

CHAPTER 12

INTRODUCTION TO NUMBER 12

In this chapter we have an account of Aaron and Miriam speaking against Moses, and for what reason, whose amiable character is given, (^{<04121>}Numbers 12:1-3); and of the Lord's calling them to him, and rebuking them for it, giving an excellent testimony to Moses, and then departing in anger, (^{<04124>}Numbers 12:4-9); and of Miriam's being smitten with leprosy, and Aaron's entreating Moses on his and her account, who prayed to the Lord to heal her, (^{<041210>}Numbers 12:10-13); and of her being ordered to be shut out of the camp seven days, during which time the Israelites stayed at Hazeroth, and then removed to the wilderness of Paran, (^{<041214>}Numbers 12:14-16).

Ver. 1. *And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses*, etc.] Miriam is first mentioned, because she was first in the transgression, and so was only punished; Aaron was drawn into the sin by her, and he acknowledged his fault, and was forgiven: it must be a great trial to Moses, not only to be spoken against by the people, as he often was, but by his near relations, and these gracious persons, and concerned with him in leading and guiding the people through the wilderness, (^{<3304>}Micah 6:4);

because of the Ethiopian woman, whom he had married, for he had married an Ethiopian woman; not a queen of Ethiopia, as the Targum of Jonathan; nor Tharbis, a daughter of a king of Ethiopia, whom Josephus ^{f147} says he married, when he was sent upon an expedition against the Ethiopians, while he was in Pharaoh's court; nor the widow of an Ethiopian king whom he married after his death, when he fled from Pharaoh into Ethiopia, and was made a king there, as say some Jewish writers ^{f148}: for there is no reason to believe he was married before he went to Midian; nor was this some Ethiopian woman he had married since, and but lately, Zipporah being dead or divorced, as some have fancied; but it was Zipporah herself, as Aben Ezra, Ben Melech, and so the Jerusalem Targum, which represents her not as truly an Ethiopian, but so called, because she was like to one; indeed she was really one; not a native of Ethiopia, the country of the Abyssines, but she was a Cushite, a native of

Arabia Chusea, in which country Midian was, from whence she came; hence the tents, of Cushan, and the curtains of Midian, are spoken of together, (^{<387>}Habakkuk 3:7). Now it was not on account of Moses's marriage with her that they spoke against him, for that was an affair transacted in Midian some years ago, which at first sight may seem to be the case; nor because he now had divorced her, as Jarchi, which perhaps would have given them no uneasiness; and for the same reason, not because he abstained from conversation with her, that he might give up himself to the service of God in his house, and perform it in a more holy and faithful manner, which is the common sentiment of the Jewish writers: but rather, as it is thought by others, because of a suspicion they had entertained, that she had interested herself in the affair of the choice of the seventy elders, and had prevailed upon Moses to put in such and such persons into the list she had a mind to serve; at least this seems to be the case, for the displeasure was against Moses himself; they were angry with him, because he transacted that affair without them, and chose whom he pleased, without consulting them; and therefore, though they cared not to ascribe it entirely to him, and his neglect of them, they imputed it to his wife, as if she had overpersuaded him, or her brother through her means, to take such a step as he did.

Ver. 2. *And they said, hath the Lord, indeed spoken only by Moses?* etc.] They own he had spoken by him; this was so notorious that it could not be denied:

hath he not spoken also by us? are we not prophets as well as he? the Lord spake to Aaron while he was in Egypt, and had made him a good spokesman in his name, and bore this testimony of him, that he could speak well, and Miriam is expressly called a prophetess, (^{<114>}Exodus 4:14,27) (^{<150>}Exodus 15:20); and this being the case, they stomached it that they should have no concern in the choice and appointment of the seventy elders:

and the Lord heard [it]; for perhaps this was said secretly between themselves; but God, that sees, and hears, and knows all things, took notice of what was spoken by them, and resented it; for it was ultimately against himself, who had ordered Moses to do what he did.

Ver. 3. *Now the man Moses [was] very meek,* etc.] So that they might say anything against him, and he not be affronted, nor resent any injury; and this therefore is introduced as a reason why the Lord undertook the cause,

and vindicated him, resenting the obloquies of Miriam and Aaron against him; because he knew he was so exceeding meek, that he himself would pass it by without taking notice of it, though he might hear it: hence the Targum of Jonathan

“and he cared not for their words;”

they gave him no concern or uneasiness, so meek, mild, and gentle was he: and this is to be considered; not as a self-commendation of Moses, but as a testimony of his character by God himself, by whom he was inspired in writing it; though it is possible this might be added by another hand, Joshua or Ezra, under the same direction and inspiration of the Spirit of God; who chose that such a character of Moses should stand here, in opposition to the calumnies cast upon him, and as giving a reason why not he himself, but the Lord, appeared in his vindication, he being so meek and lowly, as is said of his antitype, and by himself, (⁴⁰¹²⁹Matthew 11:29);

above all the men which [were] upon the face of the earth; being seldom angry, and when he was, it was generally, if not always, when the honour of God was concerned, and not on account of his own person and character; though it must not be said of him that he was perfect in this respect, or free from passion, or from blame at any time on account of it, but, when compared with others, he was the meekest man that ever lived; whereby he became the fittest person to have to do with such a peevish, perverse, and rebellious people as the Israelites were, whom no other man could well have bore with.

Ver. 4. *And the Lord spake suddenly unto Moses, and unto Aaron, and unto Miriam,* etc.] As one greatly provoked, and highly displeased, and which was shown at once; and in order to prevent the complaint getting among the people, and spreading, which might have been of bad consequence, as they were pretty much disposed to murmur and mutiny; as also to show that it was not through any solicitation of Moses that the Lord took this matter in hand, time not being allowed to him to make any application to him; for, as soon as ever Miriam and Aaron had uttered their speech against him, the Lord spake to them:

come out ye three unto the tabernacle of the congregation; everyone out of his tent, as Aben Ezra; though it is not improbable that they were all together in the tent of Moses, whither Aaron and Miriam were come to

contend with him; the words seem to be spoken quick, and in haste, as being angry:

and they three came out: of the place where they were, to the tabernacle of the congregation, that so the people might not hear what was said unto them, and what was the occasion of it.

Ver. 5. *The Lord came down in the pillar of the cloud,* etc.] Which was over the most holy place of the tabernacle, and which was a symbol of the presence of the Lord; and who is said to come down, because that was above the tabernacle; whereas he came, as is next expressed,

and stood [in] the door of the tabernacle; where he set up his tribunal, and called them to his bar, courts of judicature being usually held in the gate; not suffering them to go into the tabernacle as they were wont to do, being delinquents:

and called Aaron and Miriam; to come nearer to him, and hear what he had to say to them; Moses keeping at a greater distance, it not being so proper that he should be within hearing of those commendations which were about to be given of him;

and they both came forth; Aaron and Miriam, and stood before the Lord.

Ver. 6. *And he said, hear now my words,* etc.] The Targum of Jonathan reads, "I beseech you"; and Jarchi says, this particule always so signifies; but it is not so agreeable to the language of the divine Being:

if there be a prophet among you; not as making a doubt of it, but rather allowing that there was, and that there were others besides Moses, as even they themselves, Aaron and Miriam, and the seventy elders, and perhaps others; or at least there had been, and would be again, as there were in later times:

[I] the Lord will make myself known to him; that is, declare my mind and will concerning things present, or things to come:

in a vision; when awake, either by day or by night, representing objects to the bodily sight; as the almond tree rod, and the boiling pot, to Jeremiah, (^{<2011>}Jeremiah 1:11-13); the visions of the chariots, (^{<2234>}Ezekiel 23:24 26:7,10), and dry bones, (^{<2501>}Ezekiel 37:1-14), to Ezekiel, and such as were shown to Amos, (^{<3001>}Amos 7:1-9:15): or to the mind by night, as if really discerned by the senses; as the visions of the man riding on a red

horse, (^{<3008>}Zechariah 1:8), and of the four horns, (^{<3018>}Zechariah 1:18), and four carpenters, (^{<3010>}Zechariah 1:20), with several others shown to Zechariah:

[and] will speak unto him in a dream; as he had done to Jacob, (^{<0311>}Genesis 31:11), and as he did afterwards to Daniel, (^{<2001>}Daniel 7:1), and many others.

Ver. 7. *My servant Moses [is] not so*, etc.] Or such a prophet; he is not so used; it was not in such a manner the Lord spake to him; not in visions and dreams, as he had to Abraham and Jacob, and did to others in later times:

who [is] faithful in all mine house; in the house of Israel, or among that people which were the Lord's family, where Moses was a servant and steward, and did all things according to the will of the Lord, the master of the family; he faithfully delivered to them all the laws, statutes, and ordinances, which he appointed to be observed by them: unless this is to be understood of the tabernacle, which was the house of God, in which he dwelt, and which was made, and all things in it, exactly according to the pattern given by the Lord to Moses: (see ^{<3002>}Hebrews 3:2,5 8:5).

Ver. 8. *With him will I speak mouth to mouth*, etc.] And face to face, as he had done, (^{<0231>}Exodus 33:11); in a free, friendly, and familiar manner, as one friend speaks to another, without injecting any fear or dread, and consternation of mind, which was sometimes the case of the prophets; or without a middle person, a mediator, as Aben Ezra, not by means of an angel, as in some cases, but the Lord himself spake to him:

even apparently, and not in dark speeches; the word "apparently", or "vision", being opposed to "dark speeches", shows that this is not to be understood of the appearance or vision of an object presented to the sight, or to the mind, which is denied of Moses, though usual with other prophets; but of the vision, or plain sense and meaning of words, which are so plainly expressed, that the sense is easily seen and understood; it was not under figures and allegories, and parables and dark representations of things, that the law of the decalogue, and other laws, statutes, and ordinances, and the proclamation the Lord made of himself, as the Lord gracious, merciful, etc. were delivered unto Moses, but in plain words and clear expressions; not in such enigmatical, parabolical, and allegorical terms as many of the visions and prophecies of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Amos, and Zechariah, were exhibited to them; (see Gill on "^{<0116>}Numbers 12:6"):

and the similitude of the Lord shall he behold: as he had at the burning bush, and at Mount Sinai, with the elders of Israel, and when the Lord proclaimed his name before him; at which several times it is highly probable he beheld the Lord, even the Lord Christ, in an human form, as a presage of his future incarnation, and as he might also after this: the Targum of Jonathan is,

“the similitude which is after my Shechinah (or divine Majesty) he saw;”

that is, his back parts, as Jarchi, and other Jewish writers, interpret it; but Bishop Patrick thinks the word not should be repeated from the preceding clause, and that the sense is, that he did not behold him in similitudes, nor did the Lord speak to him by them, as to other prophets, (see ^{<820>}Hosea 12:10);

wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? or against my servant, against Moses; against any servant of mine, but especially against Moses, so faithful in my house, so much approved of and honoured by me, and so superior to all other prophets.

Ver. 9. *And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them,* etc.] Which might be visible by some outward token, as by lightning from the cloud, or, however, what follows was sufficient to show it:

and he departed; from the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, where he had stood in the pillar of cloud for some time; but as soon as he had given his testimony of Moses, and expressed his displeasure at Aaron and Miriam, he went away directly from them; not staying to hear what they had to say for themselves, which was a plain indication of his anger against them.

Ver. 10. *And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle,* etc.] Not from off the door of the tabernacle, as Aben Ezra, for that is implied in the last clause of (^{<0420>}Numbers 12:9), but from off that part of the tabernacle, the most holy place, where it had used to abide; but now it went up higher in the air, or removed at some distance from thence, which was a further indication of the sore displeasure of God; that as he would not stay with Aaron and Miriam at the door of the tabernacle, so neither would he suffer the cloud to continue over it, as it was wont to do, so long as they were there:

and, behold, Miriam [became] leprous, [white] as snow; was smote immediately with a leprosy by the Lord, as the hand of Moses was in a miraculous way, (^{<1046>}Exodus 4:6); and as Gehazi was, who was smitten of God in like manner, (^{<1167>}2 Kings 5:27); in an ordinary and gradual leprosy, when it was all white, the man was clean, (^{<1833>}Leviticus 13:13); but in an extraordinary one, and which was immediately from God, and at once, in this case it was a sign it was incurable. Miriam only, and not Aaron, was smitten with a leprosy; though Chaskuni says, that some of their Rabbins were of opinion, that Aaron was; but this does not appear, nor is it likely that he should be thus defiled and dishonoured, being the priest of the Lord, and since he was not so deep in the transgression as Miriam, and was drawn into it by her, and also repented of it:

and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, [she was] leprous; he not only cast his eye upon her, as it were accidentally, and saw what was her case; but, as the priest of the Lord, looked upon her, as it was the business of his office to do, and perceived she was leprous, and was obliged to pronounce her so; and perhaps she was the first, after the law of the leprosy, that he was called to look upon, and pronounced her unclean, which must be a great mortification to him.

Ver. 11. *And Aaron said unto Moses, alas, my lord!* etc.] The word for “alas” is generally interpreted by the Jewish writers as a note of beseeching and entreating, as it is here by the Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan,

“I beseech thee, my lord,”

or “upon me, my lord”^{f149}, be all the blame; such was his tenderness to his sister, and the compassion he had on her; and such reverence and respect did he show to Moses his brother, though younger than he, because of his superior dignity as a prophet, and chief magistrate, and prime minister, and servant of the Lord, calling him “my lord”:

I beseech thee, lay not the sin upon us; the punishment of it, bear not hard upon us, or suffer us to be punished in a rigorous manner, without interceding to the Lord for us, for the abatement or removal of it; such a powerful and prevailing interest he knew he had with God, that by his prayers their punishment would be mitigated, or not laid, or, if laid, removed:

wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned; he owns they had sinned, but suggests, and so he would have it understood, that it

was not through malice, and purposely and presumptuously, but through and ignorance, inadvertency and weakness, and hoped it would be forgiven.

Ver. 12. *Let her not be as one dead*, etc.] As she was in a ceremonial sense, being to be shut up and excluded from the society of people, and as defiling by touching as a dead carcase; and, in a natural sense, her flesh, by the disease upon her, was become as dead flesh, putrid and rotten, and unless miraculously cured it would issue in her death:

of whom the flesh is half consumed, when he cometh out of his mother's womb; like an abortive, or one stillborn, that has been dead some time in its mother's womb; and therefore when brought forth its flesh is almost wasted away, or at least half consumed: and in such a plight and condition was Miriam already, or quickly would be, through the force of her disease.

Ver. 13. *And Moses cried unto the Lord*, etc.] With a loud voice, and with great earnestness and importunity, being heartily affected with the miserable condition Miriam was in:

saying, heal her now, O God, I beseech thee; in the original text it is, "O God now, heal her now"; for the same particle is used at the close as at the beginning of the petition; and the repetition of it shows his earnestness and importunity that she might be healed directly, immediately, without any delay; and Moses uses the word "El", which signifies the strong and mighty God, as expressive of his faith in the power of God, that he was able to heal her; and at the same time suggests that none but he could do it; and so Aben Ezra interprets it,

"thou that hast power in thine hand, now heal her;"

this prayer is a proof of his being of a meek, humble, and forgiving spirit.

Ver. 14. *And the Lord said unto Moses*, etc.] By a voice out of the cloud, though at a distance; unless it was by a secret impulse upon his spirit, darting such words into his mind as if he heard an audible voice:

if her father had but spit in her face; or, "in spitting spitted"^{f150}; spit much, and continued spitting till he had covered her face with spittle; which, as it would have been a token of anger and displeasure in him, an earthly father, who is meant, and of shame and disgrace to her; so there is some likeness in spittle to leprosy, both being white, and in such a case to the abundance

of it, her thee being covered with leprosy; and which came as it were from the mouth of the Lord, by his order and appointment, immediately, as spittle from a man, and like that, in a way of detestation and contempt, and to make abhorred and despised:

should she not be ashamed seven days? hide herself, and never appear in the family, and especially in her father's presence, because of the shame she was put unto, for the space of seven days; how much more ashamed then should she be, now her heavenly Father did spit in her face, and covered it with a white leprosy and for as long a time at least, or indeed longer? fourteen days, say the Targum of Jonathan, and Jarchi, but no more than seven are required, when more might have justly been, for her separation and shutting up from company and conversation:

let her be shut out from the camp seven days; for so long the leper was to be shut up at the trial of his leprosy, and so long he was to be out of his tent at the cleansing of him, (^{<0815>}Leviticus 13:5,6 14:8);

and after that let her be received [again]; into the camp and into society with her relations and friends.

Ver. 15. *And Miriam was shut out of the camp seven days,* etc.] And so in later times lepers dwelt alone, and in a separate house, as long as the leprosy was upon them, (see ^{<0821>}2 Chronicles 26:21); Miriam no doubt was healed at once, but, as a punishment for her sin, she was obliged to keep out of the camp of Israel for such a space of time:

and the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in [again]; partly out of respect unto her, she being a prophetess, and one that went before them, and led them with Moses and Aaron, (^{<0804>}Micah 6:4); and partly for want of the cloud to direct them, which had departed at a distance from them.

Ver. 16. *And afterwards the people removed from Hazeroth,* etc.] After seven days, where they had been so long at least; the cloud being returned to the tabernacle, and having been taken up, which was the signal for motion, the camps of Israel, in their order, removed and marched forward:

and pitched in the wilderness of Paran; at a place in it called Rithmah, (^{<0838>}Numbers 33:18); which, according to Bunting ^{f151}, was eight miles from Hazeroth, near to which was another place called Kadesh, or else this was another name of Rithmah, (see ^{<0438>}Numbers 13:3,26); and now the

Israelites were very near the land of promise, and from hence they sent spies to make their observations on it, and bring a report of it; and had it not been for their ill conduct in that affair, in all probability would have been quickly in it, but on that account were kept out thirty eight years longer: it was on the twenty eighth or twenty ninth of the month Sivan the Israelites came to this place, according to the Jewish writers^{f152}, which month answers part of our May and part of June.