

How Do You Solve a Problem Like Miriam?  
An Exegesis of Numbers 12

Meghann Robern

THB 3001: The Hebrew Bible In Context  
Professor Marvin Sweeney  
21 December 2012

In his commentary on the Book of Numbers, Jacob Milgrom argues that "[t]he uniqueness of Moses is the sole theme" of Numbers 12.<sup>1</sup> While it is clear that the text establishes Moses as the highest of prophets in addition to being one who can look directly upon the likeness of G-d (Num 12:8), what happens to Miriam and what doesn't happen to Aaron is just as significant as Moses's elevation, if not moreso given the effect it has on Jewish priesthood and gender issues from that point on. At the beginning of Numbers 12, Miriam and Aaron appear to be on equal footing, and analysis of the Hebrew in 12:1, found in most commentaries, places her as the instigator of the accusation against Moses. However, the gaps in the narrative, along with the multitude of sources and awareness of Judean tendency towards anti-northern kingdom polemics (and therefore anti-women in position of power or holiness)<sup>2</sup>, imply a history rewritten to remove Miriam from being a priestess in addition to a prophetess.

To effectively analyze the text of Numbers 12, one must first acknowledge the discrepancies between English translations. The Jewish Study Bible,<sup>3</sup> (JSB) New Revised Standard Version<sup>4</sup> (NRSV), and the Schocken Bible<sup>5</sup> (SB) each have a different take on the Hebrew. While the JSB and NRSV are more similar than different, the SB is a translation that "tries.... to echo the Hebrew, and to lead the reader back to the sound structure and form of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 93. Print edition.

<sup>2</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle location 3610. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> *Jewish Study Bible*, ed. by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Print edition.

<sup>4</sup> *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Strong's Key Numbers*, Accordance electronic edition, version 2.3.

<sup>5</sup> Everett Fox, trans., *Schocken Bible: The Five Books of Moses* (Schocken Books, Inc.), Accordance electronic edition, version 1.1.

original."<sup>6</sup> A huge distinction between the JSB/NRSV and the SB, not limited to Numbers 12, is that the SB uses different transliterations of the Hebrew names. So in the text of Num 12 specifically, Miriam becomes Miryam, Moses becomes Moshe, and Aaron becomes Aharon.

12:1. The first notable difference between the various texts is right at the beginning: both the JSB and the NRSV include the itinerant marker "While they were at Hazeroth", while the SB makes it part of Num 11:35. Another difference in 12:1 is that the JSB and NRSV interpret the feminine singular conjugation<sup>7</sup> of *dabar* as Miriam and Aaron speaking together, with Miriam coming first in the text, while the SB translates it as "Miryam spoke, and Aharon, against Moshe"; by separating Aharon with commas, the SB acknowledges that Aharon took part, but places a majority of the responsibility for the action with Miriam. While the JSB/NRSV place Miriam first, their English translation makes the burden of responsibility more equal in perception. Num 12:1 also gives the reason for the *dabar*, and it is here that all three texts differ. The JSB puts the reiteration of Moses's marriage in quotation marks after a colon, as if it is being spoken aloud by someone during the confrontation. The NRSV translates the reiteration as a parenthetical after the first statement about the marriage and adds "indeed", as if it is a reminder to the reader that the claims Miriam and Aaron are making are true. The SB makes a similar construction to the NRSV, except that it places the phrase after a comma as opposed to creating a parenthetical.

12:2. Both Miriam and Aaron are included equally in the use of '*amar*'; all three texts use "they said." With the introduction of G-d, the SB uses YHWH, a choice that when spoken aloud

---

<sup>6</sup> "Product Details *Schocken Bible: The Five Books of Moses*," *Accordance Bible Store*, accessed 20 December 2012. <<http://www.accordancebible.com/store/details/?pid=SB>>

<sup>7</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 93. Print edition.

keeps a closer connection to G-d as the breath of all creation, while the JSB and the NRSV both use Lord, a translation choice more tied to human political hierarchies.

12:3. With regards to Moses and his humility, in this case the points of difference are about where in the translation the word "man" should appear and which adjective should be used to translate *m'od*. The SB and the NRSV choose to place "man" before Moses, which emphasizes his humanity. The JSB, on the other hand, places man at the end of the sentence as the object of humble used as an adjective. This distances the use of the word "man" as a descriptor of Moses. As for *m'od*, the JSB and the NRSV choose "very" to modify humble, while the SB uses "exceedingly". Only the JSB translates *'adam* as the gender-limiting "man"; the NRSV uses "anyone" and the SB uses "human".

12:4. The notable difference in this verse is the location of G-d when He speaks to the three. In the NRSV and the JSB, G-d is described as asking the triad to "come out." In the SB, however, the translation is "go out". The former implies that they are hearing G-d call from a location other than where they are—probably the Tent of Meeting—and he is telling them to come to where He is. The latter, on the other hand, implies that G-d is speaking in the location where they are at that moment, and that He is sending them to the Tent of Meeting where He will then appear. The former is a beckoning, the latter a sending. The difference reflects on whether the Tent of Meeting itself was necessary for the interaction to take place, or if G-d could have confronted them anywhere and wanted the symbolism of the Tent to be a part of the encounter. All the texts agree, however, that the Tent of Meeting was somewhere else and not in the camp with them. Each of the three texts has a different translation of tent, as well. The NRSV says "tent of meeting", with no capitalization indicating a location or structure of significance. This

lack of capitalization in modern English context undermines the ritual significance of the Tent of Meeting as the Temple in the Wilderness. The JSB adds capital letters, making it "Tent of Meeting". The SB translates it as "Tent of Appointment", which includes the definition of meeting place but adds a more formalized, ceremonial aspect to the understanding of the translation.

12:5. The only significant difference between the texts is that the SB and the NRSV translate G-d's movement as He "stood at the entrance to the [T]ent," while the JSB says that He "stopped at the entrance of the Tent." The former implies that G-d came down exactly where He intended to be for the confrontation, while the latter implies G-d moved after He came down, either to the entrance from within or from the outside.

12:6. The key difference in the translations here is whether or not the prophets of whom G-d is speaking are "them" (NRSV) or "him" (SB, JSB). The latter interpretation would exclude Miriam from being a prophet as she is described in Exodus 15.

12:7. It is in this verse that G-d brings his household into the confrontation. The JSB and the SB translate different in specific words, but retain the same basic meaning: that in the household of G-d, Moses is the most trusted individual. This implies that the prophets of the tribe of Israel, and possibly the people themselves, are considered part of G-d household. The NRSV has a slightly different take, saying that Moses is "entrusted with all my house." This separates Moses from the rest of the household, making him the caretaker of it but not necessarily a member of it.

12:9. This verse, about the anger of G-d (Hebrew *charah*, also used to describe G-d's anger in the rest of Numbers), is handled very differently by all three texts, but all with an

interpretation related to flame or fire. The JSB translates it as "Still incensed with them, the Lord departed." This uses the flame imagery to imply a strictly emotional anger, with no outward physical expression other than G-d's departure. The NRSV translates it as "And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed," which implies that the anger is still internal as opposed to external, but the use of kindle also implies a fueling or beginning to the anger, before it has reached its full power. The SB goes one step further to translate it as "The anger of YHWH flared up against them, and he went off." This interpretation indicates not only a brief burst of momentary anger—for flared implies a temporary state—but possibly an outward physical attack. This is important for the context of the following verse.

12:10. Here, the descriptions of what had been done to Miriam differ, although all agree that Miriam is the only one to suffer the punishment. The JSB says that she was "stricken with snow-white scales". The NRSV says she "had become leprous, as white as snow." The SB says that she "has *tzaraat* like snow!" Both the JSB and the NRSV have added "white" into the text as an addendum to snow, as if the only thing snow can ever be is white (as opposed to wet or cold). The notes of the JSB also reject the NRSV's use of leprosy "in favor of curable skin diseases, since persons afflicted with this condition in the Bible are often cured after being quarantined. Furthermore, the symptoms of the disease do not correlate with leprosy."<sup>8</sup>

12:12. The only significant difference between the texts in this verse is whether or not the stillborn child used as a reference for Miriam's condition is male (JSB) or neutral (SB, NRSV). All three texts agree that Aaron refers to Moses as "lord," which in the case of the NRSV makes a direct connection between Moses and G-d.

---

<sup>8</sup> Nili S.Fox, "Numbers" in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2004) 308-309. Print edition.

12:14. All three texts agree that in this verse, G-d is comparing himself to Miriam's father and taking on the right to control her and her body in that role. However, G-d's response to Moses's plea is handled differently by the three texts. The NRSV says that "If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days?" This implies that what Miriam did deserves far more punishment than the seven days one would get for merely being spat upon, and gives the sense that G-d is not being as cruel as He is allowed to be in the situation. There is the implication, then, of mercy, even in the midst of the punishment. The SB takes a different view, removing the "had but", repeating the "spat in her face" for emphasis, and adding "(at least)" to the seven days, implying that Moses and Aaron do not fully comprehend the level of punishment Miriam truly deserves. Even with this different interpretation of the text, however, there is still the implied mercy on the part of G-d. The JSB takes a middle view, saying "If her father had spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days?" This interpretation equates Miriam's actions with deserving being spat upon by her father G-d, and the customary punishment for this is seven days of isolation.

According to Marvin Sweeney's *Tanak*, "the literary structure of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers is defined by the itinerary formulas that mark the stages of Israel's journey from Egypt to Sinai and through the wilderness to the promised land of Israel."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Numbers 12 is defined as its own chapter by the itinerary mentions in 11:35 (the end of that chapter) and 12:16. Since this chapter is only sixteen verses long and tells a complete story, it is important to deal with it as a whole rather than selecting only a few verses out of context. It is part of a larger section of Numbers—chapters 10:11–19:22—which Sweeney describes as relating "the departure

---

<sup>9</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 2286-2288. Kindle Edition.

from Sinai and the rebellion of the people against Moses and YHWH during the course of their wilderness journey."<sup>10</sup> With regard to its placement inside Numbers, it comes right after the people's rebellion against the leadership because of the food they are being given to eat, and right before what Jacob Milgrom describes as the "faithlessness of the spies," one of the two "egregious sins" in the Wilderness period.<sup>11</sup> Milgrom also says that Num 11 is significant not necessarily because of the people's rebellion, but it has "contrasted Moses with the ecstatics," and this is directly relevant to the following story in Num 12 wherein Moses is being contrasted with the prophets.<sup>12</sup>

While Numbers 12:1–16 technically are a stand-alone narrative, they exist within the larger context of the narratives directly before and after, and to a lesser extent all the narratives of the Wilderness, to show descendants of Israel how G-d was cleaning house from the generation of Exodus to the generation allowed to enter the Promised Land in Joshua. Katharine Sakenfeld uses Dennis Olson's model of the census breaks in Num 1 and Num 26 to identify a division within Numbers between the first generation, "a sinful generation disobedient to G-d" and the second generation, born in the Wilderness, who live "fully obediently" and "serve as a positive example to future generations."<sup>13</sup> Even more specifically, according to Sweeney, is that in addition to establishing divine law, the wilderness narratives are refining who exactly gets to be a

---

<sup>10</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle location 3533. Kindle Edition.

<sup>11</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 99. Print edition.

<sup>12</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 93. Print edition.

<sup>13</sup> Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Numbers," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992) 45-46. Print edition.



priest and why, in an attempt to preserve the covenant between Israel and G-d with Moses as the focal point and Aaron (and his descendants) leading the priesthood.<sup>14</sup> From this standpoint, and in the context of the surrounding narratives, a synchronic reading means that "the uniqueness of Moses" is not "the sole theme of this chapter," as argued by Milgrom,<sup>15</sup> but also an scriptural explanation for why Miriam, and therefore women, are disappeared from power they previously held.

Why it was necessary to remove Miriam from power is something that must dealt with from a diachronic reading of the text, which is a blend of E, J, and P sources according to Sweeney: "Num 3–36 constitute a P redaction of an underlying EJ narrative."<sup>16</sup> This heavy mix of multiple sources is not limited just to Num 3–36, either: "Although the synchronic literary form of Num 3:1–Deut 34:12 presents a purportedly coherent narrative sequence, modern critical scholarship has identified a complex diachronic process of literary formation that produced the present narrative."<sup>17</sup> Yiskah Rosenfeld argues that (1) two distinct versions of the narrative are spliced together, creating the disparity between Miriam and Aaron first having concerns about Moses's wife and then jumping to claiming prophetic access to G-d, and (2) that "source cutting and splicing leaves obvious gaps and hints of earlier textual traditions" that "begs questions."<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 3255-3260. Kindle Edition.

<sup>15</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 93. Print edition.

<sup>16</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 3396. Kindle Edition.

<sup>17</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 3394-3396. Kindle Edition.

<sup>18</sup> Yiskah Rosenfeld, "Skin Deep: Scratching the Surface of Numbers 12," *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 7, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 1.

Within the narrative of Numbers 12, Milgrom identifies a specific poem from Num 12:6–8:

Introduction: Hear these My words (7)  
 A. If either of you is YHVH's prophet (9)  
     B. I make myself known to him in a vision (8)  
       C. I speak with him in a dream (7)  
         D. Not so with My servant Moses (6)  
           D'. He (alone) is trusted in all My household (7)  
           C'. With him I speak mouth to mouth (7)  
           B'. Plainly and not in riddles (8)  
           A'. And he beholds the likeness of the Lord (7)  
 Conclusion: How then did you not shrink (7)  
           from speaking against my servant Moses. (9)

Milgrom continues with an analysis: "The first half [12:6] describes God's communication with other prophets (ABC), the second half [12:8], His unique transmission to Moses (C'B'A'). The pivot [12:7] sets Moses apart from his prophetic counterparts (D) by declaring that God confides in him alone (D')." <sup>19</sup>

Numbers 12 also contains significant language choices that give it even more context of purpose.

The Tent of Meeting (or Tent of Appointment, or Tabernacle), is a central location where most of the action happens. The NRSV fails to capitalize it in the English translation, which does a disservice to making the reader understand how important the location is not only to the narrative but also to the people of Israel and to the leadership of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

Sweeney describes it as:

---

<sup>19</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 95. Print edition.

Insofar as the Tabernacle is constituted as the prototypical Temple, revelation from the Tabernacle sets the pattern for the function of the Temple as the source for divine revelation for Israel and the world at large at the holy center of creation. Whereas the revelation from the mountain focused on the basic laws that would constitute Israel's social and religious life, as well as the laws concerning the construction of the Tabernacle at its center, revelation from the Tabernacle now focuses on the means by which Israel would sanctify itself and thereby enter into a relationship with YHWH that would enable Israel to serve as a priestly people that would undertake the task of initiating the sanctification and completion of creation at large.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, the events that take place at the Tent of Meeting are relevant to Israel's sanctity, preserving the natural order of G-d's creation, and using the Wilderness to transition Israel from the practices of one generation to the practices of the next generation, who will be allowed to enter the Promised Land. The presence of the Tent of Meeting in this narrative signifies that the events described are necessary to the survival of Israel and the preservation of G-d's creation.

Another significant word, translated in many different ways, is *tzaraat*. While previous scholarship translated it as leprosy, as discussed earlier that is no longer applicable based on the symptoms.<sup>21</sup> The affliction does involve discharge of bodily fluids of some kind, as explained by Sweeney: "other types of skin disease that involves inflammation, swelling, and the discharge of fluid, that is, blood, pus, or other fluids, from the body through the skin." He continues to explain that such discharge is a direct connection to death,<sup>22</sup> and Aaron himself makes the connection to

---

<sup>20</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 2813-2819. Kindle Edition.

<sup>21</sup> Nili S.Fox, "Numbers" in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2004) 308-309. Print edition.

<sup>22</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 3051-3060. Kindle Edition.

a half-dead or stillborn child in case the discharge of living fluid reference is missed by the reader.<sup>23</sup> Miriam is now defiled by death.

Also, much is made in commentaries too numerous to name individually of the affliction making her skin "white," but the descriptor in the original text translates only "as snow."<sup>24</sup> Modern association with the English leads to the assumption that the descriptor is chosen for its colour, but snow is also frozen water. The appearance of a cold, wet substance in the desert wilderness is surely just as notable as its colour, and is more visually tied to the discharge of defiling bodily fluids. Rosenfeld and Erica Brown both make arguments about Miriam's relationship to water, and Brown speaks of rabbinic tradition and the portions of the Talmud that connect Miriam to the magic well that travelled with the people in the Wilderness.<sup>25</sup> Sweeney also points out that "the instruction speech in Lev 14:33–53 takes up the question of an analogous affliction, that is, mold or mildew, in the walls of a house."<sup>26</sup> Neither mold nor mildew can grow without water.

This chapter also deals with what it is to be a prophet, and how Moses is set apart from all the other prophets chosen by G-d. Miriam is identified as a prophetess in Exodus 15:20, but in that context she leads the women in what appears to be a ritual, possibly priestly, act, and does not speak for G-d nor receive a vision or dream. In Numbers 12:2, after bringing up the

---

<sup>23</sup> Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "Numbers," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: UJR Press, 2008) 861. Print edition.

<sup>24</sup> Yiskah Rosenfeld, "Skin Deep: Scratching the Surface of Numbers 12," *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 7, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 1.

<sup>25</sup> Erica Brown, "The Well Dried Up: Miriam's Death in the Bible & Midrash," in *All the Women Followed Her: A Collection of Writings on Miriam the Prophet & the Women of Exodus*, ed. by Rebecca Schwartz (Mountain View, CA: Rikudei Miriam Press, 2001) 46.

<sup>26</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle location 3060. Kindle Edition.

mysterious complaint about Moses's wife, both Miriam and Aaron claim to have been vessels for G-d in the past, and if Moses's claim to authority is his status as prophet of G-d, then they should be equal with him. It is also this claim, and not the accusation regarding the wife, that G-d hears and to which he objects. However, while the words prophet and priest are different, and ostensibly means different things, throughout scripture there is often not only people doing both roles (Moses, Aaron, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc.) but a conflation of the imagery associated with each title. A specific example is Ezekiel 3:15–16, wherein he is among exiles for seven days, representing his ordination as a priest, and then he hears the voice of G-d as a prophet.<sup>27</sup> In this context, it presents a problem when Miriam is identified as a prophetess but is only seen performing ritual leadership as a priest would do.

The concept of the household, of which there are two at stake in Numbers 12, must also be explored to understand the context. Not only is the word used directly by G-d in Num 12:7, but the confrontation over authority starts with Miriam and Aaron questioning something about Moses's wife—scholars vary on whether it is the wife herself or Moses's treatment of her that is being questioned. In this context, however, either will work, for it is the fact that a problem in Moses's household exists at all that matters in Num 12:1, not the manner of the problem itself. Miriam, being unmarried, definitely belongs to the household of her brother Moses. With regard to the household of G-d, Baruch Levine argues that the prior use of *elohim* in the context of presiding "over the council of El" and "in the midst of the gods", means that G-d's household is divine and that Moses is placed above other divinities.<sup>28</sup> This interpretation, however, ignores the

---

<sup>27</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, "Ezekiel" (lecture, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA, 4 December 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20* (The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 331. Print edition.

significance of G-d equating himself with Miriam's father in Num 12:14, and therefore claiming her as a member of his household before casting her out to stand alone. The fact that Miriam dies and is buried with no funeral or mourning rites in Exodus 20:1, as she would be entitled to as an unmarried member of Moses's or Aaron's households (Leviticus 21:1–4),<sup>29</sup> indicates how G-d's household, and Miriam's removal from it, overrides that of the humans. Even if Moses and Aaron do not mourn Miriam's death because they are bound by the rules of the high priest laid out in Lev 21:11 (as opposed to the regular priestly rules of Lev 21:1–4), the imagery of G-d being her father would allow G-d to mourn for her, and he does not. Indeed, as Miriam disappears from the narrative, she may as well be dead despite being gathered back in after her seven days of isolation. Leviticus 29:1 and Sweeney both say that a priest is responsible for the actions of his daughter, and that defilement of herself is also defilement of her family.<sup>30</sup> Miriam's spiritual transgression is manifested in transgression (and therefore defilement) of her body, as according to Jon Berquist, "In ancient Israel, there was little distinction between matters of body or flesh and the matters of the soul or spirit."<sup>31</sup> Even her brothers, priests who would otherwise be "instrumental in restoring connections between individual persons and their households when the individual bodies transgressed the bounds of allowable behavior"<sup>32</sup>, are unable to convince G-d to allow Miriam to remain physically intact. However, as previously indicated by Nili Fox's

---

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Shectman, "Social Status of Priestly and Levite Women," in *Levites and Priests in Biblical History and Tradition* ed. by Mark Leuchter and Jeremy M. Hutton (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011) 91. Print edition.

<sup>30</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanakh: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 3112-3113. Kindle Edition.

<sup>31</sup> Jon L. Berquist, *Controlling Corporeality: The Body & the Household in Ancient Israel* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002) 167. Print edition.

<sup>32</sup> Jon L. Berquist, *Controlling Corporeality: The Body & the Household in Ancient Israel* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002) 166. Print edition.

notes to Numbers, other incidents of this skin affliction are cured, and yet Miriam effectively disappears from the narrative. If the people wait for her, and she is brought back in, why has she lost her power as a prophetess independent of her status as part of the triad of authority with Aaron and Moses? Could it be the theme of conflating prophet with priest, and absence of Miriam from the text is actually the removal of her priesthood? After the confrontation in Num 12, Miriam disappears from the narratives, and any participation or membership in the households, until her death as little more than a side note in Num 20.

Baruch Levine also notes that the verb *dabar* used to indicate Miriam and Aaron speaking against Moses in a negative way is also used later without the ascribed accusatory tone: "And yet it is likely that in this chapter a play on the ambiguity of *dibber b-* was intended. In this verse [12:1], and in v 8 below, the sense is negative, whereas in v 2 and again in v 8, alongside the negative connotations, *dibber b-* means "to speak to," as God spoke to Moses."<sup>33</sup>

The cloud from which G-d appears in Num 12:5 is the imagery of choice for His appearance throughout Scripture, and as Sweeney notes, the Wilderness narratives in particular: "The cloud will continue to represent the divine presence through the remaining years of the journey through the wilderness."<sup>34</sup>

The multiple sources used in Numbers 12, along with my inability to read the original Hebrew and pick apart textual discrepancies, makes a detailed reading and personal analysis of the setting and context difficult. However, broad conclusions can be made based on the work of previous scholars. Sweeney says that "Insofar as P serves as the final redactor of Num 3:1–34:12,

---

<sup>33</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20* (The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 328. Print edition.

<sup>34</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanakh: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle location 3527. Kindle Edition.

P took up the EJ narratives of Num 3–36, the non-source materials of the same chapters, and the underlying D material to constitute the present form of the pentateuchal text"<sup>35</sup> and that:

The underlying EJ narrative, dating to the period of the later Judean monarchy, is especially concerned with examining the tensions between Israel and YHWH in the wilderness. These narratives also display a special concern for addressing the theological problem of the destruction of northern Israel by the Assyrians in 722–721 BCE insofar as they so frequently portray the source of tensions in relation to practices and institutional leadership identified with the northern kingdom of Israel. In this respect, the EJ narratives of Num 3–36 display a marked Judean perspective that views Judean practice and leadership as the means to resolve the tensions between Israel and YHWH.<sup>36</sup>

Later, Sweeney continues:

Num 10:11–19:22 focuses especially on northern Israelite institutions and practices, for example, the council of seventy elders (Num 11:4–34), the role of women in institutional authority (Num 11:35–12:15), the leadership of the tribes of Israel (Num 13:1–14:49), and priestly houses associated with the north (Num 16:1–17:15). Critical examination of northern Israelite institutions and practices is designed to point to problems that, in the eyes of the Judean writers of these narratives, led to northern Israel's destruction, but they also prepare the reader for the introduction of the Levites as the priestly tribe (Num 17:16–18:32) and, most importantly, Phineas ben Elazer ben Aaron as the founder of the priestly line that ultimately served in the Jerusalem Temple (Num 25:1–18).<sup>37</sup>

What is key to Numbers 12 and the punishment of Miriam, however, is reading the text with that Judean bias in mind, and asking why Miriam, whose only sin before now appears to be simply being female, is cast out while Aaron, associated with the previously mentioned

---

<sup>35</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanakh: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 3411-3413. Kindle Edition.

<sup>36</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanakh: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 3396-3407. Kindle Edition.

<sup>37</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanakh: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 3533-3546. Kindle Edition.



"egregious sin"<sup>38</sup> of the golden calf that is also associated with Jeroboam and the northern kingdom of Israel,<sup>39</sup> is allowed to become the progenitor of the priesthood. A case can be made that the accusation made against Moses by Miriam (and Aaron)—possibly compiled from more than one source—and the subsequent punishment, is there to serve Judean rejection of women serving in the (northern) Temple by removing Miriam from mothering the priesthood as either a Levite or the firstborn. Sweeney argues that a similar device is used in Num 11, with regard to the seventy elders: "In this respect, the narrative both accounts for the origins of this northern Israelite institution and critiques its effectiveness."<sup>40</sup> The continuation of Numbers "once again focuses on Judean polemics against northern Israelite figures and institutions."<sup>41</sup> As constructions and motifs are repeated throughout the texts of the Tanak, so might Num 12 and the appearances of Miriam before then be a deliberate attempt on the part of Judah to acknowledge that Miriam did hold power as both a prophetess and priestess, but G-d stripped her of that power, and that the continuing presence of women in the Temple is one of many reasons why He allowed them to be destroyed.

Even without the specific context of Judean bias, Phyllis Bird reminds us that the context of all Hebrew Bible texts is one of patriarchy: "For the Old Testament is a man's 'book,' where women appear for the most part simply as adjuncts of men, significant only in the context of

---

<sup>38</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 99. Print edition.

<sup>39</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, "Moses and the Exodus from Egypt/Sinai and Wilderness Wanderings," (lecture, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA, 16 October 2012).

<sup>40</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle location 3601. Kindle Edition.

<sup>41</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle location 3622. Kindle Edition.

men's activities. This perception is fundamental, for it describes the terms of all Old Testament speech about women. The Old Testament is a collection of writings by males from a society dominated by males."<sup>42</sup>

Without a doubt, Miriam is a problem. She is a problem for the uneducated reader, for she comes and goes almost randomly, is given titles (prophetess) that have no narrative behind them, and is attributed to ritual, priestly actions for which she is not officially given a title at all (Exodus 15:20). She is a woman in a position of holiness and leadership who is unmarried. She is a problem for Judean interests, because before she is defiled in Numbers 12, she has a right to the priesthood of Israel as either a firstborn (Exodus 2:4) or as a Levite (Exodus 2:1). She is cast out of the household of G-d and the household of Moses and Aaron, yet the people do not move until she is gathered back in (Num 12:16), and when she dies and is buried without fanfare (Num 20:1), immediately afterward the people cannot find water (Num 20:2). The prophet Micah keeps her equal with Moses and Aaron in Micah 6:4.

An even bigger problem, especially for Judean interests, is Miriam as compared to Aaron when considering who will begin the line of the priesthood. Sakenfeld argues that Aaron is not included in the punishment because of his status as a priest; specifically, that the narrator of Num 12 was already indoctrinated to Aaron as "the one from whom all priestly lineage was descended" and therefore he could not be portrayed as contracting the *tzaraat*.<sup>43</sup> Sweeney agrees with this assessment: "Aaron is strikingly omitted from the punishment, perhaps because he is

---

<sup>42</sup> Phyllis Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. by Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) 41. Print edition.

<sup>43</sup> Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Numbers," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992) 48. Print edition.

destined to sire the priestly line of Jerusalem."<sup>44</sup> Miriam, heretofore portrayed as equal with Aaron if not Moses, is a direct threat in the narrative to his natural ascension to power. At the time of the Judean redaction, Aaron would have the historical association with the golden calf, but would also have taken a Judean wife (Exodus 6:23) and become the progenitor of the Jerusalemite priesthood. Still, Miriam's claims to power needed to be dealt with in order to address the northern kingdom's acceptance of women in the Temple, and it would seem that the diachronic view of Num 12, not only with its gaps and piecemeal construction but also its placement within the larger narrative of making Israel right with G-d and establishing Levites, exists not only to show the uniqueness of Moses but to discredit Miriam from any leadership position at all. She is, according to the Judean editors, the lesser of two evils when compared to Aaron. This theory is also posited by Rabbi Ruth Sohn, although she does not attribute the rewrite to Judah specifically:

Perhaps in her own day Miriam was a prophet and leader, and it was later generations who, in retelling the tales, silenced Miriam and all but banished her from the text. Perhaps it was the later generations who were not willing to have a woman with the gift of prophecy standing strong, inspiring the women of their own day to seek public roles and voice demands for themselves. This would better explain the shards, the fragments of the tale that we do have-the various references to Miriam as leader and prophet without the detailed narratives that would flesh out these claims.<sup>45</sup>

The narrative also tells us that the people cannot move forward in seeking the Promised Land; Sweeney points out that according to Num 10:12, "the initial stage of the journey is from Sinai to

---

<sup>44</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 3607. Kindle Edition.

<sup>45</sup> Ruth H. Sohn, "The Silencing of Miriam," in *The Women's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*, ed. by Elyse M. Goldstein (Kindle Locations 2476-2480). Kindle Edition.

the Wilderness of Paran, but the people do not arrive in Paran until Num 12:16,"<sup>46</sup> The people linger in one place until she returns to them, but they cannot complete the first stage of their wanderings in the Wilderness until she is removed from power.

The next question is, then, how did Judah construct Numbers 12 to remove Miriam as an example to future generations? If nothing else, her presence in the Song of the Sea (Exodus 20:15) and Micah's declaration of historical leadership (Micah 6:4) means that she could not simply be erased completely; she had to be dealt with. A clue lies in the accusations of Numbers 12:1, which has been established previously by Rosenfeld (and corroborated by Rabbi Sohn<sup>47</sup>) as most likely being from two distinct versions of the narrative. The first is Miriam and Aaron questioning something about Moses's wife. The details are noticeably absent, opening the door for a variety of theories that both vilify and validate Miriam's (and Aaron's) accusation. The two main questions, across multiple commentaries, about the missing details are "What is meant by Cushite?" and "Is the wife in question Zipporah or a new wife?" Sweeney argues that the issue at stake is "Moses' marriage to a foreign woman, particularly since he is both a Levite and leader of the nation."<sup>48</sup> Milgrom agrees, based on Leviticus 24:10, that "the objection to her, it is implied, was ethnic."<sup>49</sup> Levine has a different opinion, claiming that "[t]he woman in question was most certainly not Zipporah, who is identified as a Midianite woman" (ignoring the Habbakuk

---

<sup>46</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 3554-3556. Kindle Edition.

<sup>47</sup> Ruth H. Sohn, "The Silencing of Miriam," in *The Women's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*, ed. by Elyse M. Goldstein (Kindle Locations 2442-2443). Kindle Edition.

<sup>48</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle location 3606. Kindle Edition.

<sup>49</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 93. Print edition.

association?) and that "race could not have been the point at issue." Instead, Levine argues that the problem may have been Moses taking a new wife after having sent Zipporah away, which could be seen as an insult to the first wife.<sup>50</sup> What Milgrom also brings up, however, is the alternative argument brought up by the "rabbis" against Moses and in defense of the Cushite wife, Zipporah or not: "that Moses refused to have sexual intercourse after his descent from Sinai."<sup>51</sup> Perhaps there is some truth to the latter argument, as according to Eskenazi, "God's verbal castigation of the siblings only addresses the issue of Moses' prophetic leadership and not the issue of Moses' marriage."<sup>52</sup> If the accusation against Moses was in defense of his Cushite wife and not against her, then Miriam would have been fulfilling her role as leader, and most likely priestess, of the women by advocating for the unnamed woman; in the words of Burquist, as a priest she would have been tasked with "observation of the entire cosmos and toward its integration, and within these tasks, the priests serve a ministry of intermediation, working from a central point to bring together disparate parts of reality and to reunite the elements of society that have begun to come apart due to violations of the principles of social unity."<sup>53</sup> Perhaps Miriam is attempting to restore G-d's creation as she is empowered to see it, and later Judean redaction was forced to make the first accusation as vague as possible in order to justify her punishment, and to use the feminine singular form of the verb in Num 12:1 to explain why Miriam was afflicted and Aaron was not.

---

<sup>50</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20* (The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 328. Print edition.

<sup>51</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 93. Print edition.

<sup>52</sup> Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "Numbers," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: UJR Press, 2008) 860. Print edition.

<sup>53</sup> Jon L. Berquist, *Controlling Corporeality: The Body & the Household in Ancient Israel* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002) 167. Print edition.

The second accusation, in Num 12:2, is Miriam and Aaron's justification for calling Moses, regardless of whether the accusation in 12:1 is justified or not. Miriam honestly believes that she has a right to be doing this, and it is a last words she speaks in the entirety of the Hebrew Bible. If she is truly a prophetess, the text does not allow her to speak again after she speaks against Moses, and yet her brother Aaron, who also spoke against Moses, goes on to father the line of the priesthood. But according to the text it is not enough that her prophetic voice is silenced, for her punishment continues.

Each element of Miriam's interaction with G-d or punishment given by Him in the narrative of Numbers 12 is an undoing of established purity for maintaining status as a priest(ess) as detailed by Sweeney: her skin affliction is not only wet with bodily fluids but also linguistically associated with snow and mildew, which undoes the first step of washing with water;<sup>54</sup> the physical defect of her afflicted skin prevents her from representing the image of G-d as manifested in humans<sup>55</sup>; and her exile into the Wilderness for seven days undoes the seven days of isolation required to complete ordination<sup>56</sup> and casts her out of Levite "household" of the priesthood. While the path to ordination follows "a holy rite of passage from the profane to the sacred sphere so that the priests can act as intermediaries between YHWH and the people",<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 2989-2990. Kindle Edition.

<sup>55</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 3115-3118. Kindle Edition.

<sup>56</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 3003. Kindle Edition.

<sup>57</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) Kindle locations 3004-3005. Kindle Edition.

Miriam's rite of passage in Numbers 12 follows the path backwards from the sacred into the profane.

Works Cited

- Berquist, Jon L. *Controlling Corporeality: The Body & the Household in Ancient Israel*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002. Print edition.
- Bird, Phyllis. "Images of Women in the Old Testament." In *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. by Rosemary Radford Ruether, 41-88. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974. Print edition.
- Brown, Erica. "The Well Dried Up: Miriam's Death in the Bible & Midrash." In *All the Women Followed Her: A Collection of Writings on Miriam the Prophet & the Women of Exodus*, ed. by Rebecca Schwartz, 42-52. Mountain View, CA: Rikudei Miriam Press, 2001.
- Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn. "Numbers." In *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, 787-1036. New York: UJR Press, 2008. Print edition.
- Fox, Everett, trans. *Schocken Bible: The Five Books of Moses*. Schocken Books, Inc. Accordance electronic edition, version 1.1.
- Fox, Nili S. "Numbers." In *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, 281-355. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print edition.
- Jewish Study Bible*, ed. by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print edition.
- Levine, Baruch A. *Numbers 1–20*. The Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1993. Print edition.
- Milgrom, Jacob. *Numbers*. The JPS Torah Commentary. New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990. Print edition.



*New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Strong's Key Numbers*, Accordance electronic edition, version 2.3.

"Product Details *Schocken Bible: The Five Books of Moses*." Accordance Bible Store, accessed 20 December 2012. <<http://www.accordancebible.com/store/details/?pid=SB>>

Rosenfeld, Yiskah. "Skin Deep: Scratching the Surface of Numbers 12." *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 7, no. 2 (Winter 2010).

Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob. "Numbers." In *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992. 45-46. Print edition.

Shectman, Sarah. "Social Status of Priestly and Levite Women." In *Levites and Priests in Biblical History and Tradition* ed. by Mark Leuchter and Jeremy M. Hutton, 83-102. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011. Print edition.

Sohn, Ruth H. "The Silencing of Miriam." In *The Women's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*, ed. by Elyse M. Goldstein. Kindle Edition.

Sweeney, Marvin A. "Ezekiel." Lecture, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA, 4 December 2012.

Sweeney, Marvin A. "Moses and the Exodus from Egypt/Sinai and Wilderness Wanderings." Lecture, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA, 16 October 2012.

Sweeney, Marvin A. *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. Kindle Edition.