



Joyful And Ardent Labor In The Scriptures

Studying the Bible with humility and reverence.
Studying to get to know God in truth, then live accordingly.

Where Scripture Is Silent, Do Not Assume

Q. I'm sharing a Bible study on Numbers 12, the account of Miriam speaking against Moses because he'd married the Ethiopian woman. In my view, Moses is in the wrong here because he's unfaithful to his wife Zipporah. Miriam, defending Zipporah, was right to criticize Moses. But why does God take Moses' side? Can you help me understand this?

A. It's good to share a Bible study, but only if the study represents God and His Word faithfully.

The context of Numbers 12 has nothing to do with the Cushite, or Ethiopian, woman whom Moses had taken to wife. The context is the envy of Miriam and Aaron.

Though Miriam¹ and Aaron spoke against their brother Moses for having married a Cushite (Num. 12:1), God saw and heard and dealt with the real issue: "and they² [Miriam and Aaron] said, 'Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?' And the LORD heard it" (Num. 12:2).

Envy was the real issue. Envy was what "the LORD heard." Envy was what the LORD dealt with in Num. 12:4–10. The LORD had nothing to say about Moses having taken a Cushite to wife because that was not the issue at all. The LORD's words and punishment in Num. 12:4–10 pertain solely to Miriam and Aaron's rhetorical questioning of Moses' leadership in Num. 12:2.

Q. "Moses . . . married the Ethiopian woman. In my view, Moses is in the wrong here because he's unfaithful to his wife Zipporah."

A. You are making the mistake of reading polygamy into the text. It is your assumption that Moses married the Cushite woman while Zipporah was still his wife. But ask yourself these questions:

- How do I know the Cushite woman Moses married is not Zipporah herself?
- The last time I read of Zipporah by name is Exod. 18:2, and the last time Zipporah is implied is Exod. 18:6. So how do I know whether Zipporah was still alive when Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses at Num. 12:1?³

The honest answer to each of these questions is, "I don't know because Scripture doesn't tell me."

The lesson to learn is this: Do not exceed what Scripture says. Do not assume something where Scripture is silent. If the identity of Moses' Cushite wife were important for us to know or if it were important for us to know whether Zipporah was still alive at Num. 12:1

then Scripture would tell us. The fact that Scripture does not tell us tells us that it is not important for us to know.

Q. "Miriam, defending Zipporah, was right to criticize Moses."

A. Actually, you are speaking against the LORD. Saying that Miriam was right to criticize Moses is to say that God was wrong to strike Miriam. Do you see how your assumption of polygamy by Moses has led you to dishonor the God of Israel? You are defending Miriam because you are *assuming* Moses married another woman while he was still married to Zipporah. But the Scriptures say no such thing. Scripture is silent on the issue. And where Scripture is silent we are fools to assume, particularly when we draw conclusions from that assumption.

Q. "But why does God take Moses' side?"

A. He did not support Moses against Miriam and Aaron because of bias, for the LORD is utterly impartial (Deut. 10:17–18; 2 Chron. 19:7; Acts 10:34–35; Rom. 2:9–11; Gal. 2:6; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:22–25; 1 Pet. 1:17–21). Nor does the fact that He struck Miriam with a skin disease and left Aaron untouched (Num. 12:9–10) indicate the LORD made an unjust distinction between this offending sister and brother. The reason the LORD rebuked and judged Miriam and Aaron was their sin (Num. 12:11–12), their foolish act of speaking against their younger brother and rhetorically questioning his unique status when it was the LORD's impartial choice to communicate with Moses in a unique manner (Num. 12:6–8). Punishing Miriam with a skin disease demonstrated God's justice. Sparing Aaron from the same or worse demonstrated God's mercy. What God did was right, for all His ways are morally correct (Ps. 145:17; Rev. 15:3; cf. Hosea 14:9; Acts 13:9–10).

It is my hope that this will help you to read Scripture more carefully and not make assumptions where Scripture is silent.

Notes

¹ The Hebrew of Num. 12:1 opens with *vattēdabber miryam v'aharon*. The verb *vattēdabber* is the 3rd person feminine singular form (literally "then she spoke") which agrees with the proper noun *miryam*. This can indicate that Miriam was the main critic (cf. NJB, "Miriam, and Aaron too, criticised Moses"; YLT, "And Miriam speaketh—Aaron also—against Moses"), but not necessarily (cf. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Cowley, 2nd English ed. [New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1910], 468; A. B. Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax*, 3rd ed. [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989], 158; Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* [Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006], 521, DVD-ROM [BibleWorks, LLC, 2008]).

² The verb in the Hebrew text is now plural.

³ The Hebrew *khoten mosheh* ("father-in-law of Moses") in Num. 10:29 can suggest Zipporah was alive at Num. 10:29, but not necessarily. For *khoten mosheh* also occurs in Judg. 1:16, 4:11 where Moses himself is dead.
