

March 31, 2019 - Num 11:23 – 12:16 (12:1-16) - Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses
Torah Reading: Numbers 11:23 – 12:16 (12:1-16) - Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses
Psalm 99 (a repeat from previous week)
Haftarah: Isaiah 50

Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses

The Bible doesn't shrink from examining the weaknesses and mistakes of Israel and its leadership.

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."

Who was Miriam again?

- **Exodus 15:20-21** - "And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea."

The complaint about Moses marrying an Ethiopian or Cushite wife seems to be only a pretext for the real problem - jealousy about the spirit of prophesy being given to the 70 elders, with the appearance of shunting aside Aaron and Miriam from leadership.

Theories

There are several conflicting theories about this incident.

Was it a warning against racism?

- **Jeremiah 13:23**: "Can a Cushite change his skin, or a leopard its spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil."

Cush was generally identified with Sudan, Ethiopia and areas south of Egypt, where people with darker skin lived.

Some see God's inflicting leprosy "as white as snow" on Miriam as His reaction to her objection to the dark-skinned wife of Moses.

Zipporah is a Cushite?

In other places, the Bible refers to Arabia as Cush. In fact, a follower of King Saul is called a Cushite (**Psalm 7:1** - "Shiggaion of David, which he sang unto the LORD, concerning the words of Cush the Benjamite.") and even the Jewish People (**Amos 9:7**) are referred to by the term "Cushite." There is a place called Cushan, which is a region

of Midian. So, this could also refer to Zipporah the Midianite.

Was the Cushite a new wife, an old wife, or Zipporah?

The Midrash states that when Moses fled Pharaoh (**Exodus 2:15**), before arriving in Midian, Moses escaped south to the land of Cush. (Note that Moses was presumably a young man when he fled Egypt) In Midian he married and had two small children, and he was 80 on his return to Egypt at the start of the story of the Exodus. Thus, apparently, many of his early adult years are unrecorded in the Torah. According to Josephus, Moses first served the king of Cush and then upon his death became king himself, ruling for 40 years. He was given the former king's widow as a wife but he refused to live with her or worship the Cushite god. (Yalkut Shimoni Shemot 168)

On the other hand, the statement sounds like Moses had recently remarried. Perhaps Miriam felt she was losing her place of influence and leadership to this new wife.

Most commentators do not follow the Midrash above and assume the woman Miriam was referring to was his Midianite wife, Zipporah. Some explain she was referred to as a Cushite because the nomadic, desert-dwelling Midianites somewhat resembled the Cushites, or that Zipporah herself was unusually dark-skinned or homely (Radak, R. Bechaye, Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni). Others explain it was a type of contrary nickname (Targum, Sifri quoted in Rashi). She was actually strikingly beautiful, and it was customary to give a superior person a less-becoming nickname, so as not to arouse jealousy. The Talmud explains differently, that "Just as a Cushite is distinct in her skin [color], so too was Zipporah distinct in her [good] deeds" (Mo'ed Katan 16b, see also Targum Yerushalmi).

Did Moses become celibate after God spoke to him?

Although rabbinic Judaism generally rejected asceticism, another popular line of rabbinic commentary insists that Miriam had heard from Zipporah that Moses had put her away, refraining from sexual relations in order to be ready at all times for interaction with God.

(The people before receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai and priests in their everyday service had to cleanse themselves by washing, or alternatively "not come at their wives" for a certain time before entering the Tabernacle, because any sperm or menstrual blood that didn't incorporate into a new life of a child and was found on one's body instead caused uncleanness that required a purification ceremony).

There is lots about this in the Talmud. Remember that Moses sent her and the children away before the Exodus from Egypt. As God's go-to prophet, he had to be ready at all times, and thus remain "undefiled."

How did Miriam know that Moses had neglected his conjugal obligations? Because she saw that Zipporah, his wife, took no care regarding her personal appearance, as is the

manner of women. Miriam said to her, "What is the matter with you that you neglect your appearance?" She replied, "Your brother does not mind!" Thus Miriam knew, and she told it to her brother [Aaron], and they both spoke against Moses. Rabbi Nathan says, "Miriam was standing beside Zipporah when a young man ran and told Moses [that Eldad and Medad were prophesying]. When Zipporah heard this, she said, 'Woe unto the wives of these men!' And thus Miriam knew, and she told it to her brother [Aaron], and she "spoke against Moses." (Sifrei, Bamidbar 99)

Whatever the explanation, it is not elaborated on at all in the scripture. The story goes straight to their real objection about the spirit of prophecy and leadership.

-- <https://www.aish.com/atr/Moses-Cushite-Wife.html>

Aaron was a prophet himself. **Exodus 4:27** "The Lord said to Aaron..."

Miriam was closer to Aaron than Moses, because Moses was not raised with his siblings, he was raised among the Egyptians.

Keep in mind Moses was 80 at the Exodus from Egypt; Aaron was 83; this would make Miriam in her 90s, as she was old enough to watch over Moses when floating in the Nile.'

There is no doubt Miriam was counted among Israel's leadership:

"I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam." (**Micah 6:4**)

Miriam a Prophetess

"I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." - **Joel 2:28**

Miriam was a prophet, as were Deborah (**Judges 4:5**), Hannah (**1Samuel 1:2**), and Huldah.

"Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing" (**Exodus 15:20**). This is the first time Miriam is mentioned by name in Scripture. Why is she specifically referred to as a prophetess and as the sister of Aaron only?

A Prophecy About Moses

The Talmud and Midrash teach that Miriam prophesied before Moses was even born, when she was only the sister of Aaron. Miriam was about 6 years old when Pharaoh decreed that all Israelite baby boys be killed. Hearing this, Miriam's father, Amram, divorced his wife, Yocheved, because he couldn't bear the possibility of having a son who would be killed. Seeing the actions of Amram, one of the leaders of the generation,

all of the other Israelite men followed and divorced their wives as well.

Miriam told her father, "Your act is worse than Pharaoh's! He decreed that only male children not be permitted to live, but you decreed the same fate for both male and female children!" She then predicted that her parents would give birth to a son who would save Israel from Egypt. At the Red Sea when the Egyptians were completely vanquished, Miriam finally saw the fulfillment of her prophecy and burst into song.

But now she and Aaron have a complaint against Moses.

Compare Jesus' family reaction -

- **Mark 3:20-21** - "Then Jesus went home, and once again a crowd gathered, so that He and His disciples could not even eat. When His family heard about this, they went out to take custody of Him, saying, 'He is out of His mind.'"

Miriam and Aaron had forgotten the order of authority God had described previously - they were subordinate to Moses:

"I have made thee a god to Pharaoh; and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet." (**Exodus 7:1**) "And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people: and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God" (**Exodus 7:1; 4:16**).

Slander and Leprosy

slander = *lashon hara*, "evil speech"

Adam slandered Eve, blaming her for the sin, instead of admitting his own sin. This was *lashon hara*, the evil tongue, which the rabbis blamed for causing leprosy. Consequently, a cascade of spiritual leprosy infected every generation.

The rabbis broke down the word *mezora* (leper, one to be cleansed) as connected with *mozi shem ra*, meaning "the person guilty of slander or libel." This was mainly in reference to Miriam's slander of Moses and her resulting judgment. Among other sins which bring leprosy as retribution are "the shedding of blood, taking oaths in vain, incest, arrogance, robbery, and envy" (Ar. 16a), as well as benefiting from sacred objects (Lev. R. 17:3). Leprosy later was also associated with heresy and other sins.
- See <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/leprosy>

Aaron, as high priest, acts as a witness and declares her to be leprous (**Leviticus 13:2-3**).

Some traditions say Aaron also was stricken with leprosy, but was immediately healed so as not to interfere with his duties as High Priest.

The leprosy is snow-white and covers her body. This is important, since this is a kind of

total leprosy that is paradoxically said to be "clean."

Spiritually, if Miriam could see that she was totally leprous, she had a chance for repentance and redemption. It's the same for all of us.

Compare Paul's Rebellion against God's Authority

Paul's "kicking against the pricks," resisting God's authority (and also persecuting and slandering God and His people) - so he is stricken with a kind of leprosy - in his eyes:

- Acts 9:18 - "And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales (*lepis*): and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized."

"scales" = *lepis* - from *lépō* (to peel); a flake, a scale. This is where they got *lepra* as the word for a skin disease - "scaly"

A Warning

This incident of Miriam's sin and affliction is repeated as a reminder later:

Deuteronomy 24:8-9 - "Take heed in the plague of leprosy, that thou observe diligently, and do according to all that the priests the Levites shall teach you: as I commanded them, so ye shall observe to do. Remember what the LORD thy God did unto Miriam by the way, after that ye were come forth out of Egypt."

It is one of the Six 'Remembrances' that Jews recite daily after the morning prayer.

Later Miriam died at the age of 126 (or 127) in Kadesh, and she was buried there (**Numbers 20:1**). Tradition says her son Hur had been murdered previously by the worshippers of the Golden Calf when he opposed them.

How does this warning relate to us?

Our little turf wars, jealousies and petty jostling for prominence or recognition or control are reflective of this incident, and really all of human ambition and strife are included.

This is also a "leadership" display of the same kind of discontent and murmuring that the people exhibited in the previous chapter.

It is all leprosy and an abhorrent stench in the nostrils of God. We must repent quickly without self-justification when we find ourselves in this situation!

- **1 Corinthians 10:10-11** - "Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are

come.”

More on Miriam: Miriam's Well and the Rock that was Christ

Immediately, according to tradition, the well that had followed them dried up, and they were without water.

This was Miriam's Well according to tradition. God created it on the second day of the creation, and at one time it was in the possession of Abraham and later Jacob.

"This well was in the shape of a sieve-like rock, out of which water gushes forth as from a spout. It followed them on all their wanderings, up hill and down dale, and wherever they halted, it halted, too, and it settled opposite the Tabernacle. Thereupon the leaders of the twelve tribes would appear, each with his staff and chant these words to the well, "Spring up, O well, sing ye unto it; nobles of the people digged it by the direction of the lawgiver with their staves." Then the water would gush forth from the depths of the well, and shoot up high as pillars, then discharge itself into great streams that were navigable, and on these rivers the Jews sailed to the ocean, and hauled all the treasures of the world therefrom. Once upon a time it happened that a leper ... come in contact with the waters of Miriam's well and he was instantly healed." - *Legends of the Jews, Vol. 3.*

The Talmud (Ta'anit 9a.) says, "Three great leaders led Israel: Moses, Aaron and Miriam. In their merit they received three great gifts: the Well [Miriam], the Clouds of Glory [Aaron] and the Manna [Moses]."

Paul refers to this:

-1 Corinthians 10:4 - "And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ."

God told Moses to only speak to the rock this time, but in his anger, he struck the rock twice. Water gushed forth, but for his disobedience Moses lost his opportunity to lead the people into the Promised Land.

Prophecy and Moses' special insight

The Jerusalem Talmud states that the Patriarchs knew only the "God of heaven, but God did not reveal to them the Lord's MIMRA". This Aramaic word MIMRA the Rabbis often identified with the Messiah. It corresponds to the Greek logos or 'word.' Targum Jonathan says that, "My name the LORD I did not, however, reveal to them through my Holy Spirit."

In the early stages of his vocation Moses heard the word of God: "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the

LORD I did not make myself known to them." (**Exodus 6:2-3**)

When Miriam and Aaron maligned Moses, God said to them,

"Listen to my words: When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude (*těmuwnah*) of the LORD shall he behold: wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" (**Numbers 12:6-8**).

What does it mean that Moses knew God "by his name the LORD" (**Exodus 3:14, Exodus 6:2-3, Exodus 33:18-20**), and what is the significance of him "seeing the form of the LORD"?

The leading Mediaeval Talmud and OT expositor RaSHI states that apparently Moses did not actually see the "form of the LORD" but it was as if in a "spoken vision" or in a "Holy Spirit vision," and as if from behind. Jacob was another who saw the face of God when, by the stream Jabbok, he wrestled with the "Angel of the Presence" (lit. 'of the faces'), Peniel, and said, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life was spared" (**Genesis 32:30, Isaiah 63:9**). Jacob's vision was more an angelic vision in which, according to the Rabbis -- the Messiah appeared. But how is it possible that Moses could actually have "seen" God, since before the verse concerned he is told,

- **Exodus 33:18-20** - "And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory. And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy. And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live."

Compare **Psalms 17:15** - "As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness (*těmuwnah*)."

Could it be that what is meant by "seeing the form" of the LORD is that Moses came to understand something of the "inner being" of God?

There are two Hebrew words here *tselem*, 'image' (in modern Hebrew, 'photograph'), and *demuth*, 'figure' or 'similitude.' When Moses is allowed to look at the "form of the LORD" the word *těmuwnah* is used, which in its primary sense means a 'drawing.' All of these expressions are very concrete. God is a person and he has a definite form and being. This was experienced by Moses on a deeper level than by his predecessors.

Moses' Humility

The rabbis said God stepped in to defend Moses because he would never have done so himself, because of his humility.

Moses was "a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (**Numbers 12:3**); Jesus too was "meek and lowly in heart." Such comparisons show that Jesus really was the promised prophet who would be "like Moses."

- **Deuteronomy 18:15-19** - "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him... 'I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth... If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account.'"

Moses a Type of Christ

"I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world... I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (**John 6:32-5**)

"Just as there was a First Savior so there will be a Last. Just as it is said of the First Savior (Exodus 4:20) that 'He took his wife and sons and put them on a donkey', so it is said of the Last Savior that 'He is lowly and riding on a donkey'(Zech. 9:9). As the First Savior provided manna (Ex. 16), as it is written, 'Behold I will pour out bread from heaven upon you,' so will the Last Savior, as it is written (Ps. 72:16), 'Let corn abound throughout the land'. Just as the First Savior opened a fountain, so the Last Savior will provide water, as it is written (Joel 3:18), 'A fountain will flow out of the LORD'S house'." - R. Berechiah said in the name of R. Yitshak, who lived before the year 300 AD, Midrash Rabbah on Ecclesiastes

Resources

<https://thetorah.com/moses-and-the-kushite-woman-classic-interpretations-and-philosophy-allegory/>

<https://www.mychabad.org/library/article.asp?AID=4254744>

<https://www.etzion.org.il/en/remembering-miriams-sin>

<https://thinkingtorah.com/the-mystery-of-the-cushite-woman/>

<http://rabbisacks.org/chukkat-5774-miriam-moses-friend/>

<http://www.ravkooktorah.org/BEHAALOT59.htm>

<http://www.kolumbus.fi/~kl0748/rsla/OT/OT09.html>

<http://www.oocities.org/~alyza/Jewish/num12.html>