

NUMBERS

Chapter 16

Korah, Dathan and Abiram

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 ² and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council. ³ 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?” ⁴ When Moses heard this, he fell facedown. ⁵ 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. ⁶ You, Korah, and all your followers are to do this: Take censers ⁷ and tomorrow put fire 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!” ⁸ Moses also said to Korah, “Now listen, you Levites! ⁹ 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? ¹⁰ He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too. ¹¹ It is against the LORD that you and all your followers have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?” ¹² Then Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab. But they said, “We will not come! ¹³ Isn’t it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the desert? And now you also want to lord it over us? ¹⁴ Moreover, you haven’t brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you gouge out the eyes of these men? No, we will not come!” ¹⁵ 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.” ¹⁶ Moses said to Korah, “You and all your followers are to appear before the LORD tomorrow—you and they and Aaron. ¹⁷ 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.” ¹⁸ So each man took his censer, put fire and incense in it, and stood with Moses and Aaron at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ²¹ “Separate yourselves from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once.” ²² But Moses and Aaron fell facedown and cried out, “O God, God of the spirits of all mankind, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?” ²³ Then the LORD said to Moses, ²⁴ “Say to the assembly, ‘Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.’” ²⁵ Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. ²⁶ 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.”²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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:²⁹ If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the LORD has not sent me.³⁰ 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 grave, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt.”³¹ As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart³² and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah’s men and all their possessions.³³ They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community.³⁴ At their cries, all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, “The earth is going to swallow us too!”³⁵ And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.³⁶ The LORD said to Moses,³⁷ “Tell Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, to take the censers out of the smoldering remains and scatter the coals some distance away, for the censers are holy—³⁸ 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.”³⁹ So Eleazar the priest collected the bronze censers brought by those who had been burned up, and he had them hammered out to overlay the altar,⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. “You have killed the LORD’s people,” they said.⁴² 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.⁴³ Then Moses and Aaron went to the front of the Tent of Meeting,⁴⁴ and the LORD said to Moses,⁴⁵ “Get away from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once.” And they fell facedown.⁴⁶ Then Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer and put incense in it, along with fire from the altar, and hurry to the assembly to make atonement for them. Wrath has come out from the LORD; the plague has started.”⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped.⁴⁹ But 14,700 people died from the plague, in addition to those who had died because of Korah.⁵⁰ Then Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, for the plague had stopped.

Chs 16–17 Insurrection raised its ugly head against the mediators of the covenant, Moses and Aaron, at an unspecified point during their 38 years of wandering. Experiences recorded in ch 14 were soon forgotten. Israel’s repeated murmurings came in short intervals (cf Ex 14:11–12;

15:23–24; 16:2–3, 20, 26–28; 17:1–2). Here, two groups joined hands to overthrow the divinely established order, each venting its particular complaint. (TLSB)

16:1–7 Earlier, Miriam and Aaron had led a rebellion against the leadership of Moses (ch. 12). Now Korah and his allies attack the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Korah was descended from Levi through Kohath. As a Kohathite, he had high duties in the service of the Lord at the tabernacle (see 4:1–20), but he desired more. His passion was to assume the role of priest, and he used deception to advance his claim. Korah was joined by the Reubenites, Dathan, Abiram and On, and about 250 other leaders of Israel who had their own complaints. Their charge was that Moses had “gone too far” (v. 3) in taking the role of spiritual leadership of the people; “the whole community is holy” (v. 3). To this abusive charge Moses retorts, “You Levites have gone too far!” (v. 7), and sets up a trial by fire. (CSB)

16:2 *rose up*. Led by Korah, one of the sons of Levi (v 7). Although the Levites had been given the distinction “to do service in the tabernacle of the LORD” (v 9; cf chs 3–4), they presumed to “seek the priesthood also” (v 10), to which God had appointed only Aaron and his immediate family. (TLSB)

chiefs ... well-known. Tensions between priests and Levites led to involvement by political leaders and a high-stakes confrontation. (TLSB)

16:3 *all in the congregation are holy*. Claim of priestly privileges for every Israelite. (TLSB)

16:6 Rivalry seemed specifically to be with Aaron (cf v 17), who was in charge of all the priests and Levites. (TLSB)

16:7 *You have gone too far, sons of Levi!* Beyond their divinely appointed authority (cf Lv 10). (TLSB)

16:10 *seek the priesthood*. The Levites were subject to the priests, which resulted in envy and rivalry. (TLSB)

16:11 *What is Aaron that you grumble against him?* The Levites’ dispute was actually with the Lord. (TLSB)

16:12–14 Dathan and Abiram challenged Moses’ leadership. As descendants of Reuben, the firstborn of the tribal ancestors, they may have resented a Levite’s leadership (v 7). (TLSB)

16:12 *Dathan and Abiram*. Their charge against Moses was that he had not led them into the land of promise. They claimed that Moses had in fact led the people “out of a land flowing with milk and honey” (v. 13). By this strange alchemy, in their minds the land of Egypt has been transformed from prison to paradise. (CSB)

16:13 *a prince over us?* Aaron was the right hand of Moses, against whose leadership the whole movement was ultimately directed. Dathan and Abiram attacked Moses’ leadership because he failed to give them the promised inheritance. They insisted that he had misled them to kill them in the wilderness and compared Egypt to a “land flowing with milk and honey.” (TLSB)

16:14 *Will you put out the eyes of these men?* The Levites insist that they are not blind to what Moses has done by appointing Aaron's family to the priesthood. They accuse him of favoritism. (TLSB)

16:15 *nor have I wronged any of them.* Moses' humanity is seen in his plea of innocence. (CSB)

The expression, though true and serious, has a humorous and sarcastic tone (cf Ex 20:17; Gn 43:18). Luther: "The ungodly ... are obsessed with the ambition to apply and appropriate the promises to themselves. Therefore they oppress and harass the true church. In these circumstances there is nothing else for us to do than to commend our cause to the Lord, as Moses did in that troublesome conflict with Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num. 16). They were entirely incurable and so sure of their own cause that they were neither willing nor able to be instructed. Therefore Moses refers the matter to a divine judgment and prays the Lord not to regard their sacrifice. Thereupon the Lord pronounces judgment upon them and encourages the true church" (AE 3:15) (TLSB)

16:18–21 The trial was to be by fire: Which men would the Lord accept as his priests in the holy tabernacle? The 250 men allied with Korah came with arrogance to withstand Moses and Aaron at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. The revelation of the Lord's glory was sure and sudden (v. 19), with words of impending doom for the rebellious people (v. 21). The punishment was fittingly ironic. Those 250 men who dared to present themselves as priests before the Lord with fire in their censers were themselves put to death by fire (perhaps lightning) from the Lord (see v. 35). (CSB)

16:22 Here the magnanimity of Moses and Aaron is seen. (CSB)

one man. Probably refers to Korah (v 1). (TLSB)

16:24 *Move away.* God's judgment was going to be severe, but he did not want to lash out against bystanders. It appears that Korah himself had left the 250 false priests and was standing with Dathan and Abiram to continue their opposition to Moses. (CSB)

16:26–27 Other Israelites apparently still believed Moses. (TLSB)

16:26 *from the tents of these wicked men.* All who agreed with the rebels refused to leave their dwelling and so "went down alive into Sheol" with "all their goods" (vv 32–33). The earth opened and "swallowed them up" (v 32). Some members of Korah's immediate family apparently were not involved. Cf Nu 26:9–11; see the heading of such psalms as Ps 42; 1Ch 6:22. Cyprian: "All will be liable to guilt as well as its punishment, who with irreligious boldness mingle themselves with schismatics in opposition to prelates and priests" (ANF 5:400). Luther: "To grace all things are possible. Korah stirs up a great rebellion, and he himself perishes. But this great miracle follows ... his sons are nevertheless preserved. Later they became renowned by reason of most excellent virtues, since they composed very beautiful psalms which can easily stand comparison and vie with the psalms of David. Yet they were descendants of Levi and Korah.... Accordingly, God always observes this rule. He sets forth His threats; yet He chooses

something good from evil men and sinners, just as He preserves some out of the whole human race, which is lost because of sins” (AE 8:227–28). (TLSB)

16:27 *wives ... little ones.* Whole families suffered the consequences of the fathers’ sins (cf Ex 20:5). (TLSB)

16:28–30 Moses outlines a test by which people could recognize God’s judgment and favor. Cf 1Ki 18:22–24. (TLSB)

16:30 *something totally new.* Moses wished to assure the people that the imminent judgment was the direct work of the Lord and not a chance event that might be interpreted differently. The opening of the earth to swallow the rebels was a sure sign of the wrath of God and the vindication of Moses and Aaron. (CSB)

“It is still a great mercy that the earth bears and supports us” (LC I 60). (TLSB)

16:32 *swallowed them, with their households.* The sons of Korah did not die (26:11); apparently they did not join their father in his rash plan. The households of the other rebels died with them. (CSB)

16:35 *fire came out.* From the sanctuary. Luther: “A defended sin is unforgivable. For he who forgives this sin would be in agreement with it and would approve of it. But God does not approve of iniquity. ‘Evil may not sojourn with Thee, etc.,’ as Ps. 5:4 says. Thus Moses prayed against Korah (Num. 16), and 1 John 5:16 says: ‘There is sin which is mortal’ ” (AE 16:35). (TLSB)

16:37–38 *they have become holy.* Incense burners of the rebels were hammered into bronze plates to cover the altar, a sign of the dire consequences of disobeying the Lord. (TLSB)

16:37 *take the censers.* The true priests took the censers of the 250 deceased impostors from their charred remains and hammered them into bronze sheets for the altar as a memorial of the folly of a self-proclaimed priest (v. 40). (CSB)

16:41 *the whole Israelite community grumbled.* Again the community attacked Moses, unfairly charging him with the death of the Lord’s people. Except for the intervention of Moses and Aaron (see vv. 4, 22), the entire nation might have been destroyed because of their continued rebellion (see v. 45). (CSB)

The rebellious propaganda had so poisoned the people’s minds that they refused to acknowledge the death of the instigators as God’s punishment. (TLSB)

16:46 *Take your censer.* Ordinarily, Aaron offered incense only on the altar in the sanctuary (Ex 30:1–10; Lv 16:12–13). But extraordinary means were required to make atonement for the stricken people. When Aaron ran “into the midst of the assembly” with his censer, “the plague was stopped” (vv 47–50). It was to teach the people that a sacred rite, executed by the divinely authorized person, had a salutary effect, but Korah’s illegitimate use of the censer resulted in death. (TLSB)

16:49 *14,700 people died.* The number makes sense only if the community is as large as the census lists of ch. 2 suggest. (CSB)

Ch 16 We may ask: Was God justified in allowing an entire generation to die before leading the Israelites into the Promised Land? An answer comes in the rebellion of Korah and his followers, which threatens the lives of the Lord's servants and the unity of the congregation. Yet when the Lord's punishment falls on the rebels, the Lord's servant Aaron rushes into the midst of the plague to save the people. His intercession reminds us of Christ's intercession for us; He came among us to save us. • "O LORD, I call upon You; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to You! Let my prayer be counted as incense before You, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!" (Ps 141:1-2). Amen. (TLSB)