

Numbers 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 16. When Moses heard it, he fell on his face, 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. Do this, take censers, Korah and all his company, 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. And Moses said to Korah, Hear now, you sons of Levi, 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, 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? Therefore it is against the Lord that you and all your company have gathered together. What is errand that you grumble against him?

And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and they said, We will not come up. 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? 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. 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. And Moses said to Korah, Be present, you and all your company before the Lord, you and they, and Aaron tomorrow. 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, two hundred and fifty censers. You also and Aaron each his censer. 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. 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. And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment. 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?

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Say to the congregation, Get away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Then Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. 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. 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. 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.

[3 : 51] 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. 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. And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart, 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. 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. And all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, Lest the earth swallow us up. And fire came out from the Lord, and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Tell Eliezer 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. 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 assigned to the people of Israel. So Eliezer the priest took the bronze censers which those who were burned had offered, and they were hammered out as a covering for the altar, 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. 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. 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. And Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Get away from the midst of this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment. And they fell on their faces. 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.

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.

And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped. Now those who died in the plague were fourteen thousand seven hundred, besides those who died in the affair of Korah.

And Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance of the tent of meeting, when the plague was stopped. Numbers chapter 16 relates the rebellion of Korah. Korah is from the tribe of Levi, Dathan and Abiram and Arna from Reuben. Korah's rebellion starts with the claim that Moses and Aaron are wrongfully exalting themselves over the people, that all of the people are equally holy to the Lord.

[7 : 09] Note the way that this helps us to understand further the positioning of the law concerning the tassels, which does not only look back to the story of the spies, but also looks forward to the story of Korah. Numbers chapter 15 verses 37 to 41.

The Lord said to Moses, Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner.

And it shall be a tassel for you to look at, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God.

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord your God. Now at first blush, Korah and his companions seem to be taking the meaning of this, and running with it.

All of the people are holy. You shall be holy to the Lord your God. They're taking that statement with the utmost seriousness and making a religious argument on its basis. They also sound a bit like democratic egalitarians of a sort.

[8 : 17] Surely we should all be on the same level. God views all people the same way. The idea that Moses and Aaron are set apart above the people just seems wrong. Now Korah is from a family that we already know some things about, and these things are important for reading his story in chapter 16.

In Numbers chapter 4 verses 1 to 15, When the camp is to set out, Aaron and his sons shall go in and take down the veil of the screen, and cover the ark of the testimony with it.

Then they shall put on it a covering of goatskin, and spread on top of that a cloth of all blue, and shall put in its poles. And over the table of the bread of the presence they shall spread a cloth of blue, and put on it the plates, the dishes for incense, the bowls, and the flagons for the drink offering.

The regular showbread shall also be on it. Then they shall spread over them a cloth of scarlet, and cover the same with a covering of goatskin, and shall put in its poles. And then towards the end of that section, So here we learn that Korah's family carried around the tabernacle when it travelled.

They had a proximity to the most holy things of all, but were also restricted from them. They got as near as you could get without touching. In such a position, recognising gradations and cleanness and holiness could not be more important.

[10 : 16] Yet Korah, who gets so close, but never gets to touch, might be feeling the injustice and seeming arbitrariness of it all. It is precisely the boundaries that we see in chapter 4 of Numbers that keep him, Korah, out, while allowing Moses and Aaron in, and that just strikes him as unjust.

You can see the same thing in Sinai. Some people get to go up Sinai. Only Moses could go to the top, but the general people of Israel could not even touch the mountain. Such boundaries of holiness allowed some people greater access to God than others.

This suggests that Korah's rebellion is not so much driven by a principled egalitarianism, as it is by envy and resentment at those who have more access.

Like many other supposed egalitarian rebellions, it is driven not by a general concern for the well-being of the people, but by the selfish resentment of someone who refuses to be in second place any longer.

This is the rebellion of someone who is bitter that he gets so close, but can never touch. You should pay attention to Korah's claim. For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them.

[11 : 28] Go back to Exodus chapter 29 verses 44 to 46 we read, Korah is essentially claiming that the tabernacle that his family has to serve is meaningless.

The people are the real tabernacle. And to all the restrictions placed upon him and his family in Numbers chapter 4 are really about Moses and Aaron wanting supremacy over the people.

They're not really about God at all. God is dwelling in his people. And for Moses and Aaron to claim a special status is to go against the Lord. Moses' response recognises the real issue.

This isn't about the people. Korah has been greatly exalted by God. But that isn't enough for him. He wants more. He wants the priesthood too. Moses makes clear that Korah's beef is with the Lord, not with Aaron.

The Lord exalted Aaron, not for Aaron's personal sake. What is Aaron? But for the sake of the entire people. Aaron is but a minister of the Lord to the people.

[12 : 49] It's not Aaron himself who's being privileged. It's the people that are being blessed through the ministry of Aaron that God has given. Dathan and Abiram are summoned and they refuse to come up.

They accuse Moses and Aaron of having taken them from a land flowing with milk and honey rather than bringing them to them. They're reversing the logic of the Exodus. Moses and Aaron brought them from a land of milk and honey.

Egypt! Of course, this is completely backwards. Egypt was the place of death. And the promised land is the place that is flowing with milk and honey.

Yet in their anger and the rebellion, their imagination has completely distorted things. Manuel Shalev observes that the people had previously treated Moses and Aaron as sorts of demigods.

The false god of the golden calf was a replacement for Moses, not for the Lord. Moses was the demigod that the people could deal with and accuse and grumble against, while the Lord was the shadowy and fearsome deity behind him.

[13 : 53] But after the failure to enter into the land, Moses and Aaron are knocked down to the size of men in the eyes of Korah, Dathan and Abiram and the other men with them. Now they are being accused of raising themselves up unjustly over the people, without recognising that they are servants of the Lord.

They've never been demigods. They've never exalted themselves over others. They are just the humble and obedient servants of God. The vindication of Moses and Aaron against the rebels occurs in a way that demonstrates the ministry of Moses and Aaron as one that serves and protects the people.

And the rebels are brought forward. They have to bring their censers. The people are separated from Korah, Dathan and Abiram and they're swallowed up as a proof that Moses has been called by God, that he ministers at God's will, not as one who has set himself up.

The separation of the people from Korah, Dathan and Abiram is important. It's something that occurs as a result of Moses' intercession for the people. Moses is one who covers for the people, who protects the people.

Korah, Dathan and Abiram are swallowed up by the earth. Now it seems a very strange way for them to be judged. Why are they judged in this particular way?

[15 : 08] I think there's a clue if we look back at Numbers chapter 4 verses 17 to 20, which continues the instructions given for the family of the Kohathites. The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron saying, Let not the tribe of the clans of the Kohathites be destroyed from among the Levites, but deal thus with them, that they may live and not die when they come near to the most holy things.

Aaron and his son shall go in and appoint them each to his task and to his burden, but they shall not go in to look on the holy things even for a moment, lest they die.

There's the threat of death here. There's also something else. The final verse has some very striking wording, something that's captured better in other translations. For instance, Young's literal translation renders it, And they go not in to see when the holy thing is swallowed, that they have died.

The covering up of the tabernacle and its furniture then, in preparation for the Kohathites' task in moving it, is described as a swallowing up of the holy things.

And this helps us to think better about the judgment upon Korah and his companions in Numbers 16. They claim to be holy and are swallowed up, the same verb, by the ground.

[16 : 24] Fire then proceeds from the Lord and burns up the 250 men with their censers, much in the same way as Nadab and Abihu had died, when they sought to come near to the Lord on their own terms and transgress the boundaries of holiness.

The censers of the 250 men are then taken and beaten into something as a covering for the altar. In being consumed by the Lord's fire, they were claimed as holy.

This can also help us to understand the fate of Dathan, Byram, Korah and the 250 men. Holiness is a dangerous thing. Being in the very presence of God, a consuming fire, is a dangerous thing.

And the presumptuousness of Korah, seeing proximity to God, getting near to God, as a matter of personal status, puts them in the most terrible jeopardy. The people's response to this in some ways is to treat Moses and Aaron as demigods again.

They are the ones who have consumed the people, not the Lord. And the people assemble against Moses and Aaron, perhaps to kill them. God intervenes at this point and there's a great plague upon the people.

[17 : 32] And it's the ministry of Aaron taking his censer and going through the people that leads to them being saved and delivered from the plague. The censer is a symbol of true and faithful worship.

And the wicked are saved by the presence of the righteous. Notice that Moses doesn't do what God says here. The Lord tells them to get away from the people so that the people might be destroyed.

But Aaron goes into the midst of the people to stand with them, to protect them from the Lord's judgment. You can think back to the story of Abraham interceding for Sodom, perhaps.

The presence of a certain number of righteous among the wicked can deliver them. David Foreman suggests a curious possible connection to the story of Korah in the law of Deuteronomy chapter 14 verses 1 to 2.

That reads, He observes that the word for boldness here is related to the name of Korah.

[18 : 43] And the references to the Lord setting Israel apart as a holy and treasured possession relate to the central themes of the story of Korah. What might be meant by this? The response of mourning described is one of self-mutilation and of attacking one's head.

And something similar is going on in the story of Numbers chapter 16. Now Moses and Aaron aren't special merely for their own sakes.

The meekness of Moses was so important because Moses needed to recognise that it was not about him. Rather the prominence of the offices of Moses and Aaron were for the sake of the entire people, existing so that all would benefit from their service.

Moses was not possessive of his position. We see that in chapter 11 when Joshua says, should he rebuke Eldad and Medad because they're prophesying in the camp?

And Moses says, don't prevent them. Don't be jealous for my sake. He wants all the people to participate in the goodness of the Spirit of the Lord, to prophesy. And he's not possessive of his role of leadership over them.

[19 : 54] It's not about him. It's about the Lord. He's just a minister of the Lord. What Aaron and Miriam fail to recognise in chapter 12, and Korah fails to recognise in chapter 16, is that Moses, and the leadership of Israel more generally, is called to be one of service.

They're servants of the Lord. They have an exalted status, but not for their personal sake, for the sake of the people, that God might minister his grace and goodness to them. In the story of Numbers 16, we see Moses and Aaron both playing this part.

Moses intercedes for the people and saves them from destruction. And Aaron symbolically does the same thing, bringing the censer that represents prayer and worship into the heart of the people so that they might be delivered.

A question to consider. How does the story of the rebellion of Korah help us better to understand how to relate to those in authority over us, both in the church and in society more generally?

