

Insights into the Bible
[10]

Has the Lord Spoken Only to Moses?
Numbers 12: 1-16



**THE
STORY**

וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל־אֵדוּת הָאִשָּׁה הַכַּשִּׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח פִּי־אִשָּׁה כַּשִּׁית לָקַח: וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרַק אֶדְ-בְּמֹשֶׁה דְבַר יְהוָה הֲלֹא גַם־בָּנוּ דָבָר וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה: וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עֲגוּן מֵאֵד מִכָּל הָאֲדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה פְּתָאֵם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־מִרְיָם צֵאוּ שְׁלֹשְׁתֵּיכֶם אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּנְצִאוּ שְׁלֹשְׁתֵּיכֶם: וַיֵּרָד יְהוָה בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן וַיַּעֲמֵד פְּתַח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּקְרָא אֶהֱרֹן וּמִרְיָם וַיִּצְאוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם: וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמַעוּ־נָא דְבַרִי אִם־יְהִינָה גְבוּיָאֵכֶם יְהוָה בְּמִרְאָה אֵלָיו אֲתוֹדַע בַּחֲלוּם אֲדַבְרֶיבּוּ: לֹא־כֵן עֲבָדֵי מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל־בֵּיתִי נֶאֱמָן הוּא: פֶּה אֶל־פֶּה אֲדַבְרֶיבּוּ וּמִרְאָה וְלֹא בְחִידָת וּתְמִנַת יְהוָה יִבִּיט וּמִדּוּעַ לֹא יִרְאוּם לְדַבֵּר בְּעַבְדֵי בְּמֹשֶׁה: וַיִּתְרַאֲף יְהוָה בָּם וַיִּלְד: וְהָעֲנָן סָר מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל וְהִגָּה מִרְיָם מִצְרַעַת פְּשִׁלַּג וַיִּפֹּן אֶהֱרֹן אֶל־מִרְיָם וְהִגָּה מִצְרַעַת: וַיֹּאמֶר אֶהֱרֹן אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בִּי אֲדֹנָי אֶל־נָא תִשֶׁת עָלֵינוּ חַטָּאת אֲשֶׁר נוֹאֲלָנוּ וְאֲשֶׁר חָטָאנוּ: אֶל־נָא תְהִי כַּמֶּת אֲשֶׁר בְּצִאתוֹ מִרְחֹם אִמּוֹ וַיֵּאכַל חֶצְי בִּשְׂרוֹ: וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה לֵאמֹר אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאַבְיָה יֶרֶק יֶרֶק בְּפִנִּיָה הֲלֹא תְפַלֵּם שְׁבַעַת יָמִים תִּסְגָּר שְׁבַעַת יָמִים מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה וְאַחַר תִּאָּסֵף: וַתִּסְגַּר מִרְיָם מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה שְׁבַעַת יָמִים וְהָעָם לֹא נָסְעוּ עַד־הָאָסֶף מִרְיָם: וְאַחַר נָסְעוּ הָעָם מִחֲצָרוֹת וַיִּתְּנוּ בְּמִדְבַר פָּאָרוֹן:

¹ Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married; for he had married a Cushite woman. ² So they said, "Has the Lord spoken only to Moses? Hasn't He spoken to us too?" And the Lord heard.

³ (Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.)

⁴ Suddenly the Lord said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the tabernacle of meeting!" So the three came out. ⁵ Then the Lord came down in the pillar of cloud and stood in the door of the tabernacle and called Aaron and Miriam. And they both went forward. ⁶ Then He said,

"Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to 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, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!"⁹ So the anger of the Lord was aroused against them, and He departed. ¹⁰ And when the cloud departed from above the tabernacle, suddenly Miriam became leprous, as white as snow. Then Aaron turned toward Miriam, and there she was, a leper.

¹¹And Aaron said to Moses, "O my lord, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly. ¹² Let her not be as one dead, who emerges from his mother's womb with half his flesh eaten away." ¹³ So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, "O God, pray heal her!"

¹⁴ But the Lord said to Moses, "If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days and then let her be readmitted." ¹⁵ So Miriam was shut out of camp seven days; and the people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted. ¹⁶ After that the people set out from Hazeroth and encamped in the wilderness of Paran.

The Problem/ the Problems

? What was Miriam's Sin? Why was she punished and not Aaron?

Possible Solutions

- The annotated Skeptical Bible
 - The Woman's Bible
 - RaSHI
 - Artscroll
- Babylonian Talmud 97a. Did you know?




My Take on the Story

- Reading the story in its context: the "complainers," Korach, the Spies, and Aaron and Miriam
 - The sin is to be found in verse 2, not in verse 1 (see Etz Hayim)
 - Aaron's mortification is his punishment (see Etz Hayim)

Wrapping up!

We are not all equal: A difficult bone to swallow, or how to learn to be #2

-  Injustice
-  Cruelty and Violence
-  Absurdities
-  Contradictions
-  Intolerance
-  Family Values
-  Women
-  Science and History
-  Language
-  Sex
-  Interpretation
-  Prophecy
-  Good Stuff

   (12:1, 9-10) Miriam and Aaron (Moses' brother and sister) criticize Moses for marrying an Ethiopian woman and thus breaking the law of God (see Ex.34:16, Dt.7:3, 1 Kg.11:2). But God makes it clear that his rules don't apply to his favorites, and he strikes Miriam with leprosy. Notice that only Miriam is punished, though both she and Aaron complained.

The NRSV translates this as: "Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth." But if Moses wrote the entire Pentateuch, then he must have written this verse, too. Which seems like a strange thing for the humblest man on earth to say!

Woman's Bible

[Elizabeth Stanton](#)

Paperback/ 215 Pages/ Prometheus Books/ May 1999/ 1573926965
Published in 1892 & 1895

The Woman's Bible, written by famous 19th Century feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a "Revising Committee", is one of the first attempts by women to evaluate the Judeo-Christian legacy and its impact on women through history. Stanton concluded that '*the Bible in its teachings degrades Women from Genesis to Revelation*'. However, she and the other contributors found much to admire in the Bible, particularly some of the Old Testament women. While many of her views are still controversial, time and advances in women's rights have lessened some of the shock value of this book. Stanton doesn't go as far as some modern feminist theologians and proclaim, 'God is a woman', but there are several contributions which discuss the gender of the 'Elohim' and the female aspects of the Kabbalah.

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It is rather remarkable, if Moses was as meek as he is represented in the third verse, that he should have penned that strong assertion of his own innate modesty. There are evidences at this and several other points that Moses was not the sole

editor of the Pentateuch, if it can be shown that he wrote any part of it. Speaking of the punishment of Miriam, Clarke. in his commentaries says it is probable that Miriam was chief in this mutiny; hence she was punished while Aaron was spared. A mere excuse for man's injustice; had he been a woman he would have shared the same fate. The real reason was that Aaron was a priest. Had he been smitten with leprosy, his sacred office would have suffered, and the priesthood fallen into disrepute.

As women are supposed to have no character or sacred office, it is always safe to punish them to the full extent of the law. So, Miriam was not only afflicted with leprosy but also shut out of the camp for seven days.

One would think that potential motherhood should make women as a class as sacred as the priesthood. In common parlance we have much fine-spun theorizing on the exalted office of the mother, her immense influence in molding the character of her sons; "the hand that rocks the cradle moves the world," etc., but in creeds and codes, in constitutions and Scriptures, in prose and verse, we do not see these lofty pæans recorded or verified in living facts. **As a class, women were treated among the Jews as an inferior order of beings, just as they are today in all civilized nations. And now, as then, men claim to be guided by the will of God.**

In this narrative we see thus early woman's desire to take part in government, though denied all share in its honor and dignity. Miriam, no doubt, saw the humiliating distinctions of sex in the Mosaic code and customs, and longed for the power to make the needed amendments. In criticizing the discrepancies in Moses's character and government, Miriam showed a keen insight into the common principles of equity and individual conduct, and great self-respect and self-assertion in expressing her opinions-qualities most lacking in ordinary women.

Evidently the same blood that made Moses and Aaron what they were, as leaders of men, flowed also in the veins, of Miriam. As daughters are said to be more like their fathers and sons like their mothers, Moses probably inherited his meekness and distrust of himself from his mother, and Miriam her self-reliance and heroism from her father. Knowing these laws of heredity, Moses should have averted the punishment of Miriam instead of allowing the full force of God's wrath to fall upon her alone. If Miriam had helped to plan the journey to Canaan, it would no doubt have been accomplished in forty days instead of forty years. With her counsel in the cabinet, the people might have enjoyed peace and prosperity, cultivating the arts and sciences, instead of making war on other tribes, and burning offerings to their gods. Miriam was called a prophetess, as the Lord had, on some occasions, it is said, spoken through her, giving messages to the women. After their triumphal escape from Egypt, Miriam led the women in their songs of victory.

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RaSHI

Miriam and Aaron spoke She spoke first. Therefore, Scripture mentions her first. How did she know that Moses had separated from his wife? [See below] R. Nathan says: Miriam was beside Zipporah when Moses was told that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp. When Zipporah heard this, she said, "Woe to their wives

if they are required to prophesy, for they will separate from their wives just as my husband separated from me." From this, Miriam knew [about it] and told Aaron. Now if Miriam, who did not intend to disparage him [Moses] was punished, all the more so someone who [intentionally] disparages his fellow. — [Tanchuma Tzav 13]

Hasn't He spoken to us too? Yet we have not abstained from marital relations. — [Tanchuma Tzav 13]

the people did not travel This honor was accorded her by the Omnipresent because of the time she remained with Moses when he was cast into the river, as it says, "His sister stood by from afar to know what would be done to him" (Exodus 2:4). - [Sotah 9b]

Artscroll Commentary

Since Moses had to be ready to hear God's word at any moment, he had to be ritually pure at all times, which meant that he had to refrain from marital relations with his wife Zipporah. This intimate matter remained their private affair, until Miriam learned of it from a chance remark by Zipporah. Not realizing that God had instructed Moses to do so and feeling that it was an unjustifiable affront to Zipporah, Miriam shared the news with Aaron, who agreed with her. They were critical of Moses, contending that since the two of them were also prophets, but were not required to withdraw from normal life, neither was Moses. God Himself appeared to them, to chastise them, and to testify that Moses' prophecy was of a higher order than anyone else's, and therefore he had to remain ritually pure at all times.

(1) **The Cushite** [lit., Ethiopian] woman. Zipporah was from Midian, not Ethiopia. The description of her as a Cushite was a euphemistic reference to her great beauty. It is common in Scripture and Talmudic literature to attach a derogatory epithet to a loved one in order to prevent an evil eye, i.e., envy. The numerical value of *Kushit* is equal to that of *Yefat Mareh*, beautiful in appearance. The term is repeated later in the verse to suggest that her physical beauty was matched by her character (Rashi).

(3) **Exceedingly humble.** Moses was so humble that it was unthinkable to accuse him of considering himself superior to other prophets (Ibn Ezra).

Because of his humility, Moses would never have defended himself against the charge; therefore, God had to intervene. According to one view in Sifre, Miriam and Aaron had confronted Moses with their criticism, but, in his humility, he did not respond (Ramban; Or HaChaim).

The Torah's characterization of Moses as being humble sheds light on the nature of true humility. It is commonly assumed that humble people are afraid to speak up or assert their authority. This surely does not apply to the most humble man on the face of the earth -- Moses did not hesitate to confront Pharaoh or castigate the entire nation of Israel; his humility did not deter him from doing what was proper, even if it was unpopular or dangerous. Rather, humility refers to someone's personal assessment of himself. He may feel humble that he has not achieved his potential, or that, even if he has, his greater innate ability puts greater

responsibility on him, and no one has a right to feel haughty merely for doing what one is obligated to do.

(6) God set forth the areas of uniqueness of Moses' prophecy. The following is a cross-section of several commentaries: Other prophets receive God's word in a vision or dream that lacks clarity, or when they are in a trance, so that their physicality cannot interfere with the spiritual nature of the message, but Moses' vision is like something seen through a clear lens and is given him when he is fully conscious. He is like a trusted member of a royal household, who is free to enter the palace at will. Unlike other prophets who are shown visions that they must interpret on their own -- such as Zechariah's candelabrum (Zechariah 4:5) or Daniel's four beasts (Daniel chapter 7) -- Moses receives a direct verbal message from God's mouth, as it were, and gazes at the image of HaShem, in the sense given in Exodus 33:23.

Ibn Ezra, R' Avraham - (1089-c.1164) Bible commentator; paytan. Composed classic commentary on entire Tanach, famous for its grammatical and linguistic analysis.

Or HaChaim - Commentary on the Pentateuch by the famous Kabbalist and Talmudic scholar R' Chaim ben Attar (1696-1743), Rabbi and Rosh Yeshiva in Livorno, Italy, and subsequently in Jerusalem.

Rashi - Acronym for R' Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105), considered the commentator par excellence. Rashi's commentary on the Pentateuch as well as his commentary on the Talmud are considered absolutely basic to the understanding of the text to this very day.

Ramban - Acronym for R' Moshe ben Nachman ["Nachmanides"] (1194-1270) of Gerona, Spain, one of the leading Torah scholars of the Middle Ages; successfully defended Judaism at the dramatic debate in Barcelona in 1263; author of numerous basic works in all aspects of Torah, including a classic commentary on the Pentateuch.

Sifre - Tannaitic halachic midrash to the Books of Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 97a

On a similar note, Rabbi Akiva revealed an additional matter not explicitly articulated in the Torah. You say that when Aaron and Miriam spoke against Moses, both Aaron and Miriam were struck with leprosy, as it written: "And God became angry at them and He left, and the cloud departed from above the tent, and behold, Miriam was leprous like snow. And Aaron turned toward Miriam, and behold, she was leprous" (Numbers 12:9-10). The verse's statement that God became angry at both of them teaches that Aaron, too, became leprous; this is the statement of Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira said to him: Akiva, in either case you will be judged in the future for this teaching. If the truth is in accordance with your statement, the Torah concealed Aaron's punishment and you reveal it. And if the truth is not in accordance with your statement, you are unjustly slandering that righteous man.

The Gemara asks: However, didn't Rabbi Akiva derive this from the plural pronoun *them*, meaning that God was angry with both of them? The Gemara answers: God's anger in that verse was manifest in a mere rebuke, not in leprosy. A baraita was taught in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Akiva, who said that Aaron also became leprous, as it is written: "And Aaron turned toward Miriam, and behold, she was leprous" (Numbers 12:10), and it was taught: This teaches that he turned, i.e., he was healed, from his leprosy, as he too had been afflicted.