

# NUMBERS

## Chapter 12

### *Miriam and Aaron Oppose Moses*

Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. <sup>2</sup> “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?” they asked. “Hasn’t he also spoken through us?” And the LORD heard this. <sup>3</sup> (Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.) <sup>4</sup> At once the LORD said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, “Come out to the Tent of Meeting, all three of you.” So the three of them came out. <sup>5</sup> Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the Tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When both of them stepped forward, <sup>6</sup> he said, “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. <sup>7</sup> But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. <sup>8</sup> With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” <sup>9</sup> The anger of the LORD burned against them, and he left them. <sup>10</sup> When the cloud lifted from above the Tent, there stood Miriam—leprous, like snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had leprosy; <sup>11</sup> and he said to Moses, “Please, my lord, do not hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed. <sup>12</sup> Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother’s womb with its flesh half eaten away.” <sup>13</sup> So Moses cried out to the LORD, “O God, please heal her!” <sup>14</sup> The LORD replied to Moses, “If her father had spit in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Confine her outside the camp for seven days; after that she can be brought back.” <sup>15</sup> So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on till she was brought back. <sup>16</sup> After that, the people left Hazeroth and encamped in the Desert of Paran.

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

*his Cushite wife.* 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** *Hasn't he also 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** *At once.* The abruptness of the Lord's response instilled terror (see Job 22:10; Isa 47:11; Jer 4:20). (CSB)

**12:5** *came down.* 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 servant.* See notes on Ex 14:31; Ps 18 title; Isa 41:8–9; 42:1. (CSB)

*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.* See NIV text note. 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** *Please, 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)

*disgrace 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** *Desert 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)