

Numbers Chapter 12

Verses 1-16: Here is the third complaint in this section. This has elements similar to the previous two complaints in that it has:

- (1) The phrase “spake against” (verses 1,4-6);
- (2) “The Lord heard” (11:1);
- (3) “Anger of the Lord” (11:1, 10, 33);
- (4) “Judgment” (11:1, 33);
- (5) An appeal for mercy (11:2);
- (6) Moses’ intercession (11:2); and
- (7) The journeying (11:35).

This complaint constitutes an important challenge to the authority of Moses, because the priest and a prophetess have instigated a challenge against his high position of being the sole mediator between God and Israel.

“Ethiopian woman”: Cush normally refers to Ethiopia (Gen. 10:6), and thus Moses was probably married a second time. The verb “spake” is feminine singular in Hebrew, possibly indicating she took the lead. Thus, Aaron is once again giving evidence of weak character (Exodus 32:2-4, 22-25, Num. 16:11). Zipporah was a non-Israelite woman. These types of marriages were not uncommon in Israel (1 Chron. 2:34-35). So this was just an excuse for the real reason: “Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses?” The title “my servant Moses” is a very special distinction that he shares only with Abraham (Gen. 26:24), with Caleb (14:24), with Israel as a whole (Isa. 43:10; 44:21), and with the coming Son of David (Isa. 42:1; 53:11). The reason given is that he is “faithful in all mine house”. Moses saw the Lord’s form in a “similitude”, which Israel did not see at Sinai (Deut. 4:12, 15). The Lord would speak with Moses “mouth to mouth” (Jer. 32:4), as in a normal conversation between two people. This is synonymous with “face to face” in Exodus 33:11 and Deut. 34:10; (compare 7:89).

“Leprous”: What Miriam did was to become a permanent part of Israel’s memory (Deut. 24:9).

“If her father had but spit in her face” is a reference to the rebuke a father might administer to his daughter, which would result in a period of shame to follow (Deut. 25:9; Isa. 50:6), how much more Miriam should be shamed seven days for flouting God’s authority. The public nature of her sin called for public punishment (1 Tim. 5:20).

After having stayed there a month or more, as is gathered from (Num. 11:20).

"And abode at Hazeroth": At least seven days, as appears from (Num. 12:15). Which, according to Bunting, was eight miles from Kibroth-hattaavah, or Taberah, which were the same place.

Numbers 12:1 "And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married: for he had married an Ethiopian woman."

Ethiopia (also known as Cush), south of Egypt, was inhabited by the descendants of Cush, the firstborn son of Ham (Gen. 10:6-7). Although the term "Cushite" could have been used concerning Zipporah, Moses' first wife, it seems more likely that Moses had remarried after the death of Zipporah. The marriage to the Ethiopian woman had been recent and furnished the pretext for the attack of Miriam and Aaron. Since Miriam is mentioned first, she probably was the instigator of the attack against Moses.

As the new wife of Moses, she would have had to be a woman of true faith in Yahweh. It is possible that his first wife, Zipporah, had died; it is even more likely that the marriage had ended (Exodus 2:21; 18:1-5).

This opposition was, perhaps, instigated by Miriam, since she is mentioned first in the verse above. Perhaps, Aaron was guilty by association, since we see no punishment upon him for this sin. It appears, they both spoke evil of Moses, but it was Miriam's idea. An Ethiopian was a descendant from Ham, and was a person of dark skin. She would also have been thought of as worse than the Egyptians, as far as religious belief was concerned. It seems, Moses was not interested in sharing his private life, so we do not know if Zipporah was dead at this time or not. Miriam was a prophetess, so it would have been alright for her to speak out for religious purposes, if it had not been God's chosen. It is a dangerous thing to tear down the character of those anointed of God.

Numbers 12:2 "And they said, Hath the LORD indeed spoken only by Moses? hath he not spoken also by us? And the LORD heard [it]."

"Spoken only by Moses": Miriam and Aaron asserted that God had spoken to them in the same way that He had spoken to Moses.

Miriam and Aaron decided that they were just as high up in the ministry as Moses was, and they stated it where God heard them. Pride can get a person into serious trouble. They are justifying their accusation against Moses here. They had no respect for Moses, or his decision. God hears this in a way of judging their actions.

Numbers 12:3 "(Now the man Moses [was] very meek, above all the men which [were] upon the face of the earth.)"

"Very meek": This statement is often cited as evidence that Moses could not have written the book of Numbers, for he would not have boasted in his own humility. However, the Holy Spirit certainly could inspire Moses to make an accurate statement about himself, probably against his own natural inclination. In this context, Moses was asserting there was nothing that he had done to provoke this attack by Miriam and Aaron.

Moses was not full of pride, like Miriam and Aaron were. Moses was so meek, that he did not feel he could do the things God called him to do. Truly he couldn't in his own power, but the power of God within him could do it.

Numbers 12:4 "And the LORD spake suddenly unto Moses, and unto Aaron, and unto Miriam, Come out ye three unto the tabernacle of the congregation. And they three came out."

As one greatly provoked, and highly displeased, and which was shown at once. And in order to prevent the complaint getting among the people, and spreading, which might have been of bad consequence, as they were pretty much disposed to murmur and mutiny. As also to show that it was not through any solicitation of Moses that the Lord took this matter in hand. Time not being allowed to him to make any application to him. For, as soon as ever Miriam and Aaron had uttered their speech against him, the Lord spake to them.

"Come out ye three unto the tabernacle of the congregation": Everyone out of his tent, as Aben Ezra. Though it is not improbable that they were all together in the tent of Moses. Whither Aaron and Miriam were come to contend with him; the words seem to be spoken quick, and in haste, as being angry.

"And they three came out": Of the place where they were, to the tabernacle of the congregation. That so the people might not hear what was said unto them, and what was the occasion of it.

The fact that "God spoke suddenly" to them, indicates this matter could not wait. God spoke to the three people who He had empowered to do the job He had for them. They also were the three involved in this controversy. From the Scripture above, it appears God spoke to each of them individually. He called them to the tabernacle, and they came.

Numbers 12:5 "And the LORD came down in the pillar of the cloud, and stood [in] the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam: and they both came forth."

The LORD came down": As in (Gen. 11:5), this clause states that the Lord knows and deals with situations on earth. Here the Lord came down and (in verse 10), departed. This was God's answer to the attack against Moses.

The door of the tabernacle was not the usual place for the presence of the LORD. They were called to Him for judgement.

Verses 6-8: This poem is astonishing in its content. Yahweh had revealed Himself to numerous people in a variety of way, but to Moses He spoke "mouth to mouth ... not in dark speeches" (metaphors, riddles, and symbols). Only of Moses could it be said, "the similitude of the LORD shall he behold". None of the prophets in Hebrew Scripture had the privileges of divine encounter to match that of Moses.

Numbers 12:6 "And he said, Hear now my words: If there be a prophet among you, [I] the LORD will make myself known unto him in a vision, [and] will speak unto him in a dream."

This is a reminder from God that prophets are prophets, because God made them prophets. They are not prophets or prophetesses because of any special ability of their own. God chooses whom He will for whatever position He desires them to have. They are able to prophesy, because God reveals things to them in visions and dreams.

Numbers 12:7 "My servant Moses [is] not so, who [is] faithful in all mine house."

“My servant Moses”: This phrase is also repeated (in verse 8). A servant of the Lord in the Old Testament is one who responded in faith by obedience to the Word of the Lord.

“Faithful in all mine house”: A reference to Moses’ loyal performance of his role as covenant mediator between the Lord and Israel.

God is saying in this, that Moses is more than a prophet. The greatest of the prophets received their messages in dreams and visions. God met with Moses. Moses was on the mountain 40 days and nights in the near presence of God. Moses was able to get closer to God than any other man.

Numbers 12:8 "With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the LORD shall he behold: wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"

“Mouth to mouth”: God spoke to Moses without mediation. Also, the Lord did not speak to Moses through visions and dreams, but plainly. It was not that Moses saw the full glory of God (compare John 1:18), but rather that he had the most explicit, intimate encounters (compare Deut. 34:10).

“The similitude of the LORD”: This is the likeness or representation of the Lord which Moses was privileged to see (see Exodus 33:23).

God spoke to Moses with an audible voice. Moses was in God's presence so closely, that the Scripture uses the expression face to face. He spoke plainly to Moses, not in parables. Moses never actually saw the face of God, but was close enough to see it. At one time, God did allow Moses to see His back side. If God thought this highly of Moses, why did Miriam and Aaron not have more respect than to speak against Moses? They should have been afraid to speak against this special servant of God. Possibly, one reason was because he was their physical brother. It is difficult for members of one's family to recognize his greatness.

Verses 9-12: In “anger”, the “Lord” struck “Miriam” with leprosy (Deut. 24:9). Miriam’s “flesh” was so “consumed” that she looked to Aaron liked a partly formed fetus that had been born early.

For the high priest, "Aaron", to need priestly intercession from Moses must have seemed ironic, but it was an admittance of his sin.

Numbers 12:9 "And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them; and he departed."

Which might be visible by some outward token, as by lightning from the cloud, or, however. What follows was sufficient to show it.

"And he departed": From the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, where he had stood in the pillar of cloud for some time. But as soon as he had given his testimony of Moses, and expressed his displeasure at Aaron and Miriam, he went away directly from them. Not staying to hear what they had to say for themselves, which was a plain indication of his anger against them.

God's anger was apparent to them. They have been judged, and found guilty. They are awaiting sentence.

Numbers 12:10 "And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam [became] leprous, [white] as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, [she was] leprous."

"Leprous": In judgment of Miriam's opposition to Moses, the Lord struck her with leprosy. For the treatment of a leper, see (Lev. Chapters 13 and 14). A public sin required a public response from the Lord.

"Leprosy" in the spiritual, is associated with sin. Why Aaron is not punished is hard to understand. Perhaps, it was because he was a weak man, and just followed Miriam in the sin. He was actually the one who made the golden calf, and was not punished for that either. It appears in both cases, he was a follower and not a leader. In a sense, he was punished when he saw Miriam with the leprosy.

Numbers 12:11 "And Aaron said unto Moses, Alas, my lord, I beseech thee, lay not the sin upon us, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned."

The word for "alas" is generally interpreted by the Jewish writers as a note of beseeching and entreating. As it is here by the Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan, "I beseech thee, my lord," or "upon me, my lord", be all the blame. Such was his tenderness to his sister, and the compassion he had on her. And such reverence and respect did he show to Moses his brother. Though younger than he, because of his superior dignity as a prophet, and chief magistrate, and prime minister, and servant of the Lord, calling him "my lord".

"I beseech thee, lay not the sin upon us": The punishment of it, bear not hard upon us, or suffer us to be punished in a rigorous manner, without interceding to the Lord for us, for the abatement of removal of it. Such a powerful and prevailing interest he knew he had with God, that by his prayers their punishment would be mitigated. Or not laid, or, if laid, removed.

"Wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned": He owns they had sinned, but suggests, and so he would have it understood, that it was not through malice, and purposely and presumptuously. But through and ignorance, inadvertency and weakness, and hoped it would be forgiven.

Aaron repents for them both. Since Aaron speaks his regret for the sin to Moses, it shows that he realizes he is not equal in authority to Moses. He actually asks Moses to get rid of this burden of sin for Miriam and himself.

Numbers 12:12 "Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother's womb."

As she was in a ceremonial sense. Having to be shut up and excluded from the society of people, and as defiling by touching as a dead carcass. And, in a natural sense, her flesh, by the disease upon her, was become as dead flesh. Putrid and rotten, and unless miraculously cured it would issue in her death.

"Of whom the flesh is half consumed, when he cometh out of his mother's womb": Like an abortive, or one stillborn, that has been dead some time in its mother's womb. And therefore, when brought forth its flesh is almost wasted away, or at least half consumed. And in such a plight and condition was Miriam already, or quickly would be, through the force of her disease.

Aaron and Miriam were probably pretty close, since they had been reared together. Leprosy is much like death of the skin tissue. Aaron pleads with Moses for Miriam's healing.

Verses 13-16: Although God removed Miriam's leprosy, she had to remain "out from the camp seven days" (Lev. 13:1-6; 14:1-8; 15:8), because she was defiled. This meant shame for her and delay for the people because they had to wait for her restoration before moving on. A rebellious sinner is always capable of holding back the progress of God's people.

Numbers 12:13 "And Moses cried unto the LORD, saying, Heal her now, O God, I beseech thee."

With a loud voice, and with great earnestness and importunity. Being heartily affected with the miserable condition Miriam was in.

"Saying, heal her now, O God, I beseech thee": In the original text it is, "O God now, heal her now". For the same particle is used at the close as at the beginning of the petition. And the repetition of it shows his earnestness and importunity that she might be healed directly, immediately, without any delay. And Moses uses the word "El", which signifies the strong and mighty God, as expressive of his faith in the power of God. That he was able to heal her; and at the same time suggests that none but he could do it. And so Aben Ezra interprets it, "thou that hast power in thine hand, now heal her." This prayer is a proof of his being of a meek, humble, and forgiving spirit.

Moses prays to God for Miriam. Moses' power to heal Miriam lies in the power of God. He sympathizes with his sister's condition, and asks God to heal her.

Numbers 12:14 "And the LORD said unto Moses, If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be ashamed seven days? let her be shut out from the camp seven days, and after that let her be received in [again]."

By a voice out of the cloud, though at a distance. Unless it was by a secret impulse upon his spirit, darting such words into his mind as if he heard an audible voice.

"If her father had but spit in her face": Or, "in spitting spitted"; spit much, and continued spitting till he had covered her face with spittle. Which, as it would have been a token of anger and displeasure in him, an earthly father, who is meant. And of shame and disgrace to her. So there is some likeness in spittle to leprosy, both being white. And in such a case to the abundance of it, her thee being covered with leprosy. And which came as it were from the mouth of the Lord, by his order and appointment, immediately, as spittle from a man. And like that, in a way of detestation and contempt, and to make abhorred and despised.

"Should she not be ashamed seven days?" Hide herself, and never appear in the family, and especially in her father's presence, because of the shame she was put unto, for the space of seven days. How much more ashamed then should she be, now her heavenly Father did spit in her face, and covered it with a white leprosy and for as long a time at least, or indeed longer? Fourteen days, say the Targum of Jonathan, and Jarchi, but no more than seven are required. When more might have justly been, for her separation and shutting up from company and conversation.

"Let her be shut out from the camp seven days": For so long the leper was to be shut up at the trial of his leprosy. And so long he was to be out of his tent at the cleansing of him (Lev. 13:5).

"And after that let her be received again": Into the camp and into society with her relations and friends.

The least He would punish her for was 7 days, because a leper cannot be declared clean, until after 7 days. 7 shows spiritual completeness as well. The "spitting in the face" and the 7 day separation are both signs of the father being ashamed of the child. At the end of the 7 days, she is totally restored.

Numbers 12:15 "And Miriam was shut out from the camp seven days: and the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in [again]."

And so, in later times lepers dwelt alone, and in a separate house as long as the leprosy was upon them (see 2 Chron. 26:21). Miriam no doubt was healed at once, but, as a punishment for her sin, she was obliged to keep out of the camp of Israel for such a space of time.

"And the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in again": Partly out of respect unto her, she being a prophetess, and one that went before them, and led them with Moses and Aaron

(Micah 6:4). And partly for want of the cloud to direct them, which had departed at a distance from them.

God did not move the camp, until Miriam's 7 days were fulfilled.

Numbers 12:16 "And afterward the people removed from Hazeroth, and pitched in the wilderness of Paran."

After seven days, where they had been so long at least. The cloud being returned to the tabernacle, and having been taken up, which was the signal for motion. The camps of Israel, in their order, removed and marched forward.

"And pitched in the wilderness of Paran": At a place in it called Rith-mah (Num. 33:18). Which, according to Bunting, was eight miles from Hazeroth, near to which was another place called Kadesh. Or else this was another name of Rith-mah (see Num. 13:3). And now the Israelites were very near the Land of Promise. And from hence they sent spies to make their observations on it, and bring a report of it. And had it not been for their ill conduct in that affair, in all probability would have been quickly in it. But on that account, were kept out thirty-eight years longer. It was on the twenty eighth or twenty ninth of the month Sivan the Israelites came to this place, according to the Jewish writers, which month answers part of our May and part of June. "Wilderness of Paran" (see note on 10:12).

The wilderness of Paran is near the Promised Land.

Numbers Chapter 12 Questions

1. Who spoke against Moses?
2. What was their complaint?
3. What is the difference in the sin of Miriam in this, and the sin of Aaron?
4. Who was the Ethiopian descended from?
5. What would have been her religious status?
6. It is a dangerous thing to tear down the character of God's _____.
7. In verse 2, what have Miriam and Aaron decided?
8. How meek was Moses?
9. What does the fact that "God spoke suddenly" to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam mean?
10. Where did they go to meet with God?

11. How did God meet with the three of them?
12. Who did He call to Him for judgement?
13. What sets aside a person as a prophet?
14. Moses is _____ than a prophet.
15. What special thing did God do for Moses, that He did not do for prophets?
16. What should have kept Miriam and Aaron from accusing Moses?
17. Verse 9 says, God was _____ with them.
18. What happened to Miriam in punishment?
19. Why was Aaron not punished?
20. "Leprosy", in the spiritual, is associated with _____.
21. What was another sin Aaron was not punished for?
22. Who does Aaron repent for?
23. Who prays to God for them?
24. What is the answer from God?
25. What does the "father spitting in her face" show?
26. Where is the wilderness of Paran located?