Jonathan Edwards