

Numbers 12: Pride and Humility

By
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“Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married; for he had married an Ethiopian woman. So they said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?” And the LORD heard it. (Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.) Suddenly the LORD said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, “Come out, you three, to the tabernacle of meeting!” So the three came out. Then the LORD 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, the LORD, 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 the LORD. Why then were you not afraid To speak against My servant Moses?” So the anger of the LORD 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. So Aaron said to Moses, “Oh, my lord! Please do not lay this sin on us, in which we have done foolishly and in which we have sinned. “Please do not let her be as one dead, whose flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother’s womb!” So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, “Please heal her, O God, I pray!” Then the LORD said to Moses, “If her father had but spit in her face, would she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp seven days, and afterward she may be received again.” So Miriam was shut out of the camp seven days, and the people did not journey till Miriam was brought in again. And afterward the people moved from Hazeroth and camped in the Wilderness of Paran.”

-Numbers 12:1-16

Since Numbers 12 is a relatively short story, I thought it would be easiest to put the entire passage above. As we talked about in Numbers 11, although God is moving His people into the promised land, small seeds of discontent are being sowed that will eventually lead to their downfall and failure to enter into the land. In Numbers 11 we see that the chief cause of this internal sickness has something to do with a general feeling of discontentment that manifests itself in complaint, which will later turn into outright rebellion against God.

And unfortunately, this attitude is not relegated to the people of Israel, even Moses began to complain to God about his calling and lack of patience for the people. Though not entirely, Numbers 12 is certainly a consequence of Moses' complaint in Numbers 11. Just like with the people of Israel, God punishes Moses by giving him what he thought he wanted.

By complaining about his role as the head of the nation and the main prophet of God, Moses treated casually the high and holy calling that God had placed upon him. Moses didn't fully grasp that the national identity is held together through his fidelity to God and to his own people. And this is an important point, identities hold together through those who are at the top. Think about our bodies. All the disparate "members" of our bodies have coherence through our minds that sit at the top of our bodies.

This is the same symbol that we find represented in monuments like the pyramids. A society is made up of many disparate parts that all have a singular point of convergence at the top. For the nation of Israel, this point of convergence was Moses himself who pointed the nation up towards God. We will talk more about Moses' attitude in a little bit, but I do think it's important to understand that this is how a national identity falls apart.

Just like our bodies fall apart if our minds fail, so a society falls apart when our leadership and our institutions fail. A national identity is not found in mere ideology, a common landmass, or a shared history. While things are *essential* to identity, it isn't actually the center of identity. The center of identity has something to do with what we share in common. Just as our feet and ears have coherence in that they have a shared mind, so the members of a nation have coherence in their shared institutions and leaders.

This forms the participatory elements of our national identity that allow for us to share common cause, activity, and orientation. While the members of our nation are very different, we find harmony by having a shared national religion that we participate in through the institution of the church, a shared federal government, a shared educational system, shared national holidays, and so on. When this falls apart, or when those who lead these institutions fail in their role, the identity crumbles and fragments, which is what happens in Israel, but it is also what is happening in our nation today.

The fullness of this problem will express itself in the national rebellion that takes place over the next couple chapters, and then finally, in the rebellion of Korah in Numbers 16. So while we can't, and shouldn't, lay the blame entirely at the feet of Moses, we do have to acknowledge that this is, tragically, what Moses asked for:

“So Moses said to the LORD, “Why have You afflicted Your servant? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all these people on me?”
-Numbers 11:11

Moses scorned his position as the leader of the people of Israel, and in the next couple chapters the entire nation will rebel against his leadership, and the most tragic part is that it begins with his own family.

Pride and Humility

“(Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.)”
-Numbers 12:3

While there is much to say about this particular rebellion, even though it is the most minor and doesn't result in mass casualties like the others in this book, before we talk about Miriam and Aaron and the heart of their complaints, I want first to talk about Moses and what he does right in this chapter. We have to be careful when going through the Biblical stories. On one hand, there are those of us who want to preserve the righteousness of our heroes and ignore their faults.

On the other hand, some of us like to fixate on the problems of our heroes and criticize them so that we can feel better about ourselves. This is actually a pretty big problem in this passage in particular and it reminds me of a passage from Fyodor Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov". In the book there is a particular good monk that does nothing but care for the needs of others. But when he dies, there are many who descend on his memory like vultures and try to tear apart his reputation. Dostoevsky comments on this tendency by saying:

“...for man loves to see the downfall and disgrace of the righteous.”
-Fyodor Dostoevsky - “The Brothers Karamozov

It isn't that there aren't any valid criticisms that we can lay against even the most righteous among us, it is that the heart that motivates the criticism comes from pride or envy, the criticism won't have anything beneficial or good in it, only a subtle glee at finding embarrassing and insulting those that make us feel bad about ourselves. And sometimes they do this simply by being good, which is unfortunately the case for Moses' siblings.

For us though, I don't want to fall into this temptation. While it is right to criticize Moses' faults, we must be careful to not ignore Moses' considerable good points, because all in all, Moses was an incredible man, a historic leader, and one of the most righteous people to ever live. And in this passage we see his highest virtue highlighted and praised, his humility.

Some are bothered that Moses is called the most humble man on earth, since we believe that Moses himself wrote this passage. However, we really shouldn't be bothered by this. First, this statement is in parentheses in most of our Bibles because it seems to be a commentary on the narrative. Meaning that it is likely to be an addition from Joshua after Moses' death, which would make sense because Joshua wrote the end of Deuteronomy as well as the book that bears his name. But even if it wasn't, we must also note that the narrative of this book does not shy away from showing Moses' faults in all their glory, so why not, under the direction of the Spirit, reveal Moses' good points with the same level of clarity?

But why the focus on this particular virtue? This is something that is hard for the modern person to understand, but for almost every civilization prior to ours, pride was considered the biggest problem with the human spirit. In the Greek, they referred to this sin as "hubris", but regardless of the culture, there are stern warnings throughout their sacred texts and histories about the sin of pride, like Prometheus stealing fire from the gods or Icarus flying too close to the sun. In this way, the ancient text of the Bible is actually fairly harmonious with these other religions. As C.S. Lewis puts this point in his book "Mere Christianity":

"According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind..."

-C.S. Lewis - "Mere Christianity"

Once again, even though Lewis makes allusions to countless church fathers and even the primary sin of the Bible, Satan's fall from heaven, our modern culture struggles greatly with this concept. The reason for this is that we have inverted the morality of our ancestors. Where they feared arrogance above all things and stressed humility and honor, the modern world fears low self-esteem, trauma, and abandonment above all else. We think that these are the sources of all major sins and therefore, far from fearing pride, we literally have parades honoring pride. This has made us, largely, blind to the danger of this sin, and therefore, blind to the incredible beauty of humility. So let's take a

few minutes to meditate on pride and humility since these concepts are integral to understanding this passage.

Pride and Self-consciousness

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.”

-Genesis 3:6-7

In the story of Eden we can see an odd connection between the story of the fall and self-consciousness. While the rebellion against God was acted out in eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the fall first manifests itself in self-consciousness and shame. This then gives us a pretty good definition of pride, pride is an excess of self-consciousness.

But, as we can see from the story above, this self-consciousness is not necessarily an egotistical self-consciousness, but it could manifest itself as a type of shame. Notice that Adam and Eve do not react to the fall through haughtiness or egotism, but instead through shame and a paranoid need to cover themselves and hide. This is far from the picture of Satanic pride that we see in passages like Isaiah 14:

“For you have said in your heart: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation On the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.’”

-Isaiah 14:13-14

This is the kind of pride, or as the modern person would call it “narcissism”, that we find repugnant in the modern era. A quick sidenote, one big problem with our modern view is that we have to ground behaviors like this in the brain, which is why we no longer use words like “hubris” or “pride” to describe this sin, but instead we say “narcissistic personality disorder”. But, since Satan doesn’t have a body, and therefore he doesn’t have a brain, we know that pride doesn’t come from the body, but from the spirit. As C.S. Lewis puts it:

“It is a terrible thing that the worst of all the vices can smuggle itself into the very centre of our religious life. But you can see why. The other, and less bad, vices come from the devil working on us through our animal nature. But this does not come through our

animal nature at all. It comes direct from Hell. It is purely spiritual: consequently it is far more subtle and deadly.”

-C.S. Lewis - “Mere Christianity”

Although there are certain neurological and temperamental factors that can lead to what we tend to call “narcissism” today, we shouldn’t deny its spiritual origin, or else we will lose sight of the fact that pills can’t solve this problem, we need an equally powerful spiritual solution, namely humility, but more on this later.

Back to the point. If the pride of Satan manifests itself as a reckless indifference to consequences and an over-inflated view of himself, why is it that humanities pride manifests itself as the exact opposite. A fixation on their shame and a desire to make themselves as “small” as possible? The answer has to do with this concept of self-consciousness. Before the fall, Adam and Eve weren’t good, they were innocent. Like little children, they didn’t have any self-consciousness. They weren’t proud of who they were, but they also weren’t ashamed of who they were, they literally didn’t think about themselves.

After the fall, it seems as though all they could think about was themselves. They merely thought about how the fruit would benefit them, they were consumed with their own shame, they fled from consequences, and Adam sold his wife out in order to lessen his sin in the eyes of God. Which means this, intense shame and intense arrogance are two sides of the same coin.

The late Timothy Keller pointed out this connection in the Greek word that we translate “pride”:

“This word used here for pride literally means to be overinflated, swollen, distended beyond its proper size. It is related to the word for ‘bellows’. It is very evocative. It brings to mind a rather painful image of an organ in the human body, an organ that is distended because so much air has been pumped into it. So much air, that it is overinflated and ready to burst. It is swollen, inflamed and extended past its proper size... Perhaps I can put it this way: I think the image suggests four things about the natural condition of the human ego: that it is empty, painful, busy and fragile.”

-Timothy Keller - “The Freedom of Self-forgetfulness”

Even to this day we use the phrase “inflated ego” as a call back to this ancient concept of pride. Since our ego is “swollen” it is both larger than life and sensitive at the same exact time. Therefore, someone who is proud tends to be both self-deprecating and egocentric. This doesn’t mean that they will experience each of these equivalently, in

fact most people will experience one over the other, the point is that these are not mutually exclusive points, they actually compliment one another.

This also helps us understand why this sin is so bad. Since this sin causes us to focus on ourselves, it amplifies all our other sins and makes the cardinal virtue of love impossible. In order to love another person, among other things, we have to consider them more than we consider ourselves. Pride disables us from doing this because we are so focused on ourselves that we can't think of anyone else. Back to the sin problem though, pride amplifies our other sins because it removes any natural limits from them.

For sure, even a humble person could be tempted to overeat or indulge in sexual immorality, but since their desires come from their bodies, once their bodies are satisfied the lust goes away. Pride on the other hand is not moved by the body, but by the soul. As such, it has no limiting principle. As C.S. Lewis puts it:

"We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. ...a proud man will take your girl from you, not because he wants her, but just to prove to himself that he is a better man than you. Greed may drive men into competition if there is not enough to go round; but the proud man, even when he has got more than he can possibly want, will try to get still more just to assert his power. Nearly all those evils in the world which people put down to greed or selfishness are really far more the result of Pride..."

-C.S. Lewis - "Mere Christianity"

Finally, since pride focuses on the self, it is far more self-destructive than other sins. Sure a lustful person will be disappointed if they are rejected by the opposite sex since they won't be able to indulge their sexual passions, but it is our pride that takes the rejection "personally". It is our pride that fills us with the awful emotion of shame and moves us to lacerate our own soul over our failure. While another person can oppress our bodies, it is only by pride that we can oppress our own souls and belittle ourselves until we are nothing but shame and insecurity. This is why we are told that there is almost no difference psychologically between self-consciousness and misery.

To put this point more simply, Satan's pride is what caused him to try to ascend to the highest point, but it was also what caused him to sink to the lowest point. In heaven people are so enamored by the presence of God that they don't have time to focus on themselves, but in hell they can only think of themselves.

The Poor in Spirit

This helps us understand Moses' great humility. It is often the fact that our greatest strength is also our greatest weakness, and this holds true for Moses. We can see in our time studying Moses that he is not very self-conscious. He certainly struggles with his temper and responsibility, but ego and self-consciousness don't seem to stumble him very often. Evaluating Moses' story this does make sense. Moses was born a Hebrew, but raised an Egyptian, this means he had no strong national identity. By ethnicity he was Jewish, which means that he could never be very proud of his culture, but he also couldn't be very proud of his race since he is never really accepted by his own race, as proven by this story.

Moses is unfortunately a very lonely individual who never really "belonged" to any group. He was chased out of Egypt, dwelt in Midian, rejected constantly by his own people, even rejected by his own wife, and now by his own siblings. But while these facts are tragic for Moses, they also helped refine his character and made him into a man who was incredibly humble. This idea is also seen in the Hebrew word used for "humble", which could also be translated "poor" or "needy". Jesus seems to be referencing this point when He says:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
-Matthew 5:3

Moses never had a "rich" backstory filled with glory and honor. He was raised outside his own people and married outside his people, Moses fits the archetype of the "outsider" almost perfectly. This is why Moses didn't think anything of marrying a foreign woman, but his family, who were indeed proud of their ethnicity, were deeply offended by his decision.

This is an important point though. While God will often call His prophets, like Noah, Abraham, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and so on, to live their lives as "outsiders" this is not considered the "ideal" life. Normally we develop attachments and affections through commonality with others. To be denied this is actually not a good thing, and very often leads people to become hollow more often than it makes them holy.

Think about this point logically and it makes more sense. If what you knew about a person was simply that they were torn away from their parents at a young age, raised in a home that later rejected them, and then returned to their nation of origin only to be rejected again, we would assume that such a person would have trust issues,

abandonment issues, and low self-confidence, and we actually see most of these things in Moses, though he seems to have done a pretty good job at fighting these things.

This is again true of today. After World War 2, we saw the egotism of the fascists and we have gone the other way. We think that the only way to fight the dangers of national pride, is to discourage national pride. As Americans we have very little self-consciousness. The number of people who are genuinely proud to be Americans are relatively few, though it seems a backlash of sorts is underway.

The fact of the matter is that Moses is not ignorant to his good qualities, whether or not he wrote about his humility is actually insignificant because this story *shows* Moses' humility. He doesn't respond to his siblings with wrath or coldness. He continues to love them, allows God to vindicate him, and even prays for his sister when she is cursed, all of these points Moses certainly recorded himself. To be truly good, and not merely innocent, we have to be self-conscious but humble. This doesn't mean we ignore ourselves, but merely that our attention is *more* devoted to others and to God. Like we talked about last week, the opposite of complaining is not silence, but praise. In much the same way, the opposite of pride is not unconsciousness, but love. As C.S. Lewis says:

“Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all. If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realise that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.”

-C.S. Lewis - “Mere Christianity”

Humility and Revelation

“Suddenly the LORD said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, “Come out, you three, to the tabernacle of meeting!” So the three came out. Then the LORD 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, the LORD, 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 the LORD. Why then were you not afraid To speak against My servant Moses?"

-Numbers 12:4-8

The final thing I wanted to mention about this is that humility seems to be connected to revelation. When God mentions that His fellowship with Moses is deeper and more intimate than any other person, we are supposed to conclude that the cause of this intimacy is Moses' humility above all things. We see the apostle Paul make a similar point in his second letter to the Corinthians:

"And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

-2 Corinthians 12:7-9

The revelation that he received threatened to make him proud, and so he was tempered through suffering much like Moses. When we think about this connection it makes sense. If our egos are too big then all we are listening to is ourselves, and how can we listen to the voice of God when all we are doing is listening to ourselves? In order to "make room" for God's voice, we have to empty ourselves of our own opinions and prejudice. The only way to hear from God is to first learn to be humble, because more often than not, the voice of God will contradict our own.

The psychologist Carl Jung once recounted a conversation between a rabbi and another person where the other person asked why modern people don't seem to hear from God the way that ancient people used to and the rabbi wisely replied:

"Nowadays there is no longer anyone who can bow low enough."

-Carl Jung - "Man and His Symbols"

If someone is using the authority of God to correct and guide other people, their ego can easily turn this vocation deadly. In fact, the greatest villains in history are those proud enough to believe that what they are doing is right and glorifying to God. Because the call of the ancient prophet, or to a much lesser extent the modern pastor, is to faithfully deliver the word of God, humility is absolutely necessary. The mere fact that Aaron and Miriam are jealous of Moses' calling is high evidence that they are unworthy of it. Humility doesn't seek power over others and doesn't compare our calling with that of others. Humility is content with whatever we are called to.

“If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself. Now godliness with contentment is great gain.”

-1 Timothy 1:6:3-6

The Sin of Miriam and Aaron

“Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married; for he had married an Ethiopian woman. So they said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?” And the LORD heard it.”

-Numbers 12:1-2

This leads us to the sin of Miriam and Aaron, beginning with Aaron. The reason why I want to start with Aaron is that Aaron’s sin is much less destructive and easy to understand, which is why he is not really punished. Aaron’s sin here is his sin in Exodus 32. Aaron seems to be a man who is very eloquent and wise, but he is unfortunately a bit of a coward. He doesn’t seem to like conflict and also seems to be a bit of a people pleaser, which means his main sin is vanity not pride. Although this sin mirrors pride, it actually isn’t.

Pride is extreme self-focus, vanity is actually an extreme focus on the opinions of others. The vain person can leave the house thinking they look great, but one comment from another person drains all their confidence and produces insecurity in them. Vanity is a thirst for approval, the need for validation from others, whereas pride doesn’t actually need approval or validation from others, it only needs self-validation. So when the people demand an idol from Aaron in Exodus 32, he immediately builds one for them. And when Moses gets mad at him, he offers what is perhaps the lamest excuse in the entirety of Scripture:

“So Aaron said, “Do not let the anger of my lord become hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. “For they said to me, ‘Make us gods that shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ “And I said to them, ‘Whoever has any gold, let them break it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I cast it into the fire, and this calf came out.”

-Exodus 32:22-24

He first blames the people, and then he claims that the calf “materialized” from the fire when he threw the gold into it. A terrible excuse, but one that is consummate with Aaron’s personality flaw. Like Moses, his greatest strength is also his greatest weakness. The reason why Aaron is such a great speaker and leader is because he is attuned to the voice of others. However, this also means that he struggles with vanity and is easily swayed from his convictions. So while Aaron is mentioned in this story, it is clear from the structure of the text and the punishment that is given, that he was simply a weak willed man led by a more passionate and strong woman.

This means that this sin is better understood as a feminine version of pride and envy. In Numbers 16 we will see a more masculine version of this sin, but in this passage, we see a feminine expression of this sin, and its judgment. So what is her sin? It was a type of rebellion against the prophet of God due to a proud vision of what he should be.

Before we critique Miriam too harshly, we have to first understand her good points. It was Miriam who, at a young age, placed her brother in a little ark and sent him along the Nile river to be saved from the horrible infanticide happening to the Jewish boys. By all accounts, it seems as though Miriam is a fiercely loyal Jewess who loves her family, and is even called a prophetess in the book of Exodus when she leads the women in worship after the Red Sea crossing in Exodus 15:20.

But like I with Moses and Aaron, her greatest strength is her greatest weakness. We can tell that, at least a good portion of Miriam’s sin came from a somewhat understandable place. This is shown by her, relatively, light punishment, and her repentance at the end of the story, since she doesn’t have any problems with Moses in the future. However, the pride she held over her ethnicity led her to be judgemental and condescending towards her brother, which ultimately turned her rebellious.

White Scales

“So the anger of the LORD 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. So Aaron said to Moses, “Oh, my lord! Please do not lay this sin on us, in which we have done foolishly and in which we have sinned. “Please do not let her be as one dead, whose flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother’s womb!”

-Numbers 12:9-12

This helps us understand her punishment, which I will break into two parts. The first has to do with the danger of her sin, and the second has to do with the heart of her sin. First,

by God using something like leprosy, (the word here almost certainly doesn't refer to what we today would call "leprosy" but a more obscure ancient virus), he is doing something almost playful with Miriam that also mirrors the severity of her action. White, in scripture and in ancient stories, is usually a picture of purity and grace. It is a color that people associate with the clouds of heaven, costly pearls, and majestic steeds.

"Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool."

-Isaiah 1:18

Since Miriam criticized the "darkness" of Moses' wife, it is a picture of emphasizing purity to a much higher extent than is necessary, or wise. Because of this, God makes a parody of "whiteness" by using something that is pale. This juxtaposition is, once again, found in scripture and ancient stories. For just as angels have a "white" glow of glory, so ghosts have an eerie pale glow. And in the same way, though whiteness can be a sign of purity, life, and majesty, paleness is a sign of death, infection, and pollution. Look at how God plays with this juxtaposition in Revelation 6:

"And I looked, and behold, a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer."

-Revelation 6:2

"When He opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, 'Come and see.' So I looked, and behold, a pale horse. And the name of him who sat on it was Death, and Hades followed with him. And power was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, with hunger, with death, and by the beasts of the earth."

-Revelation 6:7-8

While the "white horse" of the anti-christ is a symbol of his perceived majesty and greatness, the pale horse is the true result of his rule. In the same way, Miriam's desire to have purity in the nation was a cancer that actually produced the paleness of decay, if God had allowed it to spread.

"The narrative of Miriam's exile is a translation of Moses's second sign on the communal scale. In this case, Miriam exposes the discrepancy that Moses married a foreign woman. In so doing, she undermines the hierarchy founded on Moses and demands that she be recognized, on her own merits, as a valid mediator between heaven and earth. By exposing the discrepancies of her brother, Miriam ironically exposes herself as unsupportive and subversive to the divine hierarchy established through Moses. As a

result, she is afflicted with the disease of tzaraath and must be exiled from the camp for seven days (a full cycle). In this context, Miriam herself represents the diseased flesh of this communal body which must now be cleansed naturally by a cycle of renewal.”

-Mattheiu Pageau - “The Language of Creation”

The second reason is found in its description of being like snow. While this is a literal depiction, since her skin was flaking off, I think it can also be seen as a bit of a juxtaposition against the fire of the previous chapter. We will see this more in the sin of Korah, but while masculine pride burns like a violent fire, feminine pride is rigid and cold. In his book about old stories, Martin Shaw says this about masculine and feminine evil:

“Marie-Louise von Franz made a brilliant observation about evil.[1] She said in the old stories there were both hot and cold varieties. Hot evil is the realm of the Giant: externally destructive, swinging a club, demolishing villages, roaring, wrathful. It’s a loud kind of wickedness, easy to sketch; you can see it smouldering down the path towards you. Cold evil is subtler; cold evil is not the realm of the Giant but the Witch. The Witch traffics in isolation, getting you alone in the forest, thinning out any sense of relatedness to the wider world. It’s a condition of ice and remove. Envy takes me to a place of tremendous cold, not heat. And on that island of remove, we can become prey to the illusionary: In my solitude, I have seen many things that were not true.”

-Martin Shaw - “Liturgies of the Wild

Though equally dangerous, masculine and feminine evil just look different. A masculine pride will lead to a loud and violent rebellion, a feminine pride will lead to an icy tension within the camp. A passive questioning of Moses’ authority that would have the effect of emasculating Moses in front of the people. The effect wouldn’t be his execution, but instead he would be cast out in isolation, no longer trusted or respected by the people. This type of feminine “iciness” is fairly prevalent in literature, but I really like how Jane Austen portrays it in her excellent novel “Pride and Prejudice”. In one scene a few aristocratic women are subtly trying to “cool” the affections of a man towards a woman named Jane, notice how they do this:

“I have a excessive regard for Miss Jane Bennet, she is really a very sweet girl, and I wish with all my heart she were well settled. But with such a father and mother, and such low connections, I am afraid there is no chance of it.’ ‘I think I have heard you say that their uncle is an attorney on Meryton.’ ‘Yes; and they have another, who lives somewhere near Cheapside.’ ‘That is capital,’ added her sister, and they both laughed heartily...To this speech Bingley made no answer; but his sisters gave it their hearty

assent, and indulged their mirth for some time at the expense of their dear friend's vulgar relations."

-Jane Austen Pride and Prejudice

They begin their insults with a false praise for their "excessive regard" that they have for her. And then they subtly begin to pick at her lack of wealth and connections. As the conversation goes, you can see how the men in the conversation begin to "cool" towards Jane and the protagonist Elizabeth. The result is isolation, they are trying to kick these women out of their social circle through criticism and stealth. I also like how she says that they "*indulged their mirth for some time at the expense of their dear friend's vulgar relations.*" Calling her a "dear friend" is a nice touch. A man will attack the body of another man, while women will attack the reputation and character of another woman, and they will do this while pretending to care for their "friend".

Another book that captures this pretty well is the "Snow Queen" by Hans Christian Anderson. It is this book that Disney's "Frozen" is very loosely based on. The original book is mainly about this feminine "frosty" evil that can cool relationships and harden hearts. And the book begins with a demon constructing a mirror that does just this:

"One day the devil was in a very good humor because he had just finished a mirror which had this peculiar power: everything good and beautiful that was reflected in it seemed to dwindle to almost nothing at all, while everything that was worthless and ugly became most conspicuous and even uglier than ever. In this mirror the loveliest landscapes looked like boiled spinach, and the very best people became hideous, or stood on their heads and had no stomachs. Their faces were distorted beyond any recognition, and if a person had a freckle it was sure to spread until it covered both nose and mouth."

-Hans Christian Anderson - "The Snow Queen"

We are told later that if a fragment of this mirror got stuck in someone's eye it would make them permanently see the world in this distorted manner, and if it pierced their heart it would freeze it and make it impossible for them to feel affection or love. This is the power of this feminine sin. It can seem as though Miriam is merely caring for the purity of her people, and it can even seem as though she is caring for her brother by calling him out for his marriage, when in reality she is forcing her opinion on everyone else. She is taking her high expectations of others and passive aggressively working through her other brother to build a false consensus against Moses.

Again, whether she intended it or not, if she was successful, the result would be that her brother would lose his position, be publicly humiliated and shut out from the nation. This

is why it is right that God does the same to her as a punishment. He curses her with a public, painful, and embarrassing disease that alienated her from the people for a week.

A Time for Shame

“So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, “Please heal her, O God, I pray!” Then the LORD said to Moses, “If her father had but spit in her face, would she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp seven days, and afterward she may be received again.” So Miriam was shut out of the camp seven days, and the people did not journey till Miriam was brought in again. And afterward the people moved from Hazeroth and camped in the Wilderness of Paran.”

-Numbers 12:13-16

But this punishment was not meant to permanently destroy Miriam, quite the opposite, it was meant to humble her so that she could appropriately repent. This type of punishment is given to the people of God throughout redemptive history, even to the present church:

“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.”

-1 Corinthians 5:4-7

To discipline someone out of the fellowship of believers is to practice what was done to Miriam. To try to explain to someone that their sinful behavior is both deadly and contagious, the church is to take someone who is in severe unrepentant sin and place them outside of fellowship. This is never done lightly, joyfully, or in wrath. It should be done with humility, love, patience, and a desire for reconciliation. This is why Christ gives His church strict standards for this practice. And even for the Corinthians church. While they failed in 1 Corinthians to discipline someone properly, they failed in 2 Corinthians to be warm and charitable to this same individual when they did repent:

“But if anyone has caused grief, he has not grieved me, but all of you to some extent—not to be too severe. This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him. For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you

to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.”

-2 Corinthians 2:5-11

I would like to talk more about this difficult topic, but I think we have run out of time for this study. I would instead want to end this time by using Miriam's story to explain all of our stories:

“And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight—”

-Colossians 1:21-22

We were once outside the warmth of God's grace and forgiveness, and it was our sins that put us in that position. The reason why Christ had to be crucified in shame, outside the city of Jerusalem and in darkness was to bear the isolation from God that was due to us. This is why He cried out “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me!” But He did this so that we can be welcomed into the love and grace of God.

At a smaller scale this is what our sin does. We are told in Scripture:

“Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, That it cannot save; Nor His ear heavy, That it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear.”

-Isaiah 59:1-2

Moses is honored by God for the intimacy that he enjoyed with God. That because of Moses' humility he was welcomed into the tent of meeting to hear directly from God. And it was Miriam's pride that shut her out. This doesn't mean that Miriam ever left the grace of God, but that her sin caused division between her and her family, and most importantly, her and God. But the beauty is that just as our repentance allowed us to first enter into the grace of God, so repentance from sin allows us to draw nearer to God. So the mission and purpose of the believer is to understand this lesson, to realize that we have been welcomed in, and to take God up on His offer, to daily seek repentance from our sins and nearness to the beauty and grace of God.

“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of

our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

-Hebrews 12:1-2