

Hinne Wagenaar.

White as Snow

Numbers 12 from an African perspective<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

As a child, I once heard a sermon on Numbers 12.<sup>2</sup> I found it a very odd story and was not satisfied with the explanation of the preacher, who elaborated on the position of authority of Moses and insisted that we had to obey those who have been placed above us in the church. I was quite indignant about the fact that God punished only Miriam and not Aaron. According to me, God was not fair in flinging the shame on Miriam only. Besides, I did not understand why Miriam was punished with leprosy. Why did Miriam get a skin disease? The preacher apparently took it for granted that God could choose any punishment for his disobedient children, but I found it an arbitrary chastisement.

In this article I will try to answer these questions of my childhood by interpreting Numbers 12 from an African perspective. It is not self-evident, however, that a white European theologian can interpret Biblical texts from an African perspective. I hope that the reader is willing to give me the benefit of the doubt in this respect. I have tried to be aware of the racist and colonial heritage of my European (ecclesiastical) tradition, and bit by bit I have learned to read scripture with new eyes.<sup>3</sup> This learning has been facilitated through my work as 'Chaplain to International Students in the Netherlands' (1990-1997), but especially through my work as lecturer at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Anglophone Cameroon (1998-2002). I have studied this text with my students in several courses on African Theology. We have come to the conviction that this text needs to be read from an African perspective. This article is, therefore, dedicated to those students who took this course in African Theology in the period 1998-2002.

---

<sup>1</sup> This article has also been published in *Africa Theological Journal*, vol. 26. no. 1 (2003): 75-87.

<sup>2</sup> For the English text of Numbers 12 I have used the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

<sup>3</sup> See: J. Pobee and B. Wartenberg-Potter (eds.), *New Eyes for Reading* (Geneva: WCC, 1986).

## I. Western perspectives

1.

Several established commentators have observed a disparity between verses 1 and 2 of Numbers 12. Martin Noth expresses it aptly in his opening sentences on Numbers 12:

The fact that Moses is reproached with two different things is immediately clear from the opening verses of this chapter. According to v. 1 his marriage with a Cushite woman is laid in his charge; according to v. 2, on the other hand, the reproach is to do with an unjustified claim to special privileges with regard to the reception of the divine word. This twofold reproach is certainly connected with the disunity of the narrative with regard to the role played by the persons who appear against Moses.<sup>4</sup>

This disunity is enhanced by two more arguments. (a) The occurrence of the feminine singular (in Hebrew) in the first sentence ‘and she spoke against Moses’, instead of ‘and they spoke’ (Miriam and Aaron). In addition Miriam’s name is only mentioned first in this verse, while in the other verses the text states ‘Aaron and Miriam’. (b) The restriction of the punishment to Miriam. Most commentators argue that this text of Numbers 12 is, therefore, not a literary unit. They suppose that the base narrative (of J/E) has been supplemented by ‘Aaron’ material. There is no agreement on the precise extend of the supplementation, but generally they find additions in verses 2-8, 10b and 11.<sup>5</sup>

Now this being the case, the commentators have to make a choice as to which reproach must be understood as the central reproach of the text: the one of Moses marrying a Cushite or the one of Moses’ spiritual privileges with regard to the reception of the divine word. As far as I have been able to analyse, most, if not all, commentators argue that the issue of this chapter is not Moses’ marriage, but Moses’ authority. I will present here some of the opinions.

Noth writes that the reproach regarding the Cushite marriage is ‘scarcely fundamentally significant’.<sup>6</sup> Gray, in the International Critical Commentary, is of the opinion that ‘at most the marriage is the occasion, whereas the real cause of the complaint against Moses is the

---

<sup>4</sup> M. Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 92.

<sup>5</sup> Compare P.J. Budd, *Numbers*. Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 5, (Waco: Word Books Publisher, 1984), 133.

<sup>6</sup> Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, 93.

wounded pride of Miriam and Aaron'.<sup>7</sup> Wenham observes that 'the text does not explain why Miriam and Aaron objected to this woman, because in reality their objections to her were only a smokescreen for their challenge to Moses' spiritual authority'.<sup>8</sup> Budd agrees that 'essentially Miriam represents those who speak against the representatives of Mosaic authority. This and nothing more is the point of the story'.<sup>9</sup> And finally, Olson in the most recent commentary in this list maintains that 'it is clear that the primary issue emerges in Numbers 12:2. It challenges Moses' unique role as the supreme channel of God's word to the Israelites'.<sup>10</sup>

Once this conclusion has been reached, the way is open to the interpretation of what is considered to be the main subject of the text, namely the rebellion against Mosaic authority. Before I turn to that, however, it is important still to consider an important aspect of vs. 1, namely the meaning of Cush.

2.

Most scholars, quoted above, are aware that in the Hebrew Bible Cush generally refers to the land of the people who inhabited Africa south of Egypt (cf. e.g. 2 Kgs 19:9; Isa 20:3, 5; 37:9; 43:3; 45:14; Ezek 30: 4-5; 38:5; Nah 3:5) The Septuagint translates Cush here with Ethiopia, the land at the upper stream of the Nile. However, some scholars feel the need to doubt this relationship between Cush and Ethiopia. Noth simply finds Ethiopia too far removed from Moses' sphere of activity. 'The 'Cush' from which the wife mentioned here came, can hardly mean the country on the southern boundary of Egypt.'<sup>11</sup> And so he identifies Cush with the 'Cushan' of Hab. 3:7, because in that text Midian is mentioned alongside Cushan. In that case there would be a possibility of identifying this woman as Zipporah, a conclusion which he, in the end, does not support. Others mention the possibility of Cush as the region of the Cassites,

---

<sup>7</sup> G.B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, latest impression 1976, The International Critical Commentary, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976), 121.

<sup>8</sup> G.J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 111.

<sup>9</sup> Budd, *Numbers*, 135.

<sup>10</sup> D.T. Olson, *Numbers*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 71.

<sup>11</sup> Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, 94.

east of Babylonia (cf. Gen 10:18) or the region of N. Arabia (cf. 2 Ch 14: 9-15).<sup>12</sup> The interesting question, however, is why these scholars want to deviate from the general identification of Cush with Ethiopia, when the text does not give any reason to do so and when the alternatives do not give clear solutions.

3.

After these initial difficulties, the scholars are quite unified in their view of the 'real issue' of the chapter, namely the rebellion of Aaron and Miriam against Moses and Moses' special authority. We may place Numbers 12 in two ways into the context of Numbers 11 and 12. These two chapters are situated between leaving Sinai (Numbers 10: 11-36) and the exploration of Canaan (Numbers 13). Wenham rightly mentions three complaints. Firstly the complaints about the hardships (Numbers 11: 1-3), secondly the complaints about food (Numbers 11:4-35) and finally the complaint about the special position of Moses' authority (Numbers 12).<sup>13</sup> Besides, we need to see that the conflict concerning Moses' authority and his position of having a special prophetic role as the supreme channel of God's word may have been aroused by the sharing of Moses' spirit in Numbers 11:26-30 and the fact that others could prophesy now and be legitimate channels of God's word. So we are dealing with the question whether prophesy is subordinate to the authority of Moses and Mosaic tradition.<sup>14</sup> Here we may observe that Moses' sharing of power (spirit) and his initiative in democratising the leadership in Israel also enhances his leadership position. Indeed, through his benevolence he heightens his position of power. The spirit of the others was taken from *his* spirit (Numbers 11: 25). It may be that this caused irritation and discomfort among the other leaders in Israel, especially those in his family. Remember that we are dealing with a family dynasty and a clan regime, with Moses, Aaron and Miriam as brothers and sister in key positions!

From what follows it is clear that God immediately appears in defence of Moses. God passionately defends Moses' case and describes his intimate relationship with him. The central message is that though God's revelation is not limited, it cannot contradict Mosaic revelation, for Moses has been initiated into the fulness of intimacy with God. Most of the

---

<sup>12</sup> Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, 121; Budd, *Numbers*, 136.

<sup>13</sup> Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, 106-114.

<sup>14</sup> See Olson, *Numbers*, 70.

exegetical labour is subsequently invested in verses 6-8, the description of God's relationship with Moses in contrast with other prophets, a passage which is 'poetic in character, rhythmical and parallelistic in form'.<sup>15</sup> I will not elaborate on these verses here in this article, as this has been done quite extensively by others.

## II. African perspective

1.

Though I agree, by and large, with the exegesis given concerning the authority and leadership conflict, I find that this interpretation can still not give satisfactory answers to the questions of my childhood, namely: (a) why is Miriam punished with a skin disease, with leprosy?; and (b) why is only Miriam punished? I am of the opinion that the answers to these questions are lost when we separate the issues of vs. 1 and 2, of marriage and Moses' authority, as done in the interpretations given above. I propose to read the text of chapter 12 as a literary unit, though certainly with older traditions at the background. But the present text has, as a whole, been carefully prepared and preserved for the people of God. I am of the opinion that the Western interpretation has lost focus by searching for one central theme at the cost of the other. This passage should not be treated like a circle with one centre, but as an ellipse with two focal points.<sup>16</sup>

2.

Definitely, Moses' authority is one of the central issue in this passage, but I do not understand why scholars do not identify the obvious connection between Moses' marriage with the Cushite and the punishment of Miriam. We must notice that the wife being Cushite is drawing vital attention in verse 1 as it is mentioned twice. Clearly the Cushite woman is a black woman from Ethiopia, while the punishment of Miriam is a skin disease! There must be a link between the reproach of verse 1 and the punishment of God in verse 10. That link is 'skin'. If Miriam and Aaron protest against this black African woman and Miriam is punished with a skin disease (as white as snow!), then clearly the problem Miriam and Aaron have raised deals

---

<sup>15</sup> Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, 124.

<sup>16</sup> An ellipse, in geometry, is an oval figure that resembles the shape of a flattened hoop, which has 2 foci.

with the colour of skin of the Cushite woman. Why would the narrator comment on the skin of Miriam, white as snow? Who thinks of snow while being in the middle of the desert? Quite an intentional contrast is dramatized here: Moses' black wife, despised and discriminated against by Miriam and Aaron, is now contrasted with Miriam, who suddenly becomes 'as white as snow' in her punishment. We are, beyond doubt, witnesses of divine creativity and divine humour in administering punishment!

Surely, for us readers far from that context, it would have been easier if verse 1 had read: 'Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite woman, for he had married a black Cushite woman'. But in Biblical times, Cush was synonymous with blackness. That is why the Septuagint translated 'Ethiopian woman'. Aithiops in Greek literally means 'burnt face'.<sup>17</sup>

The combination of leprosy and snow is not unique for Numbers 12. Though leprosy is not associated with 'white as snow' in most of the cases in the Hebrew Bible, there are two more places where a skin disease is depicted with the words 'white as snow'. In both places (Exodus 4:6 and 2 Kings 5:27) we deal with extraordinary circumstances (miracle and punishment), and not with chronic forms of leprosy, just like in Numbers 12. This does not mean, however, that 'white as snow' should not be read as a response to the blackness of the Cushite because in the other two cases there is no link between 'white as snow' and blackness. We do not know the origin and first use of white as snow in relation to leprosy. In our passage God could use the association of whiteness and leprosy as a response and punishment to the rejection of the blackness of the Cushite by Miriam and Aaron.

The second question, i.e. why only Miriam was punished, may be more difficult to answer. We might refer back to the tradition behind this present text and try to defend the position that the original version only dealt with Miriam, and that the Aaron tradition was inserted later. But this would argue against my own assumption of reading the text as a literary unit. Another explanation is given by Olson:

In any case, women in male-centered cultures will find in Miriam's example a resonance with their own experience of injustice. The unfairness of Miriam's burden continues to find echoes in cultures where women work more, own less, and suffer greater abuse than their male counterparts.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> See part I of C. H. Felder's, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 1- 48, in which he handles issues of race in biblical narratives, with much consideration for Ethiopia in the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>18</sup> See Olson, *Numbers*, 74.

Though this is very true, it does not completely explain the injustice of the divine judgment. The fact that Miriam is mentioned first in verse 1, deviating from the rest of the text in which Aaron is mentioned first, hints at the reality that Miriam had something to do with the origin of the rebellion. We are dealing here with a marriage of Moses. Moses was the key figure; the person everyone was turning to; the charismatic leader 'who walked with God'. And Miriam was his sister and the leader of the women's movement. At least we might get such an idea from Exodus 15: 20 ('then Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her, with timbrels and dancing') and from the acknowledgement that in traditional societies men and women are separated by their own movements with their own leadership. In this case, Miriam would not simply be one of the leaders of Israel, but she was representing the women. In our classes we said jokingly that Miriam was heading the rebellion of the Christian Women Fellowship, the CWF, a very strong movement in the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon. We could imagine that quite a bit of strife was ignited by Moses' marriage with this black African woman. They will have wondered whether there were no respectable women among them. Why did Moses have to choose an 'abnormal' woman? Is it proper for a leader to marry a foreigner, and even a black one? They may even have been offended by the fact that 'Moses had compromised his distinctive relationship with Jahweh'.<sup>19</sup> These feelings may very easily have turned into, and have been expressed, in racial prejudice. Miriam became the spokeswoman of the rebellion and was punished accordingly. Apparently, she got Aaron on her side, and thus they formed a very serious opposition to Moses' authority. 'Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?' (vs. 2).

3.

In the above account I have tried to show that it is not necessary to disassociate verses 1 and 2. On the contrary, the text of Numbers 12 cannot be understood without identifying the problem behind verse 1. This text needs to be examined from the perspective of racial prejudice and hatred against black people. That does not mean, however, that the issue of Moses' authority is of no importance. From the perspective of verse 1, Moses' position can even be painted in a more penetrating manner.

---

<sup>19</sup> Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family*, 141.

Directly after the questioning of Moses' authority by Miriam and Aaron, God takes an active part in the debate, starting with 'and the Lord heard it' (vs. 2). Not Moses, but God responds to the challenge of Miriam and Aaron. Moses is being presented as very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth (vs. 3). Meekness is not simply humility here. Moses' meekness is found in his unwillingness to fight for his own position and interests. Throughout the ministry of Moses, we see that he prefers not to take the position of leadership. In the former chapter he still pleaded with God to be released from his duties: 'the burden is too heavy for me' (Numbers 11:14). In that same chapter he shows the amazing capacity to share his power and spirit with 70 elders. Moses is not sitting on his power, to put it in a popular way. He is not hungry for power. He is in power despite his own interests. From the perspective of Cameroonian society today, where the scramble for power and position, at all levels of society including the church, is the order of the day, this meekness is indeed astonishing.

Because of Moses' meekness, God comes in as his advocate. Moreover, God comes to the rescue of the African woman also. For remember that she is openly rejected and humiliated as an improper partner in marriage for Moses. God speaks out for her, by taking Moses' side. In astonishingly intimate words God reveals his relationship with Moses: 'Moses understands me; he is at home with me; he is my intimate discussion partner. How could you speak against him and not be afraid?' (vs. 8). God supports Moses in his choice of a Cushite woman. There is nothing wrong with this African woman. From this early stage in the history of Israel it is revealed that with God there is no partiality. God does not *judge* on the basis of skin colour, he is not *prejudiced*. It is significant that here a black woman is included in the people of God, just like the black Ethiopian is baptised at an early stage into the fold of the church (Acts 8: 26-40).

We actually also need to address the question whether Miriam and Aaron had no right to question the authority of Moses. Budd writes:

The question the story answers is not whether you should marry a Cushite, but whether you should challenge the uniqueness of Mosaic authority.<sup>20</sup>

I would disagree with such a stand. The issue at stake is that Moses is unique because he married a Cushite and that he was above all racial shortsightedness, not that we should not query Moses deeds because he was unique! Certainly, Miriam and Aaron were qualified

---

<sup>20</sup> Budd, *Numbers*, 134.



persons to question Moses' choices, as priest and prophetess! But God judges their specific racist critique of Moses and the Cushite as unqualified. Therefore a punishment follows that fully reveals and exposes the insanity of their position. It is as if God tells Miriam: 'so you do not like a black skin and consider it to be inferior? Well then I will make your skin perfectly white, white as snow!'

Again the meekness of Moses is revealed. Only now, when his critic is punished, does Moses become active. Now he speaks his only words, which form an intercessory prayer on behalf of Miriam: 'Heal her, O God, I beseech thee' (vs.13). Moses does not come to his own defence, but comes to the defence of the one who just tried to topple his position. He does not return the anger; he does not 'mirror' the behaviour of his opponent.

4.

Finally, we need to say something concerning the history of interpretation. I find it quite embarrassing that most of the commentators do not want to explore into the relationship of the Cushite and the punishment of Miriam, and, moreover, that there is a strong tendency to identify Cush as something other than the region of the upper Nile and Ethiopia. This attitude reveals a deep prejudice against African and black people. Certainly, the scholars do not see that they are in line with Miriam and Aaron. We may wonder whether they make the issue opaque and invisible because of their, perhaps unconscious, racist paradigm of thinking.

Quite disturbing I found the position of Dennis Olson who, in his commentary published in 1996, acknowledges the possibility of the blackness of the Cushite woman as the key to the proper understanding of this passage. However, he quotes the Afro-American theologian Cain Hope Felder, who supposedly argued against this possibility of racial prejudice in this text, because 'racial prejudice against African people is more a modern European prejudice and ought not to be read into the biblical text here'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Felder warns against a too simplistic identification of racial prejudice in the Bible with modern racism, which is of quite a different calibre. But twice in his book, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family*, Felder addresses the passage of Numbers 12, and in both cases he is convinced that racial prejudice is the key to the understanding of the passage.<sup>22</sup> I am quite staggered by the fact that Olson

---

<sup>21</sup> Olson, *Numbers*, 71.

<sup>22</sup> Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family*, 42 and 141.

quotes Felder for his own support, while Felder openly defends the opposite position. In this way Afro-Americans are used as witnesses to cover up Euro-American prejudice.

### **Conclusion**

In this article I have tried to answer the questions of my childhood concerning Numbers 12. I have argued that this text should be read as a literary unit. The issue of the text should not be reduced to one basic theme (i.e. Mosaic leadership), but we may acknowledge that this text could be seen as an ellipse with two related focal points: the issue of Moses' marriage with a Cushite and the issue of Mosaic leadership. Only in that perspective may we come to satisfactory answers to the questions as to why only Miriam was punished and why she was punished with a skin disease, white as snow. The conclusion may be that God furiously rebuffs the rejection of the Cushite, an African black woman, based on racial prejudice, and passionately defends the special position of Moses and the cause of his black Cushite wife. To Miriam and Aaron, and consequently to us, is revealed what Moses understood already.