

# NUMBERS

## Chapter 16

### *Korah's Rebellion*

Now Korah the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men. 2 And they rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men. 3 They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?" 4 When Moses heard it, he fell on his face, 5 and he said to Korah and all his company, "In the morning the LORD will show who is his, and who is holy, and will bring him near to him. The one whom he chooses he will bring near to him. 6 Do this: take censers, Korah and all his company; 7 put fire in them and put incense on them before the LORD tomorrow, and the man whom the LORD chooses shall be the holy one. You have gone too far, sons of Levi!" 8 And Moses said to Korah, "Hear now, you sons of Levi: 9 is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself, to do service in the tabernacle of the LORD and to stand before the congregation to minister to them, 10 and that he has brought you near him, and all your brothers the sons of Levi with you? And would you seek the priesthood also? 11 Therefore it is against the LORD that you and all your company have gathered together. What is Aaron that you grumble against him?" 12 And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and they said, "We will not come up. 13 Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also make yourself a prince over us? 14 Moreover, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up." 15 And Moses was very angry and said to the LORD, "Do not respect their offering. I have not taken one donkey from them, and I have not harmed one of them." 16 And Moses said to Korah, "Be present, you and all your company, before the LORD, you and they, and Aaron, tomorrow. 17 And let every one of you take his censer and put incense on it, and every one of you bring before the LORD his censer, 250 censers; you also, and Aaron, each his censer." 18 So every man took his censer and put fire in them and laid incense on them and stood at the entrance of the tent of meeting with Moses and Aaron. 19 Then Korah assembled all the congregation against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And the glory of the LORD appeared to all the congregation. 20 And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, 21 "Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment." 22 And they fell on their faces and said, "O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and will you be angry with all the congregation?" 23 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 24 "Say to the congregation, Get away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram." 25 Then Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. 26 And he spoke to the congregation, saying, "Depart, please, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest you be swept away with all their sins." 27 So they got away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. And Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the door of their tents, together with their wives, their sons, and their little ones. 28 And Moses said, "Hereby you shall know that the LORD has sent me to do all these works, and that it has not been of my own accord. 29 If these men die as all men die, or if they are visited by the fate of all mankind, then the LORD has not sent me. 30 But if the LORD creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the LORD." 31 And as soon as he had

finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. 32 And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. 33 So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. 34 And all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, “Lest the earth swallow us up!” 35 And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men offering the incense. 36 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 37 “Tell Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest to take up the censers out of the blaze. Then scatter the fire far and wide, for they have become holy. 38 As for the censers of these men who have sinned at the cost of their lives, let them be made into hammered plates as a covering for the altar, for they offered them before the LORD, and they became holy. Thus they shall be a sign to the people of Israel.” 39 So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers, which those who were burned had offered, and they were hammered out as a covering for the altar, 40 to be a reminder to the people of Israel, so that no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, should draw near to burn incense before the LORD, lest he become like Korah and his company—as the LORD said to him through Moses. 41 But on the next day all the congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, “You have killed the people of the LORD.” 42 And when the congregation had assembled against Moses and against Aaron, they turned toward the tent of meeting. And behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD appeared. 43 And Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, 44 and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 45 “Get away from the midst of this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.” And they fell on their faces. 46 And Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer, and put fire on it from off the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone out from the LORD; the plague has begun.” 47 So Aaron took it as Moses said and ran into the midst of the assembly. And behold, the plague had already begun among the people. And he put on the incense and made atonement for the people. 48 And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped. 49 Now those who died in the plague were 14,700, besides those who died in the affair of Korah. 50 And Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance of the tent of meeting, when the plague was 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** *I have not harmed one 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** *get 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** *creates something ew*. 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** *all the congregation of the people of Israel 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)