

Numbers 16-17 • Korah's Rebellion

Introduction

The account of Korah's rebellion has been replayed many times in similar fashion throughout the history of the Church. It serves as a model of how a single yet influential individual can escalate their personal desires and agenda so as to ultimately infect a whole congregation or even movement. What on the surface appears to be discontent with human authority is soon found to actually be a dissatisfaction with and rejection of God's authority. Or as Jesus will put it:

"The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me." — Luke 10:16

¹Now Korah the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took action, ²and they rose up before Moses, together with some of the sons of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, chosen in the assembly, men of renown. ³They assembled together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone far enough, for all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?"

[Read v.1-3]

Q: Who is the main ring leader of the opposition? How does his background provide an understanding of his motives?

A: Korah is a member of the rank-and-file Levites and not a member of the priesthood proper. It would appear that he is making an attempt to elevate himself personally to a position which God had not appointed him.

Q: Who are Korah's inner circle?

A: Dathan, Abiram and On were sons of Reuben, the original firstborn son of Jacob. Because of sin (Gen. 35), his position as head over the rest was taken away from him.

Point: It would appear, for their own personal reasons, Korah is attempting to leapfrog into Aaron's place, and the sons of Reuben into that of Moses.

Q: How did the discontent of these four men first begin to infect the rest of Israel?

A: It first began by rallying "two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation...men of renown". (v.2) They appear to have attracted others who desired to attain to higher and more prominent positions themselves.

Q: What might be the ironic thing which all these men have in common? Were they oppressed or marginalized to begin with?

A: In the overall scheme of the way Israel was organized, they were all in leadership positions to begin with, not someone who was at the very bottom of the given authority structure. It's just that they were not in overall charge.

Q: How does the nature of their charge against Moses and Aaron attempt to hide their true intentions?

A: They formulate something relating to a spiritual issue to cover up the fact they are actually attacking their authority. They accuse Moses and Aaron of exalting themselves over the holiness of God present in the overall congregation.

Q: How might this accusation be a twisting of God's Word?

A: On Mt. Sinai God told Israel through Moses that if Israel kept their covenant with Him, "you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation". (Ex. 19:6) These men seem to be making an attempt to apply this as being Israel's current state with God, something Israel has already achieved.

Q: What is ironic about the timing of that statement which they may be twisting?

A: It came just prior to the rebellion which Moses found when he came down from Sinai, and here we find the twisting of that statement in the course of yet another rebellion.

Application: *Spiritual opposition begins with an individual who infects larger and larger numbers. Their true motives are usually wrapped in a partial truth which twists the reality.*

[Read v.4-7]

⁴When Moses heard this, he fell on his face; ⁵and he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, "Tomorrow morning the LORD will show who is His, and who is holy, and will bring him near to Himself; even the one whom He will choose, He will bring near to Himself. ⁶Do this: take censers for yourselves, Korah and all your company, ⁷and put fire in them, and lay incense upon them in the presence of the LORD tomorrow; and the man whom the LORD chooses shall be the one who is holy. You have gone far enough, you sons of Levi!"

Q: How did Moses and Aaron defend themselves?

A: They didn't; they left that up to God.

Q: But how does Moses rephrase the situation so that it is the right spiritual issue at the heart of the matter?

A: The accusers began by asserting "the whole congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is in their midst" (v.3), but here Moses defers, "the man the LORD chooses shall be the one who is holy". (v.7)

Q: How does Moses let them know that he is aware of the true nature of their rebellion, that they are desiring something higher to which they were never appointed?

A: "You have gone far enough". (v.7)

Point: *The rebellious tend to hid their intentions whereas God's leaders stick to the plain truth of the matter.*

Q: What do censers and incense consistently represent in Scripture?

A: Prayer.

Application: *It is important for spiritual rebellion to be handled according to God's Word and ways, even when the nature of the conflict is obvious.*

[Read v.8-11]

⁸Then Moses said to Korah, "Hear now, you sons of Levi, ⁹is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the service of the tabernacle of the LORD, and to stand before the congregation to minister to them; ¹⁰and that He has brought you near, Korah, and all your brothers, sons of Levi, with you? And are you seeking for the priesthood also? ¹¹Therefore you and all your company are gathered together against the LORD; but as for Aaron, who is he that you grumble against him?"

Q: Who does Moses specifically address and why?

A: Moses addresses the Levites who have been influenced by Korah. Moses recognizes they are the source of what causes the other leaders to publicly dissent from the rest of Israel.

Q: Of what does Moses remind them?

A: As Levites they were already assigned a special position in the greater scheme of things. It implies that they are not acting in the character of their assignment.

Q: How might this sound familiar? What other famous spiritual rebellion was instigated by someone dissatisfied with their position?

A: It is in the same character as Satan.

*"How you have fallen from heaven,
O star of the morning, son of the dawn!
You have been cut down to the earth,
You who have weakened the nations!
But you said in your heart,*

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*'I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne above the stars of God,
And I will sit on the mount of assembly
In the recesses of the north.
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.'
Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol,
To the recesses of the pit. — Isaiah 14:12–15*

Application: *Spiritual rebellion among God's own is rooted in the desire to elevate one's self beyond what God appointed.*

¹²Then Moses sent a summons to Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab; but they said, "We will not come up. ¹³Is it not enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, but you would also lord it over us? ¹⁴Indeed, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor have you given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Would you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up!"

¹⁵Then Moses became very angry and said to the LORD, "Do not regard their offering! I have not taken a single donkey from them, nor have I done harm to any of them."

[Read v.12-15]

Q: What is the accusation Dathan and Abiram now present?

1. "...you have brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness..." (v.13) They blame Moses for Israel's failure.
2. "...nor have you given us an inheritance..." (v.14) They blame Moses for their personal situation, what they perceive as material loss.
3. "...you would also lord it over us". (v.13) They reject Moses' authority over them personally.
4. "Would you put out the eyes of these men?" (v.14) They accuse Moses of misusing his authority to deceive everyone.

Point: *In the previous section we clearly see that Korah and the Levites seek to replace Aaron, and in this section that the sons of Reuben seek to replace Moses.*

Q: What personal remedy does Moses seek?

A: Still leaving it up to the Lord, he asks that their offering which will be presented side-by-side with the others is rejected by God. It is not a personal remedy Moses seeks, but an overall spiritual one.

Application: *Godly leaders seek spiritual solutions to spiritual problems, even when the outcome means the judgment of God.*

¹⁶Moses said to Korah, "You and all your company be present before the LORD tomorrow, both you and they along with Aaron. ¹⁷Each of you take his firepan and put incense on it, and each of you bring his censer before the LORD, two hundred and fifty firepans; also you and Aaron shall each bring his firepan."

¹⁸So they each took his own censer and put fire on it, and laid incense on it; and they stood at the doorway of the tent of meeting, with Moses and Aaron. ¹⁹Thus Korah assembled all the congregation against them at the doorway of the tent of meeting. And the glory of the LORD appeared to all the congregation.

²⁰Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ²¹"Separate yourselves

[Read v.16-22]

Q: Whom did Moses direct to present themselves?

A: "You and all your company". (v.16) Their ranks had previously been identified as swelling to at least 250.

Q: But who actually showed up the next day in Korah's "company"?

A: "...all the congregation". (v.19) Korah's influence had succeeded in basically infecting everyone.

Q: What seems to confirm this observation that it was the whole of Israel who were now opposing Moses and Aaron?

A: Because of God's command to Moses and Aaron to separate from the congregation "that I may consume them instantly". (v.21)

[Continued on the next page.]

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from among this congregation, that I may consume them instantly.”

²²But they fell on their faces and said, “O God, God of the spirits of all flesh, when one man sins, will You be angry with the entire congregation?”

²³Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²⁴“Speak to the congregation, saying, ‘Get back from around the dwellings of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.’”

²⁵Then Moses arose and went to Dathan and Abiram, with the elders of Israel following him, ²⁶and he spoke to the congregation, saying, “Depart now from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing that belongs to them, or you will be swept away in all their sin.”

²⁷So they got back from around the dwellings of Korah, Dathan and Abiram; and Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the doorway of their tents, along with their wives and their sons and their little ones.

²⁸Moses said, “By this you shall know that the LORD has sent me to do all these deeds; for this is not my doing. ²⁹If these men die the death of all men or if they suffer the fate of all men, then the LORD has not sent me. ³⁰But if the LORD brings about an entirely new thing and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that is theirs, and they descend alive into Sheol, then you will understand that these men have spurned the LORD.”

³¹As he finished speaking all these words, the ground that was under them split open; ³²and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men who belonged to Korah with their possessions. ³³So they and all that belonged to them went down alive to Sheol; and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. ³⁴All Israel who were around them fled at their outcry, for they said, “The earth may swallow us up!” ³⁵Fire also came forth from the LORD and

Q: What is ironic about Moses and Aaron in how they responded?

A: The leaders of the opposition, as well as Aaron, all showed up with their censers and incense which represents prayer. Moses and Aaron interceded in prayer on behalf of the people, and it is only their prayer which God acknowledges. Sheer numbers is not what mattered.

Q: What is the specific request which Moses and Aaron make?

A: They ask for a distinction between the actual individual sinners fomenting rebellion from those influenced by it.

Application: *Spiritual leaders are always held accountable to a higher standard.*

[Read v.23-35]

Q: How do we know that God acknowledges the intercession provided by Moses and Aaron?

A: He relents from destroying the whole congregation and has the congregation separate from the chief instigators.

Q: How is this separation specified?

A: God not only commands to be physically set apart, but warns not to even touch anything belonging to them.

Q: How might this be ironic when compared to their original accusations and claims?

A: Originally they had claimed, “for all the congregation is holy, every one of them” (v.3), and yet this warning to separate and not touch anything of theirs indicates that God’s sees them as the completely opposite of “holy”, as actually profane and unclean, contaminating everything with which they come into contact.

Q: For whom did “an entirely new thing” take place?

A: The original inner circle of instigators with whom the rebellion originated and those which were irreparably contaminated by them.

Q: Who was subsequently punished and how?

A: The 250 leaders who influenced the congregation at large were destroyed in a manner previously seen by God in what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Q: What is common to both of these judgments?

A: Fire, whether first on earth or subsequently in hell. They will both end up the same.

Q: What was particularly wrong with what they were doing as compared to their Levite counterparts?

A: These men were not supposed to be handling censers or incense at all, something specifically assigned to the priests and Levites. Their rebellion which began against the human authority of Moses escalated to rebellion against God.

Q: How is this story related in the New Testament?

A: Jude draws a parallel between “the rebellion of Korah” and false teachers in the Body of Christ.

consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering the incense.

³⁶Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ³⁷“Say to Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, that he shall take up the censers out of the midst of the blaze, for they are holy; and you scatter the burning coals abroad. ³⁸As for the censers of these men who have sinned at the cost of their lives, let them be made into hammered sheets for a plating of the altar, since they did present them before the LORD and they are holy; and they shall be for a sign to the sons of Israel.”

³⁹So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers which the men who were burned had offered, and they hammered them out as a plating for the altar, ⁴⁰as a reminder to the sons of Israel that no layman who is not of the descendants of Aaron should come near to burn incense before the LORD; so that he will not become like Korah and his company—just as the LORD had spoken to him through Moses.

⁴¹But on the next day all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, “You are the ones who have caused the death of the LORD’S people.” ⁴²It came about, however, when the congregation had assembled against Moses and Aaron, that they turned toward the tent of meeting, and behold, the cloud covered it and the glory of the LORD appeared.

⁴³Then Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, ⁴⁴and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ⁴⁵“Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them instantly.” Then they fell on their faces.

⁴⁶Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer and put in it fire from the altar,

But these men revile the things which they do not understand; and the things which they know by instinct, like unreasoning animals, by these things they are destroyed. Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever. — Jude 10–13

Application: *The consequences for the failure of spiritual leaders are also distinctly higher.*

[Read v.36-40]

Q: How could the censers used by the rebellious still be considered by God to be holy?

A: They were used by God, but not for the purposes the rebels intended.

Point: *In the beginning of Revelation we see censers in concert with the prayers of the saints, but then in Revelation 8:5 we see it in turn used by God to bring judgment upon the earth with the advent of the seven trumpets.*

Q: What appears to be the greater meaning of their rejection of Aaron?

A: Their rebellion against Aaron as High Priest was a rejection of the work of God on the altar. Their sin would be hammered into it as a reminder as part of the altar itself.

Q: What is the first way God affirmed Aaron’s authority?

A: By using the censers—which represented the prayers and service of the priesthood, as a public display of same.

Application: *The things and signs of God always work to the benefit of those with a heart inclined toward Him, and to the judgment and detriment of those hardened of heart.*

[Read v.41-50]

Q: How is this accusation similar to that previously made?

A: Previously blame for Israel’s failure to obtain the Promised Land was laid upon Moses and Aaron, now the failure of Korah and his fellow rebels was assigned to them.

Q: How does Moses’ and Aaron’s reaction indicate the quality of their own spiritual condition?

A: Their first reaction is to fall on their faces—that is, to humble themselves before God, rather than elevate themselves before men.

Q: How is God’s initial reaction similar to what took place the day before?

A: He commands Moses and Aaron to separate themselves from the entire congregation, “that I may consume them instantly”. (v.45)

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and lay incense on it; then bring it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone forth from the LORD, the plague has begun!”

⁴⁷Then Aaron took it as Moses had spoken, and ran into the midst of the assembly, for behold, the plague had begun among the people. So he put on the incense and made atonement for the people. ⁴⁸He took his stand between the dead and the living, so that the plague was checked. ⁴⁹But those who died by the plague were 14,700, besides those who died on account of Korah. ⁵⁰Then Aaron returned to Moses at the doorway of the tent of meeting, for the plague had been checked.

^{17:1}Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Speak to the sons of Israel, and get from them a rod for each father’s household: twelve rods, from all their leaders according to their fathers’ households. You shall write each name on his rod, ³and write Aaron’s name on the rod of Levi; for there is one rod for the head of each of their fathers’ households. ⁴You shall then deposit them in the tent of meeting in front of the testimony, where I meet with you. ⁵It will come about that the rod of the man whom I choose will sprout. Thus I will lessen from upon Myself the grumbings of the sons of Israel, who are grumbling against you.”

⁶Moses therefore spoke to the sons of Israel, and all their leaders gave him a rod apiece, for each leader according to their fathers’ households, twelve rods, with the rod of Aaron among their rods. ⁷So Moses deposited the rods before the LORD in the tent of the testimony.

⁸Now on the next day Moses went into the tent of the testimony; and behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds. ⁹Moses then brought out all the rods from the presence of the LORD to all the sons of Israel; and they looked, and each man took his rod. ¹⁰But the LORD said to Moses, “Put back the rod of Aaron before the testimony to be kept as a sign against the rebels, that you may put an end to their grumbings against Me, so that they will not die.” ¹¹Thus

Q: What might be the irony found in this specific action of intercession?

A: Whereas the 250 with their censers were not just ineffective but suffered the judgment of God, Aaron with his single censer in combination with the altar mitigated God’s judgment.

Q: What is Aaron doing here? How does this invoke a New Testament parallel?

A: Aaron illustrates the work of Christ, who left the place of safety to take up a stance between the living and the dead in order to rescue sinners from death.

Q: What is the second way God affirms Aaron’s authority?

A: By responding to Aaron’s intercession on behalf of the people.

Application: One man’s intervention in compliance with God’s Word and ways accomplishes what hundreds out of compliance cannot.

[Read 17:1-13]

Q: What is a rod?

A: It is a stick, a dead piece of wood.

Q: So what is significant about what happened to Aaron’s rod?

A: It not only sprouted, but produced fruit! It came to life.

Point: Each of the dead rods were given back to their respective leaders, but Aaron’s “rod of life” was placed permanently on display in the Tabernacle.

Q: What did the people of that time see as the meaning of their respective rods compared to Aaron’s?

A: They saw it as a greater spiritual representation that they would die if they approached the Tabernacle in the same manner as Aaron and his descendants. They saw their own death in the deadness of their respective rods, and the life coming through the priesthood represented by Aaron’s rod.

Q: What is the greater meaning we might see in Aaron’s rod?

A: A representation of the resurrection of Christ, whom God has declared as the only High Priest He accepts.

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. — Hebrews 10:19–25

Q: What is the third way God affirmed Aaron’s authority?

A: By Aaron’s rod.

Moses did; just as the LORD had commanded him, so he did.

¹²Then the sons of Israel spoke to Moses, saying, "Behold, we perish, we are dying, we are all dying!" ¹³Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the LORD, must die. Are we to perish completely?"

²⁸"Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

Application: *Spiritual leaders are always seeking to work for the benefit of bestowing life rather than being instruments of death.*

Overall Application **[Read Acts 20:28-31]**

Q: What are the general similarities between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Body of Christ?

A: Both congregations may be beloved by God as a whole, but God has selected some to specific offices of ministry and distributed supporting gifts and responsibilities.

Q: Is someone allowed to "covet" another person's position or office?

A: In 1 Corinthians 14:1, Paul stipulates, "Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts".

Q: How then is a position of leadership to be pursued in the Church?

A: Each one must prove themselves worthy by their respective character and conduct.

It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach.

Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.

Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. — 1 Timothy 3:1–13

Epilogue

Q: How do we know that not every member of Korah's family was not destroyed?

The sons of Korah, however, did not die. — Numbers 26:11

Q: How is this possible?

A: When the people were told to separate from Korah and his associates, it would appear that some of his own family, seeing the truth for themselves, separated and were saved.

Q: What lasting legacy would the sons of Korah provide which continues even to this day?

A: There are Psalms which are annotated "A Psalm of the sons of Korah": 84, 85, 87 and 88.

Application: *Those who separated themselves and were content to serve the Lord in the Tabernacle and later the Temple would write:*

*For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand outside.
I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God
Than dwell in the tents of wickedness. — Psalm 84:10*