

“AND YHWH HEARD”: WHEN GOD’S PEOPLE MURMUR AGAINST THEIR LEADERS (NUMBERS 12:1-16)

V. J. Steiner, Ph.D.

MIQRA 9.1 (Winter 2010): 6-10 (slightly revised, 2022)

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual leadership has always been a costly calling; it is not for the faint of heart. By ‘cost’ I do not refer merely to increased demands of responsibility, time, and training. I have in mind the pricier and more painful costs of criticism, jealousy, and mistrust. Sometimes those in leadership “have it coming”; they pay dearly for their own folly and failures. At other times the resistance they experience is simply a reflection of a cultural attitude conditioned by deep socio-political suspicions and the unease we feel when we sense that we may be at the mercy of someone else’s agenda. Nowadays, for example, much of the free West is dominated by a doctrine of the egalitarian ideal, the advocates of which regard any form of particularism or exclusion as self-evidently bad and proclaim equality (confused as inclusivism) as the ultimate virtue, the new moral absolute. In the public opinion, since god (the lower case is intended here) loves all equally and accepts all people alike, any notion that one person is different in status from another must be suppressed. It is an insult for any human to stand above others, especially if ‘above’ implies not merely talents, but authority which in any way restricts the unqualified autonomy of another.

How we got to where we are in our distrust of leadership and in our confusion over equality and liberty lies deep in our cultural and religious history, with roots as far back as the American Revolution, the Enlightenment project, and the Protestant Reformation. How could it be otherwise when to be an American, for example, is to hold “these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”; or to be a Christian (of the Protestant variety) is to regard all Christians equally as “believer-priests,” each *individually* (the operative word) having direct access to God without any need for human intermediaries. Given this heritage, deportment that is culturally acceptable when it comes to how we think and speak about those in authority is sometimes mistaken as deportment that is Christian. When the Church aligns itself with the kingdoms of the world, embracing the values that define what it means to be an American, for example, it is understandable that Christians living in this country should come to assume it their right, if not their duty, to resist those in leadership when they do not agree with their decisions and policies and to do so in the name of “equality” (no one is above us) and “liberty” (it’s a democratic privilege). It does not seem to matter that in this respect, to borrow a line from Stanley Hauerwas, “as Christians in America we are more American than Christian.”¹ Nor does it occur to us that while equality and liberty, in the popular sense, may be our democratic birthright, biblical virtues cut across these values and bring them under the scrutiny and judgment of lordship. If leaders exist, in the public perception, simply to make and to carry out decisions *we the people* have already decided are best, that clearly is not the way the *Church* has been designed to operate. Autonomy may be a democratic privilege and grumbling our national pastime, but neither is a Christian freedom, or at least not one that is founded in the teaching and example of our Lord, for whom self-abasement, suffering, and persecution are preferable to self-will and insubordination.

But the roots of this confusion lie deeper than the Declaration of Independence or the Protestant Reformation. It was present in Israel long before. The exodus generation, for example, recently liberated from bondage by the mighty salvation of YHWH, soon turned into a nation of grumblers against both their saving LORD and his appointed leaders. And like Christians today, Israel’s grumblers were

¹ S. Hauerwas, *A Cross-Shattered Church: Reclaiming the Theological Heart of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 137.

presumptuous opinion-holders who, in the name of equality and liberty, felt their opinions counted as much as anyone else's, including the decisions rendered by their accredited leaders.² Numbers 12 narrates one such incident in the life of Israel and its leadership, an account both uniquely intriguing and profoundly instructive, not least because of the principals involved—YHWH, Moses, and Moses' two siblings, Miriam and Aaron—and the issue at stake, namely, who stands qualified to lead Israel, especially as those who mediate the word of the LORD.

Although we cannot in the space of this article explore the story in detail, a summary exposition sheds light on many important points for further theological and practical reflection. As I will not be including the biblical text here, it will be best to proceed with a Bible opened to our passage. But first a few words on the relationship of chapter 12 to what immediately precedes.

THE CONTEXT

The story of Miriam and Aaron's challenging the credibility and authority of Moses as the sole mediator of divine revelation continues the theme of rebellion against proper leadership begun in the previous chapter. But whereas the conflict in ch. 11 originated in problems on the fringes of the camp, in the *people's* complaint against their leaders, in ch. 12 problems surface at the heart of the leadership, indeed, among Moses' own siblings. "The complaining spirit is not limited to the Israelite laity. There is even dissent and jealousy among the leaders of the people, who resent the fact that Moses, is, in the words of one Protestant scholar: 'God's vicar on earth, a kind of papal figure'."³

Chapters 11 and 12 are linked, then, by a common concern about Moses' leadership role, or more specifically, by a concern about the *uniqueness* of Moses vis-à-vis the Spirit-endowed elders (ch. 11), and the prophetess Miriam and high priest Aaron who, on the basis of their own leadership gifts (cf. Exod 4:10-17; 15:20-21; Mic 6:4), contest Moses' qualification and special position (ch. 12). It is possible that "Miriam and Aaron summon the courage to challenge Moses from the example of Eldad and Medad (11:26-29), who also have received their prophetic gift directly from God, prophesying independently of Moses and with the latter's encouragement."⁴ In other words, built into YHWH's endowing seventy elders with the Spirit (11:16-25) and Moses' own wish for YHWH's Spirit to come upon all his people so that all might share in prophecy (v. 29), lies the very real possibility that such an initiation of other forms of leadership might be construed as negating Moses' *unique* role and status as YHWH's prophet and leader *par excellence*. In this way, ch. 11 raises interesting questions relative to whether the "inclusion" of others in Spirit-endowed leadership and their recognition as genuine channels of God's revelation translate into an implicit "equality" that invalidates differentiation. Perhaps the kind of leadership exemplified in Moses does not entail a unique status after all, as Miriam and Aaron will contend in ch. 12.⁵

THE ATTACK ON MOSES, AND THE DIVINE RESPONSE (VV. 1-9)

² For a survey of the grumbling theme in Numbers, see T. D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 242-52.

³ Victor Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 310; cited in John Bergsma and Brant Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Old Testament*, vol 1. *The Old Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2018), 236-37.

⁴ J. Milgrom, *Numbers* (JPS; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 93.

⁵ The chapters are further linked by a common narrative pattern, wherein "the people complain; God's anger burns; Moses intercedes; the punishment abates" (W. H. Bellinger, *Leviticus, Numbers* [NIBC; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001], 226).

The story begins abruptly with two issues brought up by Miriam and Aaron in complicity, as concerns Moses' marriage to a foreigner (v. 1) and Moses' status as sole interpreter of God's words (v. 2). The precipitating cause of the resentment was Moses' marriage to a Cushite wife. That Miriam is the chief instigator of the gossip is evident both in her first-position mention and in the unambiguous feminine singular form of the verb 'spoke'.⁶ This detail will factor later in the story.

Aside from the fact that their grumbling somehow centers on an ethnic objection, the exact nature or precise point of Miriam and Aaron's complaint that Moses had married a Cushite⁷ is not clear. The issue of Moses' choice of a wife may have occasioned his siblings' criticism; but it quickly drops from the story in v. 2, where their charge takes an unexpected turn. Apparently Miriam and Aaron's complaint about Moses' marriage to an outsider was little more than a pretext or "surface issue that concealed the deeper problem of jealousy over their brother's unique status before God in the community."⁸ Of course, it is often the case that the real underlying issues in the personal attacks and criticisms people bring against their leaders surface only later. Or as one of my pastor friends observes, the reason people give for leaving a church is almost never the real reason.

The real issue focuses on Miriam and Aaron's concern about Moses' unique status and authority relative to the fact that God also spoke with and through them, which, of course, is completely true. As often happens in criticism, their language is exaggerated: "Does YHWH speak exclusively [lit., only and solely] with Moses?" Not content that God did indeed speak to and through them as prophetess and priest, as well as through the Spirit-endowed elders of ch. 11, their real objection centered on an intolerable differentiation between Moses' status and their own. Why should Moses be God's favorite, or what gives him an advantage? In other words, jealousy, "the desire to be on the inside or at the top,"⁹ and the presumption of equality when it came to speaking on the LORD's behalf lay at the root of their complaint. It is clear from what follows that God's economy would operate on a different set of values and expectations from theirs, an economy in which shared ministry did not require a collapse of all positional distinctions. Meanwhile, v. 2 ends on a frighteningly ominous note, forgotten by most who murmur against their leaders—"And YHWH heard." God was listening!

Whether "the man Moses was very *humble*, more so than any man [*'adam*] who was upon the surface of the ground [*'adamah*]," or rather ". . . very *afflicted/miserable*" or ". . . very *dependent*," the precise translation of the narrator's parenthetical comment in v. 3 does not obscure the essential point: However great he might appear in others' eyes (cf. Exod 11:3), in his own eyes Moses was no more than a mere man. His qualities are hereby implicitly contrasted with the complaints of Miriam and Aaron,¹⁰ even more so with the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day who sat in Moses' seat but fell far short of his model (Matt 23:1-12). For Moses, unlike Miriam and Aaron, leadership was not about social position or self-assertion or something to be exploited for personal gain (cf. Phil 2:5-8; 2 Cor 10:1, 12; 11:30; 12:9). Accordingly, like all humble leaders, who feel no "need to fight for the right to bear a towel,"¹¹ he had nothing of his own to defend, no reason to open his mouth against his accusers (cf. Isa 53:7; 1 Pet 2:23). Called of the Lord to serve, the burden was on the Lord to vindicate his appointment. Specifically in the

⁶ Hebrew verbs are more gender and number specific than English. The verb 'spoke' in v. 1 ("Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses. . .") is in fact a feminine singular form, placing her the prominent role as the one who did the talking.

⁷ From the medieval period to the modern, commentators have long puzzled over the identity of this woman, whether it is in fact a reference to Zipporah or to another otherwise unknown wife, with arguments lining up on either view.

⁸ T. R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 224. It is noteworthy that "God didn't even address it in his response to them" in the following verses (I. M. Duguid, *Numbers: God's Presence in the Wilderness* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2006], 160).

⁹ D. L. Stubbs, *Numbers* (BTCB; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 123.

¹⁰ Bellinger, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 225.

¹¹ Duguid, *Numbers*, 162.

context of Miriam and Aaron's criticism, "The narrator wishes the reader to know that Moses himself would probably have let this challenge go unanswered. It was Yahweh who heard it and who took it upon himself to answer it."¹² Moses will leave the defense to God.

Suddenly,¹³ as if to nip this complaint in the bud, YHWH summoned the three sibling leaders: "Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting" (v. 4). Frightful things were known to happen there (cf. 16:16-18, 19-35), and we anticipate that more than a little family confab may ensue. "Then YHWH came down [this too can be frightening (cf. Gen 11:5; Exod 19:20; 34:5; Num 11:25)] in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent; and he called Aaron and Miriam, and the two of them came forward" (v. 5). The suspense intensifies as YHWH prepares to address Aaron and Miriam, separated now from Moses their brother, who is left out of the matter.

The highly poetic divine speech opens with an attention-getting "Now, you listen to me!" (lit., "Hear now my words"), after which three points are registered in defense of Moses. First, visions and dreams are the customary media by which YHWH communicates his revelation with authentic but "ordinary" prophets (v. 6).¹⁴ Second, Moses, being no ordinary prophet, is set apart from the others as the recipient of more direct or less veiled revelation, which point is spelled out in a fivefold differentiation in vv. 7-8: (a) Moses is called "[YHWH's] 'servant'" (v. 7a); (b) Moses is uniquely "entrusted with [YHWH's] whole house" (v. 7b); (c) YHWH speaks with Moses "mouth to mouth" (v. 8a, lit.), (d) "clearly, and not in riddles" (v. 8a); and (e) Moses "beholds the form of YHWH" (v. 8a).¹⁵ In all these ways, "God emphasizes the role of Moses as the unique and supreme vehicle of divine revelation."¹⁶ Third, it should be a terrifying thing to speak against YHWH's servant Moses! (v. 8b). "God's speech ends using the same vocabulary (*dibber be*) as Miriam and Aaron did in their charge (v. 2) but with boomerang effect: God speaks to Moses (2) but Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses (8, cf. v. 1)."¹⁷ The point could not be clearer: Not all of God's people, not even all of God's prophets, see and hear God equally. "On the basis of the contrast here, [Aaron and Miriam] have overstepped themselves in issuing a challenge to Moses' unique status by claiming parity with him."¹⁸ They have attacked the man Moses, who sees himself as only a man, and in so doing they have attacked YHWH's special servant, whose authority resides solely in the One with whom he communes "mouth to mouth."

The suspense of our passage grows most intense at the narrative conclusion in v. 9: "And YHWH's anger burned against them, and he left." (The image of someone's being sorely upset and

¹² Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 224.

¹³ 'Suddenly' is used rarely of YHWH, and only here of speaking. Most frequently it is used of a sudden invasion of judgment without warning (e.g., Isa 47:11; Jer 4:20; 6:26; 15:8; 18:22; 51:8; Pss 64:8 [EVV 7]; Job 5:3; Ashley, 224).

¹⁴ The Hebrew text of v. 6b is problematic on grammatical, text-critical, and accentual grounds. See the commentary literature for discussion.

¹⁵ Briefly, on (a) cf. Exod 14:31; Deut 34:5; Josh 1:1, 2, 13, 15; 2 Kgs 21:8 (Moses); Gen 26:24 (Abraham); Num 14:24 (Caleb); 2 Kgs 9:7 (prophets); Isa 41:8 (Israel); on (b) cf. Eliezer (Gen 24:2) and Joseph (Gen 39:4-5) in the households of Abraham and Pharaoh, respectively; "Of All of God's household, Moses is the most trusted; he alone has direct access to the Deity and obtains an audience with Him at will" (Milgrom, 96); on (c) "mouth to mouth" occurs only here; but cf. "face to face" in Exod 33:11 and Deut 34:10, and see especially the discussion in D. T. Olson, *Numbers* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1996), 71-73; on (d) i.e., plainly, as in his encounter at the burning bush, or his experience of the theophany at Sinai, or his being shown the blueprint of the Tabernacle; on (e) cf. Exod 20:4; Num 12:8; Deut 4:12, 15, 16, 23, 25; 5:8; Job 4:16; Pss 17:15, all (with the possible exception of Job 4:16) referring to the visible manifestation of YHWH; here probably an allusion to Exod 33:23 and the form of God passing by, where even in his intimacy there is distance (he sees only God's back; Belling, 225), the point being that YHWH's revelation to Moses is direct (note that the people saw no form at Sinai but only heard a voice—Deut 4:12, 15).

¹⁶ Olson, *Numbers*, 71.

¹⁷ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 96.

¹⁸ Ashley, *Numbers*, 226.

stomping out comes to mind, although it is hard to imagine such action of God.) Everything about this line is frightening! Elsewhere in Numbers, to be the target of YHWH's burning anger spells disaster (cf. 11:1, 33; 25:3; 32:10, 13). "So when we read that God's anger is kindled and then God departs, we expect dead bodies to be left after the dust settles."¹⁹ Moreover, the delay of this line—surely YHWH was incensed from the moment he "heard" (v. 2)—prompts Milgrom's observation that "God's anger did not abate but only mounted during the confrontation."²⁰ Will YHWH's angry withdrawal bring severe punishment in its wake? We wait and wonder.

THE PUNISHMENT OF MIRIAM, AND AARON'S RESPONSE (VV. 10-12)

Readers are both relieved and perplexed by what transpires when the cloud departs over the tent: "Miriam was skin-diseased like snow" (v. 10a). Interpreters differ on the precise nature of her affliction, whether it was leprosy in the technical sense or simply a rash, and whether the comparison to snow refers to the color of her skin or to its flakiness.²¹ Without minimizing the discomfort and shame associated with Miriam's condition, we are relieved that her punishment was not more severe (i.e., death). As readers sensitized to gender issues and ideological agendas in the current cultural climate, we are perplexed, however, that Miriam alone is afflicted. Why she and not he? Was not Aaron guilty as well? Indeed he was, but v. 1 (see above) had already cast Miriam in the primary role in the complaint against Moses. She alone is shamed through skin disease; as we shall see, "Aaron is humbled in a different way."²² In any event, modern concerns over discrimination are not in view, and it is best not to draw gender-charged points from a text that has no apparent interest in making them.

Aaron's response, as he turns and sees in horror what has happened to his sister (v. 10b), is both ironic and instructive. He pleads with Moses who, in turn, pleads with YHWH for Miriam's restoration (vv. 11-12). The irony—or is it evidence that YHWH's rebuke has taken effect?—consists in Aaron's addressing Moses as "my lord," whose credentials and unique status he and Miriam had earlier questioned. Presumably, "Only he whom Miriam and Aaron have wronged can help them."²³ Ashley captures the point: "Aaron, who had wanted to be able to be like his brother in the latter's role as a speaker for Yahweh, is forced to intercede with Moses who intercedes with God. . . . Yahweh is right—Moses is special!"²⁴ It is instructive that in his apology to Moses, Aaron confesses *both* his and Miriam's sin and calls it such: "O my lord, do not, I beg you, lay upon us the [penalty of the] sin that we have foolishly committed" (v. 11). Then follows his gut-wrenching petition for Miriam's preservation from the decay of death (v. 12). How will Moses respond, and will YHWH answer?

THE INTERCESSION OF MOSES, AND THE DIVINE RESPONSE (VV. 13-14)

As elsewhere in crisis situations (cf. Exod 15:25; 17:4), humble Moses cries out for those who have sinned against him, here "with a great emotive entreaty"²⁵: *'el na' refa' na' lah*, "O God, please heal her, please" (NLT: "Heal her, O God, I beg you!") (v. 13). St. John Chrysostom notes the contrast from our sometimes-hard hearts: "Miriam and her company spoke evil of Moses, and he immediately begged them off from their punishment. No, he would not so much as let it be known that his cause was avenged. But not so we. On the contrary, this is what we most desire; to have everyone know that they have not

¹⁹ Olson, *Numbers*, 73.

²⁰ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 97.

²¹ Proposals that YHWH's judgment on Miriam corresponds ironically to her racial complaint against Moses' dark-skinned Cushite wife seem overly contemporary.

²² Stubbs, *Numbers*, 124.

²³ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 97; cf. Gen 20:7, 17; Job 42:7-8.

²⁴ Ashley, *Numbers*, 227.

²⁵ R. D. Cole, *Numbers* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman, 2000), 207.

passed unpunished.”²⁶ Instead of responding angrily and defensively to the murmurings of Miriam and Aaron, Moses embodies and pleads for grace.

Miriam’s cleansing, however, would be neither automatic nor without condition (v. 14). Drawing on a hypothetical precedent not detailed in the Bible (but cf. Deut 25:9; Isa 50:6; Job 30:10), YHWH responds to Moses’ intercession by pointing out that if seven days are required to reinstate one in whose face his or her father had spat, then surely this would be the minimal period of isolation for Miriam in the present circumstance. The reason for this analogy is unclear, although it may suggest that her “affront to Moses’ spiritual authority is as gross as if her father had spat in her face.”²⁷ In any event, Miriam’s humiliation requires her exclusion from the camp for a full week, not in this instance to fulfill the laws of infectious skin disease (cf. Lev 13–14; Num 5:2-4), but to serve as a reminder of the shame that befits those who speak wrongly against YHWH’s appointed and anointed leader.²⁸ After Miriam’s seven-day banishment, she is to be “gathered in,” that is, restored to the community (v. 14b; cf. 2 Cor 2:5-11).

THE POSTLUDE (VV. 15-16)

And so it was. Miriam “was shut outside the camp seven days, and the people did not set out on the march till Miriam was brought in again” (v. 15). One person’s sin affects the entire community. All of Israel, we could say, paid a price for Miriam’s sin, as they must wait in the camp, delaying their march to the Promised Land until she has served out the designated time for her shame. In this way, “the people” (2x in vv. 15-16) are reminded of the serious consequences of insubordination, of the value of the individual (they cannot journey on without her), and of the necessity of forgiving and restoring grace (she is not permanently barred from the community).

SOME FINAL REFLECTIONS ON LEADERSHIP

In addition to the occasional points of application already noted, and among the many others that might be offered, two stand out in particular as regards the larger theological interests of our chapter relative to leadership. The first concerns the seriousness of disregarding proper lines of authority and accountability. This is precisely the point which the divine response to Miriam and Aaron in vv. 6-8 seeks to clarify. There the accent falls, to be sure, on the peculiar status of Moses vis-à-vis other *prophets* of YHWH,²⁹ and caution should be exercised in too-hastily drawing correlations to present-day Church leaders. Still, inasmuch as Moses’ siblings are held to account on the basis of YHWH’s speaking *most* directly to Moses, we might infer that greater responsibility of subordination is owed to those who are most intimate with the Lord. Or as my former Protestant pastor used to stress, we must listen to all God’s people, but especially to those who listen most to God. And the criterion which best determines who listens most to God and is therefore made privy to the oracles of the Lord is not defined by everyone else’s opinion on the matter. It consists in the compelling call of God and in the faithful discharge of the responsibilities commensurate with that call (v. 7).

²⁶ Homilies on Acts 14; cited in *ACCS* III, 222.

²⁷ G. J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981), 113. “If a human father’s rebuke by spitting entails seven days of banishment, should not the leprosy rebuke of the Heavenly Father at least require the same banishment?” (Milgrom, 98).

²⁸ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 98.

²⁹ In terms of the larger implications, “Mosaic tradition is more authoritative than prophetic inspiration. . . . In Numbers 11, the elders prophesied when given some of Moses’ spirit. This chapter makes it clear that any such prophetic revelation operates under the authority of Mosaic tradition” (Bellinger, 225; cf. Olson, 70). Eventually ‘Moses’ comes to signify the Torah or Pentateuch, with implications for the relative status of prophets, wise men, and apostles as those who are properly under authority.

Second and related, what makes insubordination so offensive—and this is true whatever its form or justifying label—is that it violates the designated status of YHWH’s leader as *servant*. Since the status of a servant is relative to that of his master, authority and respect are especially due *YHWH’s* servant, who in lowliness utters the words and carries out the wishes of his Master, even if imperfectly. To disregard YHWH’s servant-leader, then, is tantamount to disregarding YHWH himself. The implications for the Church today are far-reaching, especially given the current cultural insistence on undifferentiated equality, where anyone’s say is valued as if it were as credible and authoritative as anyone else’s (unless, of course, the former ‘anyone’ in this sentence represents someone with who I disagree, and the latter ‘anyone’ refers to me and my opinions!).