

CLARIFYING
BAFFLING
BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER SEVEN

“MOSES WAS MADE
TO DESPAIR”
NUMBERS 12:3

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VII

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THE PROBLEMS IN 12:3

The rule is that things equal to the same thing are equal to each other, but there are exceptions, especially when it comes to Hebrew homographs. In Num. 12:3, the MT **הָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה** appears as the equivalent of the MT **הָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה** “the man Moses” in Exo 11:3. But the *pre-Masoretic* **הָאִישׁ** in Num. 12:3 was probably not the same as the **הָאִישׁ** of Exo 11:3.

Noth (1968: 95) pointed out that **הָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנָו מְאֹד** **הָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנָו מְאֹד** “Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which *were* upon the face of the earth” (KJV) in Num. 12:3 “. . . is a latter addition which disrupts the close connection between v. 2b and 4.” Moreover, Noth (1968: 95) recognized that “it is not easy to ascertain what is meant by the unusual phrase [וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה] ‘the man Moses.’” He concluded, “. . . perhaps the ‘humanity’ of Moses is meant to be brought out and given explicit expression, so that the unique distinction accorded to this ‘man’ should be traced back exclusively to Yahweh’s freewill and be regarded as a divine gift.” Noth, thereby, transforms “the obliqueness of the reference to Moses” (Gray 1903: 123) into an even more oblique theological reference to divine free-will. Olson (1996: 71) and others continued to view Num. 12:3 as a parenthetical insertion by a narrator who, in the words of Ashley (1993: 224) “wishes the reader to know that

Moses *himself* (italics mine) would probably have let the challenge [by Aaron and Miriam] go unanswered.”

However, once the *pre-Masoretic* **הַאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה** of Num. 12:3 is exegeted independently of the MT **הַאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה** of Exo 11:3, all of Num. 12:3 can be read as an original and integral non-parenthetical part of the narrative dealing with Aaron’s and Miriam’s challenge to Moses’ leadership.

Most studies on Num. 12:3 have focused on the interpretation of **עָנָו** (which occurs in the singular only here in the Bible) and its Qere,¹ **עָנָיו**, debating the merits of translating **עָנָו** as “meek” or “humble” or “devout.” Rogers (1986: 257–263) revived (apparently unknowingly) the suggestion of Sellers (1941, cited in Evans, 1969: 439–440) to abandon both “meek” and “humble.”² But, whereas Sellers opted to translate **עָנָו** as “vexed, bad-tempered, or irritable,” Rogers argued from etymology and context for “miserable.”

SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS

The real clue to the meaning of **עָנָו** is in the meaning of the **הַאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה** which precedes it. There is no problem with the proper name **מֹשֶׁה**; but what appears to be the noun **אִישׁ** and the definite article **הַ** is in reality the verb **אִישׁ** “to despair” with the prefixed **הַ** of the *Hoph^eal*, meaning “he was brought to despair.” Thus, the **הַאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה** “the man Moses” of Exo 11:3 is not the equivalent of the **הַאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה** in Num. 12:3. This latter verse should have been vocalized as **הַאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה** meaning “Moses was made to despair.” The Hebrew verb **אִישׁ** “to despair,” which would be a *hapax legomenon*

here, has gone unrecognized to date by commentators and lexicographers; but it is the cognate of Arabic **أيس** (*ʿayisa*) and **أيأس** (*ʿiyās*) (Lane, 1863: 137; Wehr, 1979: 47), with its synonym being **قنط** (*qanīṭa*) “to despair most vehemently of a thing, to become disheartened, to be without hope” (Lane, 1885: 2568; Wehr, 1979: 927). The metathetic by-form of **أيس** (*ʿayisa*) is **يأس** (*yaʿisa*) “to give up all hope,” and (4) “to deprive someone of hope” (Lane, 1893: 2973-2974; Wehr, 1979: 1294), which is the cognate of the well attested Hebrew **יָאֵשׁ** “to despair, to give up hope” (BDB: 384 [with no reference to **أيس**] (*ʿayisa*), although **يأس** (*yaʿisa*) is noted]; Jastrow, 1903: 560).

Consequently, **הָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה** is not a simple predicate clause meaning “the man is Moses,” nor the inversion of a proper noun and its modifier, “Moses the man.” Rather, **הָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה** is a typical verbal clause with the verb (here a *Hoph^cal*) followed by its subject: “Moses was brought to despair.” Given the intensity of the despair suggested by the synonym **قنط** (*qanīṭa*), the adverbial modifier “most vehemently” may be necessary in English to reflect accurately the author’s intent to show how deeply distressed Moses was by the challenge of Aaron and Miriam to his authority.

The depth of Moses’ despair is stressed by the adverbial modifiers which follow **הָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה**, namely, **עָנִי / עֲנִי מֵאֵד** and **מִכֹּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה** “more than anyone upon the face of the earth.” The meaning of **עָנִי / עֲנִי מֵאֵד** will most likely be synonymous with **יָאֵשׁ** “to despair.” Thus, the **עָנִי / עֲנִי** in 12:3 has nothing to do with: (1) **עָנָה** “to answer,” or (2) **עָנָה** “to afflict, to do violence, to be afflicted,

to be bowed down,” a cognate of *عنا / عنو* (*anâ*) and its derivatives *ענה* and *ענו* “poor, humble, meek,” or (3) *ענה* “to sing,” a cognate of *غنى* (*ġannaya*); or (4) *ענה* “to be free from want, to be wealthy or competent,” a cognate of *غنى* (*ġaniya*) (Lane 1877: 2301–2303).

But the *ענה / ענה* here may have something to do with *ענה* (stem II) “to be occupied, busied with” in the sense of “being *preoccupied* with a matter” (BDB: 775). This is suggested by the Arabic cognate *عنى* (*anaya*) “to be disquieted, to suffer difficulty, distress, trouble, fatigue, or weariness,” which is a synonym of *هام / هييم* (*haim / hâma*) “to be perplexed, mystified, baffled, puzzled, confused, to be robbed of one’s senses” (Lane, 1874: 2180; 1885: 3047; Wehr, 1979: 762, 1224), which is the cognate of Hebrew *הגם* “to murmur, to discomfit” (BDB: 223).

The vocalization of the *Kethib* *ענו* or the *Qere* *עניו* (which is also the *Kethib* in 17 manuscripts cited by Kennicott [1780: 250]) can be resolved by (1) paying attention to the intensity of emotion and despair (*עניו*) experienced by Moses when challenged by Aaron and Miriam, and (2) reading *עניו* (*plene*) or *ענו* (*defectiva*) as a *qatīl* form used “almost exclusively of persons, who possess some quality in an *intense* manner” (GKC: 234 [§84f, italics mine]; Moscati, 1964: 78 [§12.9]). Contra Gray (1903: 123), who vocalized the words as *ענו / עניו* (taking his clue from *הגם*), the variants should be vocalized as *עניו* and *ענו*, indicating that Moses was *intensely* perplexed and preoccupied by the challenge from siblings Miriam and Aaron. The prepositional modifier, “more than anyone upon the face of the earth,” could modify

either **הָאִישׁ** “he was brought to despair” or **עֵנְיוֹ מְאֹד** “[he was] extremely distressed.”

CONCLUSION

The lapse in oral tradition which permitted **הָאִישׁ** in Num. 12:3 to be misunderstood as **הָאִישׁ**—rather than **הָאִישׁ**—was also sufficient to obscure in the tradition the proper nuance and vocalization of **עֵנְיוֹ / עֵנוֹ**. The Masoretic reading of Num. 12:3 unintentionally transformed the verse from a statement of high drama about Moses’ emotional and mental depression due to the crisis created by Aaron and Miriam, into a parenthetically intrusive accolade. While the parenthetical intrusion elevated Moses to a plateau of “humility” or “meekness” beyond the reach of other human beings, the intent of the narrator was to show how the conflict with sister and brother brought Moses to the depths of despair—“a deeper distress (**עֵנְיוֹ**) than that of anyone else on earth.”

Rogers’ proposal to render **עֵנְיוֹ / עֵנוֹ** as “miserable” was a step in the right direction, and a major improvement over Sellers’ “bad-tempered or irritable,” which hints at a permanent personality trait rather than a passing mood associated with a crisis situation in the family. While “miserable” rightly removed the unintended accolade from the narrative, it failed to focus on Moses’ disturbed emotional and mental faculties. When, contra Rogers, the etymological base is shifted away from **עָנָה** (= **عنا / عنو** [*anâ*]) “to afflict, to do violence, to be afflicted, to be bowed down” to **עָנָה** (= **عنى** [*anaya*]) “to be disquieted, to suffer difficulty and distress,” the depression of Moses due to the sibling rivalry becomes transparent.

Although Milgrom (1990: 94) appealed to what he considered the “synonymous parallel” in Psa 22:27 (i.e., **עֵנְיוֹם**

“the devout” and דְּרִשְׁיוּ “those who seek Him”) to clarify עֲנוּ in Num. 12:3, the synonyms in this latter verse itself are mutually informative—once they are correctly vocalized as הֵאֱיִשׁ “he was brought to despair” and עֲנִיו or עָנוּ “[he was] distressed.” Far from being adulatory, הֵאֱיִשׁ מֹשֶׁה עֲנִיו מְאֹד was the narrators way of showing just how human Moses was when challenged unfairly by Miriam and Aaron. The adulation of Moses was delayed in the narrative until verses 7–8, when from God—not from Moses nor from a later narrator—this accolade was given: פֶּה אֶל-פֶּה אֲדַבֵּר-בּוֹ וּמְרִאָה “mouth to mouth I speak to him very clearly.”

NOTES

1. Rogers (1986: 257 n. 6), followed by Allen (1990: 799), indirectly quote Gray (1903: 124) that the ם of the Qere עֲנִיו “is a *mater lectionis* to indicate that the last syllable is to be pronounced as in דְּבַרְיוֹ.” Surprisingly, both Rogers and Allen omit Gray’s concluding comparison, “as in דְּבַרְיוֹ,” indicating that they misunderstood Gray’s statement. Gray’s point was not *whether* the second syllable should be pronounced, but rather *how* it should be pronounced.

2. I am indebted to my colleague, Dr. Parker Thompson of North Fork, Virginia, for this reference to O. R. Sellers’ 1941 proposal.