

Reformation Fellowship Notes • April 7, 2019
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Handout #9
Numbers 16

I. Introduction

- A. No indication when the event described in this chapter occurred
 - 1. In chapter 14, the adult generation was condemned to die in the desert.
 - a) They should have been somewhat chastened.
 - b) This event could have been months later.
 - c) It could have been decades later.
- B. Change in the nature of the challenges to authority
 - 1. Previously the challenges were directed against Moses.
 - 2. Now there will be three challenges directed more toward Aaron.
- C. This is a sparse description of an event that was probably very complex.
 - 1. I will work through the text and reconstruct the incident.
 - 2. Then I will point out some clues that might help us create a much fuller picture.

II. Numbers 16:1-3

- A. Another insurrection
 - 1. Several such incidents are recorded in the texts.
 - a) It started in Egypt.
 - b) Most recently Miriam and Aaron (his own siblings)
- B. Coalition of Kohathites (Levites) and Reubenites
 - 1. Korah was the leader of the opposition from the Kohathites.
 - a) Most privileged subtribe of the Levites
 - 2. Dathan and Abiram and On from the tribe of Reuben.
 - a) On is not mentioned again.
 - b) The Kohathites and the tribe of Reuben would have camped next to each other.
 - 3. 250 leaders of the assembly join them in their complaints.
 - a) This is a serious rebellion with wide spread support.

“These men were not run-of-the-mill Israelites. The text piles up three appositives to show their preeminence: they were *leaders of the congregation*, they were *chosen from the assembly*, and they were *important men* (lit., ‘men of a name’).” (Ashley, p. 304)

- 4. This is being presented as one rebellion. but there appear to be two different interest groups.
 - a) We have seen this phenomenon before.
 - (1) Miriam and Aaron

- b) Members of coalition have different reasons for their opposition.
 - (1) Easiest way to unite people is in opposition.
- C. They rebelled against the authority of Moses and Aaron.
- D. The complaint of the rebels
 - 1. “You have gone far enough.”
 - a) A charge of overreach on the part of Moses and Aaron
 - 2. “All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is in their midst.”
 - a) They all enjoy a special status before God.
 - (1) This is taken individually rather than collectively.
 - b) They all have God in their presence.
 - c) They are all just as special to God as Moses.
 - d) It is possible that the command to wear *tsitsit* has contributed to this.
 - (1) “...in order that you may remember to do all My commandments and be holy to your God.” (Deut. 15:40)
 - 3. Korah is claiming that there needs to be more equality, but he really wants to rise above everyone else.
 - a) Since we are all equal, Moses and Aaron have no right to be over us.
 - b) So they should share power with the leaders of the rebellion.
 - c) This is a move that has been common since the French Revolution.

III. Numbers 16:4-7

- A. Moses falls down on his face.
 - 1. Moses and Aaron reacted this same way when the people refused to go into the Promised Land.
 - a) The response of a righteous man in the presence of blatant blasphemy
- B. Moses sets up a test.
 - 1. This test appears to be directed at Korah.
 - a) “And all his congregation”
 - (1) We will come back to this at the end.
 - 2. God will speak up on this issue.
 - a) All the phrases used are references to priests.
 - (1) God will show who is his.
 - (2) God will show who is really holy.
 - (3) God will show whom he will bring near to him.

“The expressions *who is his* (*’et-’ăšer-lô*) and *who is holy* (*w’et-haqqāḏôš*) certainly have to do with priestly functions here, as the following clause, *and he will bring that one near to himself* (*w’hiqrîb ’ēlāyw*), makes clear. The verb *hiqrîb*, ‘to bring near’, in this context means to admit into the immediate presence of God, something permitted only for Moses and the priests.” (Ashley, p. 307)

- b) God will make it clear who is to serve as priests before him.
- 3. Each of them is to take a censer and put incense and fire in them.

- a) In the presence of the Lord (at the Tabernacle)
 - b) God will choose the holy one.
 - c) They have all seen Aaron's two sons consumed by fire for burning incense with strange fire.
 - (1) So this is potentially high stakes.
4. "You have gone far enough."
- a) He turns this phrase on Korah.
 - (1) Korah is the one who has overreached.
 - b) Moses has no doubts about the outcome of the test.

IV. Numbers 16:8-11

- A. Moses directs his remarks more directly to Korah and the Levites.
- 1. Korah and the Levites have been designated by God for a special purpose.
 - a) To serve in the Tabernacle
 - b) To minister to the people
 - 2. God *has* brought the Levites near to him.
 - a) They are privileged to serve in the Tabernacle.
 - 3. But Korah still wants more.
 - a) He wants the priesthood.
 - b) He wants Aaron's position.
 - 4. Now you are gathered together against the Lord!
 - a) This is not a rebellion against Aaron; it is against God.
 - b) Why are you attacking Aaron?

V. Numbers 16:12-14

- A. Now Moses directs his remarks to Dathan and Abiram.
- 1. Moses tells Dathan and Abiram to come to him.
 - 2. They refuse flatly.
 - a) You brought us *out of* a land flowing with milk and honey.
 - (1) Turns what God did on its head
 - b) To have us die in the desert
 - c) And you lord it over us.
 - d) You haven't brought us to a good land.
 - e) Are you just going to pull the wool over our eyes?
 - (1) This suggests that they think Moses is a con artist.
 - 3. Dathan and Abiram are essentially claiming that under Moses in the desert they are enslaved, rather than in Egypt.

VI. Numbers 16:15-19

- A. Moses became angry.
- 1. He asked God to not regard their offering.

- a) Is this a general term for an offering?
 - (1) Moses is saying don't respond to their appeals to God.
- b) Does this word have its usual meaning of meal offering?
 - (1) A meal offering is presented with an admission of guilt.
 - (2) Moses is saying don't accept their offerings that require an admission of guilt because they are unrepentant.
- 2. Moses protests that he has not harmed anyone and he has not stolen anything from them.
 - a) In response to accusation that Moses is lording it over the Israelites
- B. Moses commanded that Korah, and his company be present at the Tabernacle.
 - a) "Your congregation"

"One must carefully differentiate the two uses of the word *congregation* (*'ēdā*) in this chapter. When the group of two hundred fifty under the leadership of Korah is meant, it is called *his* or *your* (i.e. Korah's) *whole congregation* (vv. 5–6, 11, 16), but where it indicates the whole of the sacred congregation of Israel, the expression *the whole* (or *this whole*) *congregation* (vv. 2–3, 9, 19, 21, 24, 26, 33). It was the latter group that Korah assembled against Moses and Aaron. (Ashley, p. 313)

- b) The 250 leaders
- 2. Bring censer and firepan.
- C. They show up with censers in hand.
 - 1. They must have convinced themselves of the rightness of their cause.
- D. The glory of God appeared to them.

VII. Numbers 16:20-24

- A. God tells Moses and Aaron to step back.
 - 1. God is going to judge the wicked.
 - 2. They fall on your faces.
 - a) This is the third time they do this.
 - 3. They plead that God not judge the entire congregation because of one (Korah).
 - 4. In indication of a concession, God told Moses to have the congregation step back.
 - a) They must step back from the tents of Korah, Dathan,, and Abiram.

VIII. Numbers 16:25-30

- A. Moses went with his elders to the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.
 - 1. These elders must be loyal to Moses.
 - 2. Moses tells everyone to stay back from those tents.
 - 3. Don't touch the tents.

- a) They are unclean.
- 4. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram stood by their tents with their families.
- B. Moses announces what God's judgment will be.
 - 1. God will act to show that God is on Moses' side.
 - a) "By this you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these deeds."
 - (1) This must have been called into question.
 - b) "for this is not my doing"
 - (1) Moses has been acting at God's behest.
 - (2) What is about to happen is not Moses' action either.
 - 2. If these men die a natural death, God has not sent Moses.
 - 3. If these men are swallowed up by the earth, they have spurned the Lord.
 - a) An entirely new thing (unique?)
 - b) Swallowed alive
- C. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram did not beg forgiveness or run.
 - 1. They are either defiant, self-deceived, or both.

IX. Numbers 16:31-35

- A. The earth opened up and swallowed the men, their families, and their possessions.
 - 1. They cried out.
 - 2. They were buried alive.
 - 3. Everyone else ran in fear.
 - 4. Fire came forth from the Tabernacle and burned up the 250.
 - a) This is what happened to Aaron's sons when they offered strange fire.

X. Numbers 16:36-40

- A. Eleazar was instructed by God through Moses to pick up the censers of those burned up.
 - 1. I don't know why Eleazar was tasked with this.
 - 2. The censers are holy
 - a) Because they were presented to the Lord.
 - 3. Scatter the coals
 - 4. Hammer out the bronze into plating to cover the altar.
 - a) Which altar?
 - (1) Altar of incense (which was gold)
 - b) This is a reminder that no layman who is not of the descendants of Aaron should come to burn incense before the Lord.

XI. Numbers 16:41-50

- A. There was more rebellion that occurred the next day.
 - 1. So the events of chapter 16 took place over 4 days.
 - 2. All the congregation of the sons of Israel
- B. The Israelites accuse Moses and Aaron of causing the death of the rebels.
 - 1. But they were distracted by the glory of God descending on the Tabernacle.
 - 2. Moses and Aaron go to the Tabernacle.
 - 3. God told them to step back; he wanted to destroy the Israelites.
 - a) Like before
- C. Moses and Aaron fell on their faces.
 - 1. This is the fourth time they did this.
- D. Moses instructed Aaron to get his censer, put fire from the altar in it, and burn incense in it.
 - 1. Make atonement for the people
 - a) People had already started to die from the plague.
 - 2. Aaron took his censer and stood between the living and the dead.
 - a) The plague stopped.
 - b) An additional 14,700 had died.
 - 3. Aaron returned to the Tabernacle and stood with Moses.
 - a) Aaron's status as the one chosen by God to serve as priest was affirmed.

XII. Conclusion

- A. What was the nature of the complaint of Korah and his followers against Moses and Aaron?
 - 1. They think Moses has laid claim to too much power.
 - a) Given what we have read in Exodus and Numbers, this makes no sense.
 - (1) Moses has only the power that God has given him.
 - b) But what if we look at these events just through the eyes of the Israelites?
 - (1) This is what I will try to do.
 - 2. Could they have had a different interpretation of events?
 - a) Korah appears to be a Yawist.
 - (1) In his complaint, he uses the name Yaweh twice.
 - (2) The test that is set up is to determine who will be Yaweh's priest.
 - b) All the Israelites have seen God's activity on their behalf.
 - (1) They saw the works of God.
 - (a) Parting of the Red Sea
 - (b) Manna
 - (c) Heard God speak at Sinai
 - (d) Cloud and pillar of fire
 - (e) They are all YHWH-ists.

- (2) But Moses has been the mediator.
 - (a) Moses has interacted directly with God.
 - (b) Moses transmitted God's statements to the people.
- (3) What if Moses has not done that accurately and fairly?
 - (a) What if Moses has filtered God's messages to his benefit?
 - (b) What if Moses has not advocated for us like he should?
- (4) We were never all that bad, and if Moses had advocated for us as he should have, we would have been fine.
- (5) This reinterpretation becomes commonplace in the OT.
 - (a) The prophets' words are rejected.
 - (b) False prophets are preferred.
- c) Had they had better leadership things would have been better.
 - (1) Korah, Dathan, and Abiram may have claimed to be better leaders.
 - (a) Korah should have the power of the priesthood.
 - (b) Dathan and Abiram should have political power.
 - (2) The rabbis argue that they claimed traditional leadership would have been better.
 - (a) Korah is a descendant of Izhar, the second oldest of Kohath.
 - (i) The leader of the Kohathites was a descendant of Uzziel, the fourth son of Kohath.
 - (ii) According to the rabbis, Korah was bitter because he was skipped over.
 - (b) Dathan and Abiram are from the tribe of Reuben.
 - (i) Reuben was the first born of Jacob.
- d) They rebels had a large following.
 - (1) They may have established a rival congregation.

“The term *‘ēdā* commonly describes the whole cultic community of Israel, and its use here to describe the group of Korah's followers is hardly accidental. This was an alternate cultic community based on different regulations, and was a parody of the real community of Yahweh headed by Moses and Aaron.” (Ashley, p. 306)

- 3. Overwhelming denial of their own culpability
 - a) This rebellion comes just two chapters after the Israelites refuse to go in to take the land and are told that they will die in the wilderness.
 - (1) We don't know how much time has passed.
 - (2) They may have blamed Moses for God's punishment.
 - (3) In any case, they have not faced into their wickedness.
 - b) A similar denial occurs in this chapter.
 - (1) After the earth swallows the rebels, they blame Moses.
 - (2) God has to intervene and punish them.
- 4. The Israelites have not changed since Moses fled Egypt.
 - a) One of the Israelite slaves said, “Who made you a prince or a judge over us?”