

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Eighteenth Week - Wednesday

AARON AND MIRIAM

"Then Yahweh came down in the pillar of cloud and stood in the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam. And they both went forward. Then He said, 'Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, Yahweh, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is faithful in all My house. I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings; and he sees the form of Yahweh. Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?' So the anger of Yahweh was aroused against them, and He departed. And when the cloud departed from above the tabernacle, suddenly Miriam became leprous, as white as snow. Then Aaron turned toward Miriam, and there she was, a leper" (Numbers 12:5-10).

The twelfth chapter of Numbers is full of painful matter and offers some points of difficulty. The substance of it is a misunderstanding between Moses on the one hand and his brother and sister on the other, indicative of low and very unexpected jealousy on the part of Aaron and Miriam at the authority exercised and the powers assumed by Moses.

One may fancy that Aaron, who had not long ago seen his two eldest sons perish before his eyes, would still be too brokenhearted, too much bowed down by the weight of grief to find room in his mind for such matters. But it was not so. The way of man is like the branch of the great cedar bent down in winter beneath a load of snow. The snow slowly melts, and day by day the branch begins to rise again until at last it throws off the last of its burden to spring up straight and green again.

Up until now Moses seems to have had the cordial support of his own family. But one cannot help thinking that Aaron's mind had become somewhat too exalted by the very distinguished position to which he and his sons had been raised. It can scarcely have escaped his notice that the position assigned to him as high priest was in some respects superior to that of Moses himself. The function of Moses was temporary and would pass away with his life, whereas Aaron's was permanent in himself and his heirs, and would leave him and them the foremost and most important persons in the nation.

Although Aaron was the elder brother, his position was attained entirely on account of Moses and that part he bore with Moses in the deliverance of Israel. That he was discontented is

certain; that he made no secret of that discontent is clear; and that it had its principal source in the jealousy entertained of the powers exercised by Moses is plainly stated. As Bishop Hall writes, "It is a hard thing for a man willingly and gladly to see his equals lifted over his head. Nothing will more try a man's temper than questions of emulation [jealous rivalry]. That man has no true light who cannot be content to be a candle before the sun of others."

We are sorry to see Miriam also engaged in this murmuring. For her a somewhat different ground of discontent may be expected--the marriage of Moses with "an Ethiopian woman." There is a difficulty in understanding this. Some suppose that it refers to that Ethiopian princess whom Moses had espoused before he originally left Egypt, according to the Jewish traditions to which we formerly referred (14th week Wednesday), and who now rejoins him in the wilderness. But it is safest to adhere to *known* facts. The facts we do know are that Moses had a wife called Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, and that during the encampment in Sinai she had been brought by her father and brother to Moses.

Now if we can show that this woman might with propriety be called an Ethiopian, a perfectly satisfactory explanation grows out of this circumstance. And we can show this. The name translated "Ethiopian" is "Cushite," from Cush the son of Ham. This name is applied in Scripture not only to Africa but to Arabia, which is explained by the descendants of Cush having left their name in certain regions in which they tarried some time prior to their final passage into Africa. Or it may be that a body of them remained a long time in Arabia before they eventually passed over to join the main stock of their people (that is, if they in reality did ever did pass over--for the descent of many of the more ancient Arabian tribes has been by no means very clearly deduced and some of them may have been of Cushite origin). The land in which Jethro dwelt may indeed have been at this very time occupied mainly by such tribes, to whom belonged the hostile shepherds who wronged Jethro's daughters at the well.

But it suffices to know that they were once in this region and left their name in it. Therefore Zipporah may have been called a Cushite because she belonged to a country that had received its name from them, and not because she herself was of the children of Cush.

But admitting the existence of any sense in which Jethro's daughter could be called an Ethiopian, it is obvious that her arrival might be very unwelcome to Miriam, who would find herself unpleasantly superseded in her position of chief lady in the camp, being the sister of both Moses and Aaron. This wife of Moses would at least share, if not occupy completely, the deference and attention that had up till then belonged to her alone.

The high consideration with which Jethro had been treated on his visit to the camp, and the influential position now taken by his son Hobab, who was to remain with them, may also have been distasteful to Aaron in his present temper. And thus he and Miriam may have joined together in a common cause at the appearance of Zipporah.

But there was One who guarded the honor of Moses too well for him to be afflicted at the hard

speeches even of a sister and a brother. It is emphatically remarked that "the Lord heard it." All three were summoned before the door of the tabernacle. The cloud visibly moved and the voice of the Lord spoke to them in the words of our text, words well suited to fill their hearts with shame. The sign of his glorious presence was then withdrawn, and the proof of his anger was seen in the fact that Miriam had become a leper. This was a peculiar and striking judgment. There had been special regulations regarding the treatment of those infected with leprosy, under which it became the duty of the priest himself to judge of its existence and pronounce the doom of exclusion from the camp. The woman whose tongue had before been so free to criticize her brother's conduct and character was now mute with horror. She who had been so high, whose views were so aspiring, was now to be cast forth from the camp as an unclean thing, to live separately for how long she did not know.

Yet pity was shown her, and though she might not be spared this humiliation, the period of her exclusion was limited to the seven days which those once afflicted with leprosy were required to pass before they could be readmitted. It would now be Aaron's duty to visit her outside the camp, and if the symptoms had not disappeared there would be no help for her. She would be reduced to the condition of confirmed lepers. These not only dwelt outside the camp, but even there they had the responsibility of taking care that clean persons should not come near them and be rendered ceremoniously unclean. A stranger would be able to distinguish lepers by their uncovered heads and sordid raiment. And that the ear also might supply the information which the eye might have missed, they were bound to cry out, "Unclean! unclean," whenever they saw a stranger approach.

But if Miriam should then be free from this loathsome affliction and declared to be so on the authority of the priest, certain ceremonial acts of lustration and sacrifice would enable her to return to the congenial life of the camp. And Miriam did return to the camp after the people had remained there a whole week on her account. She came back no doubt humbled in her own eyes but strengthened in her soul by the correction she had received--the best proof of this being that we hear no more of her until her death.