



Daily Verse and Comment

Numbers 12:1

(1) Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite.

New International Version

A strange chapter of Moses' life deals with his two wives, a situation that sparked the events of Numbers 12.

The story begins sometime during the first forty-year period of his life, during the time before he fled to Midian. The Jewish historian Josephus records that, as a general of Egypt, [Moses](#) was sent with an army to turn back an Ethiopian incursion into Egypt (*Antiquities of the Jews*, II.10.1-2). Having done that in a decisive battle, he took the offensive, gaining victory after victory. Finally, he laid siege to their royal city, Saba. Because Saba was highly fortified and situated on an island, it was nearly impregnable, and this worried Moses. However, before a long siege could reduce both morale and his army's strength, the Ethiopians offered him a deal. Josephus writes:

Tharbis was the daughter of the king of the Ethiopians: she happened to see Moses as he led the army near the walls, and fought with great courage; and admiring the subtlety of his undertakings, and believing him to be the author of the Egyptians' success, . . . she fell deeply in [love](#) with him; and upon the prevalence of that passion, sent to him the most faithful of all her servants to discourse with him about their marriage. He thereupon accepted the offer, on condition she would procure the delivering up of the city; and gave her the assurance of an oath to take her to his wife; and that when he had once taken possession of the city, he would not break his oath to her. No sooner was the agreement

made, but it took effect immediately; and when Moses had cut off the Ethiopians, he gave thanks to [God](#), and consummated his marriage, and led the Egyptians back to their own land. (2:252-253)

Several years later, Moses fled from Egypt after killing the Egyptian. He was a fugitive, a wanted man. His Ethiopian wife, no longer in favor among the Egyptians, likely returned to her native land. Forty years passed while Moses led Jethro's flocks, during which he took Zipporah as his wife and fathered two sons. Then, after the Pharaoh's death, God called Moses to be His prophet and sent him back to Egypt.

The subsequent events—Moses' demands of Pharaoh, the plagues, the Exodus, and the Red Sea crossing—did not occur in a vacuum. Word of Egypt's devastation and humiliation raced through the surrounding countries. News would quickly reach Ethiopia that their conqueror, Moses, was alive and leading a new army of Israelites. It is not improbable that his Ethiopian wife, now upwards of her mid-fifties, returned to Egypt to rejoin her husband. Evidently, arriving after the Israelites had already entered the wilderness, she followed their trail until she finally caught up with them at Hazeroth, and proclaimed herself to be Moses' wife.

What a furor that caused! We see in Numbers 12 that it got Aaron and Miriam into deep trouble with God because they criticized Moses for a supposed [sin](#) he had committed long before he was converted. If it had been a sin, God had obviously forgiven him of it, an act of political strategy done before Moses' calling. His siblings had a superior, judgmental attitude that God did not like at all, for it was His prerogative to judge His servant Moses.

As for Zipporah, she, too, would not have been happy to find out Moses had an Ethiopian wife (unless Moses had told her of his life in Egypt). The Bible does not give her reaction. [Exodus 18:1-3](#) shows that Zipporah, though she did not participate in the Exodus from Egypt, rejoined Moses at Sinai, so she was probably there when all the events occurred in Numbers 12. It probably made for interesting mealtimes!

These are intriguing stories, pieced together from the sparse historical evidence that remains of those times. Much of them is historical conjecture, but they are engaging nonetheless. They show, however, that God works to

prepare His servants as is necessary to bring about His purpose. Moses was a great man, but only because God Himself forged him in the royal household of Pharaoh and in the deserts of Sinai and Midian to lead Israel out of Egypt and to the Promised Land.

And if He prepared Moses for his job, will He not do the same for His Son's bride ([Revelation 19:7-9](#))?

— Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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