

**Exegetical Notes, Numbers 16:1-50**  
**“Korah’s Rebellion”**

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**NUMBERS 16:1-50**

**Verses 1-3**

*Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites—Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—became insolent<sup>2</sup> and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council.<sup>3</sup> They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD’s assembly?”*

- Rebellion spurs rebellion. Once the spirit of rebellion has been given birth, it fosters additional waves of rebellion. This is the story of the next wave of rebellion among the Hebrew people.
- Korah, the leader of this rebellious group, was the great-grandson of Levi. He was from the tribe of Kohath. (See Numbers 3:27-32, 4:1-20) The Kohathites carried the furniture, including the ark of the covenant, when the camp was moved. This clan had been given high responsibility for caring for God's tent.
- Korah was joined in rebellion by Dathan, Abiram, On (who were from the tribe of Reuben) and 250 leaders from among the other tribes. The 250 men were respected members of Israel's Council. This is a large and influential group which came against Moses.
- They accused Moses of taking upon himself too much authority. They claimed that he had set himself up as higher than the other members of the Council when all of them were equal before God. They were saying that Moses needed to step back and see himself as one of them and not different than they before God.

**Verses 4-7**

*<sup>4</sup> When Moses heard this, he fell facedown. <sup>5</sup> Then he said to Korah and all his followers: “In the morning the LORD will show who belongs to him and who is holy, and he will have that person come near him. The man he*

*chooses he will cause to come near him. <sup>6</sup> You, Korah, and all your followers are to do this: Take censers <sup>7</sup> and tomorrow put burning coals and incense in them before the LORD. The man the LORD chooses will be the one who is holy. You Levites have gone too far!"*

- At first, Moses was caught off guard by the attack against his leadership. He fell down before God in prayer.
- After praying, Moses said that the matter must be laid before God and God must be allowed to settle the dispute by picking whom he would choose to serve him.
- Moses proposed a test to settle the issue. The next morning the men in rebellion against his leadership would all come before God carrying their censers filled with hot coals and incense. The smoke arising from the censer represents the prayers of God's people. The smell of the burning incense is a "pleasing aroma" to God. Moses proposed that the group allow God to indicate who of them he regarded as holy. That word means, "set apart" for God 's use.
- But Moses also turned the charge back on the rebellious group. As they had accused him of going too far, he now warned them that they had gone too far.

### **Verses 8-11**

*<sup>8</sup> Moses also said to Korah, "Now listen, you Levites! <sup>9</sup> Isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near himself to do the work at the LORD's tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them? <sup>10</sup> He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too. <sup>11</sup> It is against the LORD that you and all your followers have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?"*

- Moses spoke to Korah and all of the Levites. He reminded them that God had "set them apart." Literally, he agreed that they were holy to God. Like he and Aaron, they had been called by God to a special place in God's service. Moses said that they should have been content to serve God in the way God had commissioned them to serve.
- Moses said that the problem, the reason for their rebellion, is that they were not content to serve as they had been called. They now wanted to function in the office as priest too.

### Verses 12-15

<sup>12</sup> *Then Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab. But they said, “We will not come! <sup>13</sup> Isn’t it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness? And now you also want to lord it over us! <sup>14</sup> Moreover, you haven’t brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Do you want to treat these men like slaves? No, we will not come!”*

- Then Moses turned his attention away from Korah, the leader of the rebellion, to those who followed him in rebellion. He summoned Dathan and Abiram to come to him. But they refused to come to Moses.
- They added to the charges against Moses saying that he had failed to deliver on his promises to the people. He had not brought them into the promised land as promised. In Hebrew, they accuse Moses of "trying to put out their eyes." The phrase means that they accused Moses of throwing dust in their faces. They accused Moses of bringing them out of Egypt to make them his own slaves.

### Verse 15

<sup>15</sup> *Then Moses became very angry and said to the LORD, “Do not accept their offering. I have not taken so much as a donkey from them, nor have I wronged any of them.”*

- At this point, Moses lost his temper. He asked God to reject their service since he had never made any personal gain from any of them.

### Verses 16-21

<sup>16</sup> *Moses said to Korah, “You and all your followers are to appear before the LORD tomorrow—you and they and Aaron. <sup>17</sup> Each man is to take his censer and put incense in it—250 censers in all—and present it before the LORD. You and Aaron are to present your censers also.” <sup>18</sup> So each of them took his censer, put burning coals and incense in it, and stood with Moses and Aaron at the entrance to the tent of meeting. <sup>19</sup> When Korah had gathered all his followers in opposition to them at the entrance to the tent of meeting, the glory of the LORD appeared to the entire assembly. <sup>20</sup> The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, <sup>21</sup> “Separate yourselves from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once.”*

- Moses repeats the challenge to the rebels, and on the next day all of those in rebellion, along with Moses and Aaron appeared before the Tent of Meeting with their censers burning.
- God then appeared and threatened to kill all of the men who stood in opposition to Moses along with the entire nation of Israel.

### Verse 22

***<sup>22</sup> But Moses and Aaron fell facedown and cried out, “O God, the God who gives breath to all living things, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?”***

- Once again, Moses stood in intercession for the people and begged God not to destroy them all because "one man had sinned." He clearly lays this entire rebellion at the feet of one man, its leader, Korah.

### Verses 23-27

***<sup>23</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, <sup>24</sup> “Say to the assembly, ‘Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.’” <sup>25</sup> Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. <sup>26</sup> He warned the assembly, “Move back from the tents of these wicked men! Do not touch anything belonging to them, or you will be swept away because of all their sins.” <sup>27</sup> So they moved away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. Dathan and Abiram had come out and were standing with their wives, children and little ones at the entrances to their tents.***

- In response to Moses prayer of intercession, God resolves not to punish the entire nation, but to hold accountable Korah and those who joined him in rebelling.
- Moses is told to order the people to stand back from the leaders of the rebellion and all that they own, for God's judgment is about to fall on them.

### Verses 28-30

***<sup>28</sup> Then Moses said, “This is how you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: <sup>29</sup> If these men die a natural death and suffer the fate of all mankind, then the LORD has not sent me. <sup>30</sup> But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the realm of the dead, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt.”***

- Moses declares that God will show the people whom he favors by judging the rebel leaders in a unique way. They will not die in the normal way men die. Instead the earth will open up and swallow them, their families, and all they own. By this, the people will know that God is with Moses and has chosen him to be the leader of the nation and the spokesmen of God.

### Verses 31-34

<sup>31</sup> *As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart*

<sup>32</sup> *and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their*

*households, and all those associated with Korah, together with their*

*possessions. <sup>33</sup> They went down alive into the realm of the dead, with*

*everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and*

*were gone from the community. <sup>34</sup> At their cries, all the Israelites around*

*them fled, shouting, “The earth is going to swallow us too!”*

- It happened just as Moses said it would. The earth opened up and swallowed Korah, Dathan, Abiram, On and all that was theirs.
- Seeing the sign of God's judgment fall, the people of Israel were scared, assuming that God would destroy them too.

### Verse 35

<sup>35</sup> *And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.*

- God consumed the other rebellious leaders with fire. Even though the idea belonged first to Korah, all of those who participated in the rebellious act suffered God's judgment.

### Verses 36-40

<sup>36</sup> *The LORD said to Moses, <sup>37</sup> “Tell Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, to remove the censers from the charred remains and scatter the coals some*

*distance away, for the censers are holy— <sup>38</sup> the censers of the men who*

*sinned at the cost of their lives. Hammer the censers into sheets to overlay the altar, for they were presented before the LORD and have become holy.*

*Let them be a sign to the Israelites.” <sup>39</sup> So Eleazar the priest collected the*

*bronze censers brought by those who had been burned to death, and he*

*had them hammered out to overlay the altar, <sup>40</sup> as the LORD directed him*

*through Moses. This was to remind the Israelites that no one except a*

*descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the LORD, or he*

*would become like Korah and his followers.*

- The censers which the rebels carried before the Lord were holy objects. So they were taken up and hammered into bronze sheets which were used to cover the altar. These bronze sheets on the altar were to serve as a reminder to the people, that no one except the ones chosen by God to serve him as priests were to burn incense to God.

### Verse 41

***<sup>41</sup> The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. “You have killed the LORD’s people,” they said.***

- The very next day, the people were complaining against Moses and Aaron again. This time, the people accused Moses and Aaron of killing "YHWH's people," meaning, the 250 who had rebelled.

### Verses 42-50

***<sup>42</sup> But when the assembly gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron and turned toward the tent of meeting, suddenly the cloud covered it and the glory of the LORD appeared. <sup>43</sup> Then Moses and Aaron went to the front of the tent of meeting, <sup>44</sup> and the LORD said to Moses, <sup>45</sup> “Get away from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once.” And they fell facedown. <sup>46</sup> Then Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer and put incense in it, along with burning coals from the altar, and hurry to the assembly to make atonement for them. Wrath has come out from the LORD; the plague has started.” <sup>47</sup> So Aaron did as Moses said, and ran into the midst of the assembly. The plague had already started among the people, but Aaron offered the incense and made atonement for them. <sup>48</sup> He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped. <sup>49</sup> But 14,700 people died from the plague, in addition to those who had died because of Korah. <sup>50</sup> Then Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance to the tent of meeting, for the plague had stopped.***

- Once again, God appeared before the people announcing to Moses and Aaron his intention to destroy Israel because of their rebellion.
- Once again, Moses and Aaron fall on their faces pleading with God not to destroy the entire nation of Israel.
- This time God is more intent than ever before. He sent a plague among the people, which was killing them, even as Moses and Aaron begged him for the people's lives. Moses told Aaron to fill his censer and to use it to make intercession for the people before God which Aaron did.

- In response to the prayers of Moses and Aaron for the people, the plague was stopped, but only after 14,700 people had died from it.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Some People Just Don't Get It*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)