

NUMBERS

Chapter 12

Miriam and Aaron Oppose Moses

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. 2 And they said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” And the LORD heard it. 3 Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth. 4 And suddenly the LORD said to Moses and to Aaron and Miriam, “Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting.” And the three of them came out. 5 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. 6 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. 7 Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. 8 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?” 9 And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed. 10 When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, like snow. And Aaron turned toward Miriam, and behold, she was leprous. 11 And Aaron said to Moses, “Oh, my lord, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned. 12 Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother’s womb.” 13 And Moses cried to the LORD, “O God, please heal her—please.” 14 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.” 15 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. 16 After that the people set out from Hazeroth, and camped in the wilderness of Paran.

12:1 *spoke against.* Occurred at the next recorded place of encampment, Hazeroth (11:35). (TLSB)

his Cushite woman. Cush was the first son of Ham, the father of the southernmost peoples known to the Hebrews (Ge 10:6–7), living in the southern Nile valley. Moses’ wife Zipporah may be referred to here (see Ex 2:15–22); if so, the term “Cushite” is used in contempt of her Midianite ancestry. It is more likely, however, that the reference is to a new wife taken by Moses, perhaps after the death of his first wife. The attack on the woman was a pretext; its focus was the prophetic gift of Moses and his special relationship with the Lord (v. 2). (CSB)

Seems to suggest a rather recent event. Moses’ sister and brother attacked his leadership, hiding their sinful claim to his position by finding fault with his marriage to a Cushite (Ethiopian) woman. On Moses’ family, cf Ex 6:14–26; 18:1–6. The Lord did not forbid the marriage of an Israelite man to a foreign woman (cf Gn 41:45), except in certain cases (Dt 7:1–4). (TLSB)

12:2 *Has he not spoken through us?* Of course he had. Mic 6:4 speaks of Moses, Aaron and Miriam as God’s gracious provision for Israel. The prophetic gifting of the 70 elders (11:24–30) seems to have been the immediate provocation for the attack of Miriam and Aaron on their brother. (CSB)

12:3 *very meek.* Moses did not speak out strongly or move to punish. He was humble before the Lord, who quickly acted to vindicate him. Moses’ faults and virtues are mentioned with equal candor. Here, his humility motivates God’s intervention on his behalf. Moses has the final word by recording his own meekness and vindication. (TLSB)

Perhaps a later addition to the text, alerting the reader to the great unfairness of the charge of arrogance against Moses. (CSB)

12:4 *suddenly*. The abruptness of the Lord's response instilled terror (see Job 22:10; Isa 47:11; Jer 4:20). (CSB)

12:5 *come out*. Often used of divine manifestations. In 11:25 the Lord came down in grace; here and in Ge 11:5 he came down in judgment. In a sense every theophany (appearance of God) is a picture and promise of the grand theophany, the incarnation of Jesus, both in grace and in judgment. (CSB)

12:6–8 The poetic cast of these words adds a sense of solemnity to them. The point of the poem is clear: All true prophetic vision is from the Lord, but in the case of Moses his position and faithfulness enhance his special relationship with the Lord. (CSB)

12:6 *prophet ... vision ... dream*. Typical means of revelation in OT. Luther: "This diversity of expressions sheds light on the three types of prophecy or the three classes of revelation that are clearly mentioned in Num. 12:6–8.... It is a vision or a form of apparition when God appears to people when they are awake, not as in dreams.... But these visions are usually forms which require explanation.... Dreams are on a level below this" (AE 3:10–11). (TLSB)

12:7 *my house*. The household of God's people Israel. (CSB)

God speaks as head of Israel, which is His household. (TLSB)

12:8 *mouth to mouth*. Moses held a unique position. God communicated His will through him more directly and intimately than through any other prophet, including Aaron and "Miriam the prophetess" (Ex 15:20; cf 25:22; Dt 18:15, 18). Moses was even granted to see "the form of the LORD." Basil the Great: "Let us listen then to these words of truth written without the help of the 'enticing words of man's wisdom' [1Co 2:4] by the dictation of the Holy Spirit; words destined to produce not the applause of those who hear them, but the salvation of those who are instructed by them" (NPNF 2 8:52). (TLSB)

clearly and not in riddles. God's revelation does not come with equal clarity to his servants. There may be oracles of the Lord that a prophet might not fully understand at the time; to him they may be riddles and mysteries (cf. 1Pe 1:10–11). But to Moses, God spoke with special clarity, as though face to face (see also Dt 34:10). (CSB)

12:10 *leprous*. Miriam, the principal offender against her brother Moses, has become an outcast, as she now suffers from a skin disease that would exclude her from the community of Israel (see 5:1–4). (CSB)

Aaron was likely not made leprous because that would prevent him from serving as high priest. (TLSB)

12:11 *oh, my lord*. Aaron's repentance for the sin of presumption is touching, both in its intensity and in his concern for his (and Moses') sister. (CSB)

12:12 Sorrowful reference to an ill-formed child, who could not survive. (TLSB)

12:13 *O God, please heal her*. Only Miriam was made leprous, perhaps because she was the instigator of the opposition, while Aaron was only the weak-willed accomplice (cf Ex 32:1–6, 21–24); however, see note, v 10. Or, perhaps his full confession of guilt averted the Lord's anger (v 11). Moses' intercession for

his offending sister (without a word of recrimination) is a powerful demonstration of his meekness (v 3). (TLSB)

12:14 Miriam had offended the Lord Himself, yet He was lenient with her. (TLSB)

shamed for seven days. An act of public rebuke (see Dt 25:9) demands a period of public shame. A period of seven days was a standard time for uncleanness occasioned by being in contact with a dead body (see 19:11, 14, 16). (CSB)

Cured of her disease, Miriam was nevertheless required to observe the period of isolation prescribed for the cleansing of lepers. (TLSB)

12:16 *wilderness of Paran.* The southernmost region of the promised land. The people's opportunity to conquer the land was soon to come. (CSB)

Ch 12 Moses faces a new rebellion when Miriam and Aaron claim equal status with their younger brother. They learn the danger of challenging God's authority. God's punishment is swift, yet merciful. Our Lord is a Lord of both Law and Gospel, by which He always calls people to repentance and pronounces grace. • Heavenly Lord, curb our rebellious, jealous hearts, and grant us meekness. Look on us with mercy through Christ, our Redeemer. Amen. (TLSB)