

People on the Move: The Book of Numbers

Power Struggle

Lesson #7 for November 14, 2009

Scriptures: Genesis 17:10-17; Numbers 16; 17; 26:9,11; Deuteronomy 11:6; Joshua 4:3-9; Matthew 26:13; Luke 22:19.

1. This lesson covers the power struggle between Moses and Aaron—who were doing their best to direct the people under God’s guidance—and Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and On who challenged their leadership. It also covers the consequences of that rebellion and what God did to deal with it. This is the most serious rebellion that occurred in those 40 years.
2. Let us sympathize for a moment with the rebels. How would you feel if you knew every possibility of reversing God’s verdict was gone? They had just been sentenced to spend the rest of their lives wandering in the desert eating a very simple diet and eventually dying right there in the desert, never having seen the land of promise, the land flowing with milk and honey. Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and On were apparently among the 70 leaders chosen earlier by Moses to help administer the children of Israel. Korah was a cousin of Moses.
3. On the other hand, how much evidence did those rebels have that God was their leader and not Moses and Aaron? Who brought the plagues on Egypt? Who split the Red Sea? Who brought the manna and water every day? Who had spoken to them from the top of Mount Sinai? Who was embodied in the cloud and the pillar of fire? Did they really believe that Moses and Aaron had managed to do those things on their own? They may have felt desperate, but who could they blame?
4. Korah, the leading spirit in this movement, was a Levite, of the family of Kohath, and a cousin of Moses; he was a man of ability and influence. Though appointed to the service of the tabernacle, he had become dissatisfied with his position and aspired to the dignity of the priesthood. The bestowal upon Aaron and his house of the priestly office, which had formerly devolved upon the first-born son of every family, had given rise to jealousy and dissatisfaction, and for some time Korah had been secretly opposing the authority of Moses and Aaron, though he had not ventured upon any open act of rebellion. He finally conceived the bold design of overthrowing both the civil and the religious authority. He did not fail to find sympathizers. Close to the tents of Korah and the Kohathites, on the south side of the tabernacle, was the encampment of the tribe of Reuben, the tents of Dathan and Abiram, two princes of this tribe, being near that of Korah. These princes readily joined in his ambitious schemes. Being descendants from the eldest son of Jacob, they claimed that the civil authority belonged to them, and they determined to divide with Korah the honors of the priesthood.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 395.2
5. The following charges were made against Moses and Aaron by Korah and his group: 1) You (Moses) have gone too far; 2) All the members of the community belong to the Lord; (True? Or not true?); 3) The Lord is with all of us; (True? Or not true?); and 4) Why do you set yourself above the Lord’s community? How can we explain those charges? Have such charges ever been made at other times?
6. They were of the number who went up with Moses into the mount and beheld the divine glory. But since that time a change had come. A temptation, slight at first, had been harbored, and had strengthened as it was encouraged, until their minds were controlled by Satan, and they ventured upon their work of disaffection. Professing great interest in the prosperity of the people, [This was Satan’s claim in heaven!] they first whispered their discontent to one another and then to leading men of Israel. Their insinuations were so readily [397] received that they ventured still further, and

at last they really believed themselves to be actuated by zeal for God.—Ellen

G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 396.4-397.

7. Read Numbers 16:12-14. Notice that Dathan and Abiram first refused to come as Moses directed, and they added their own list of accusations: 1) You (Moses) have brought us out of the fertile land of Egypt to kill us here in the wilderness; 2) Do you also have to lord it over us? 3) You certainly have not brought us into a fertile land or given us fields and vineyards as our possession; and 4) Now you are trying to deceive us. We will not come! Isn't that the way many revolutions have started?
8. Here we see Dathan and Abiram likening Egypt to the land of promise. How had they come to such a conclusion? Was it that they could not get beyond the idea that they were going to die in that desert? Egypt was a land of slavery!
9. If you had been one of the children of Israel standing there watching the conflict between Moses and Aaron versus Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, with which side would you have sympathized?
10. What happened to On? (Numbers 16:1) Did he realize the mistakes they were making and repent? We do not hear anything further about him.
11. Read Numbers 16:15-35. Notice that Korah gathered the people around him! Did he really think that he was going to be successful in his bid for authority? Did Moses make up that whole scenario? Or, did God tell him that the earth would open up? How many people heard God speak? (Numbers 16:23) If you heard those words from God, wouldn't you run? How many times had God threatened to destroy all the Israelites? (Exodus 32:9,10; Numbers 11:1; Numbers 14:12; 16:21,45; compare Deuteronomy 9:13; Psalms 106:23) Or, did only Moses and Aaron hear God's voice? Did Moses and Aaron have any ability to make the earth "open up" and "swallow" those individuals? Some have tried to explain that as just an earthquake. But how did it happen to come at exactly the right moment? And why did it swallow up only the rebellious? Did Moses and Aaron have any ability to send fire from heaven to burn up the rest of the 250? Did they have any ability to send the plague to destroy the other 14,700?
12. You would think those three miracles would settle forever the issue about who was on God's side? Why do you think God chose that dramatic method for destroying Korah, Dathan, and Abiram?
13. Did all of their children and families die in that rebellion? See Numbers 26:9-11. Korah's family was not destroyed, apparently because they were not rebels! See Psalms 42-49, 84-88. Those songs (psalms) were apparently composed by the descendants of Korah. What does that teach us about God's judgments? Korah's son were evidently not a part of the rebellion, and they were preserved. Doesn't this demonstrate that each person will be treated fairly based on his own behavior? On the other hand, the fact that Dathan's and Abiram's families were standing beside them suggests that they were rebels also.
14. Notice that Korah was the one who asked his followers to come to the entrance of the tent to face Moses and Aaron. Did he really believe that he was doing God's will? (Numbers 16:19)
15. Satan has been in rebellion against God since before this world was created. His original claims included one that suggested that he could run a better government than God's. Incredible as it may seem, although he has been proven wrong in every one of his accusations, Satan believes that at the end of time, he will be able to organize his followers to invade and conquer the new Jerusalem! (GC 664) What does that teach us about our ability—no matter how intelligent we may be—to deceive ourselves? Try to image what you would have done and how you would feel if you had been there.
16. We have all heard about "ladder climbing." So many people in our world today are doing everything they can to step on and over their competitors to get that corner office or that new position which will give them more authority and power and presumably a better paycheck. How does that kind of ladder climbing fit with your understanding of God's plan and His government?

17. Why do you think the name of Korah is not mentioned in Psalms 106:16-18 when it discusses his rebellion? Was the writer of that psalm trying to be kind to Korah's descendants?
18. Despite the fact that Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and most of their descendants had been totally destroyed, the rebellion was not at an end. So, God asked Eleazar, Aaron's son, to collect the fire pans from the 250 princes that had been burned up. From those fire pans he constructed a bronze plate which was used to cover the altar of burnt offering in the courtyard of the tabernacle. Thus, every time any of the children of Israel went to offer a sacrifice, they would be reminded of God's answer to that rebellion.
19. Think of some of the other reminders that God has established down through the centuries to teach us important lessons. The Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11), the gold in the tabernacle which came from conquering the Midianites as a reminder of God's protection (Numbers 31:54), the story of Mary pouring oil over the feet and head of Jesus at Simon's feast (Matthew 26:6-13), and the Lord's Supper with its symbols (Luke 22:19). As human beings living in a very concrete world, do we need those concrete reminders? Why do we need reminders? Or do we?
20. God set up two sequential tests to try to demonstrate who was in charge. After the 250 leaders had been consumed by fire and their censors had been gathered to be used in the temple services, was the rebellion over?
21. Read Numbers 16:41-50. Imagine complaining that Moses and Aaron had been the ones who had destroyed the rebels the day before! What happened next? Who were those 14,700 people who died? Were they sympathizers of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram? Or was that a general destruction of people because of God's "anger"? After watching the earth open up and fire descend from heaven and burn up the princes, how could those people claim that Moses and Aaron were the ones who caused the death of God's people? Were those people "picketing" Moses and Aaron? How much evidence should have been needed to convince someone that God was the One active?
22. Despite that terrible expansion of the rebellion, what did Moses instruct Aaron to do? How do you understand that action by Aaron? Was that a race between Aaron and God's destroying angel? Is there any known physical "plague" that can kill 14,700 people so quickly? What does it mean to "stand between" the living and the dead? (Numbers 16:48) Did the people themselves make any attempt to get away from the plague that was killing people? Was there some kind of line drawn "in the sand" calling for Korah's sympathizers to be on one side while the sympathizers of Moses and Aaron were on the other?
23. Apparently, there were still questions in the minds of the people about who should be priests. So, God sent another test. Twelve rods were brought to the temple. Apparently those rods—one from the leader of each tribe of Israel—were taken into the Most Holy Place and placed before the ark of the covenant. The next morning it was discovered that Aaron's rod had not only budded, but had blossomed, and had produced ripe almonds. (Numbers 17:8) Once again, it should have been very clear what God's choice was and that Moses and Aaron had nothing to do with that miracle.
24. Do we ever see challenges to God's leadership in our day? How should we respond if we see a church leader sinning or misrepresenting God before His people? Didn't Jesus give us sufficiently clear instructions about how to deal with sinners? (Matthew 18:15-19) Have you ever dared to follow those instructions?
25. Paul also had some very clear instructions given through precept and example about how to deal with leadership in the church and in the world. (Acts 23:1-5; Romans 13:1-7) When challenged by the Sanhedrin, Peter and John made it very clear whose side they were on. (Acts 5:27-29) What should we learn about dealing with church leadership from all this?
26. Even in the Old Testament, there were repeated examples of challenges to God's leadership. Consider the priests of Baal that met Elijah on Mount Carmel. (1 Kings 18) What about Nathan with

David? (2 Samuel 12) What about Jeremiah? (Jeremiah 20:1-6; 28)

27. **I question whether genuine rebellion is ever curable.** . . . Call rebellion by its right name, and apostasy by its right name, and then consider that the experience of the ancient people of God with all its objectionable features was faithfully chronicled to pass into history. . .

Rebellion and apostasy are in the very air we breathe. We shall be affected by it unless we by faith hang our helpless souls upon Christ. If men are so easily misled, how will they stand when Satan shall personate Christ, and work miracles? Who will be unmoved by his misrepresentations? Professing to be Christ when it is only Satan assuming the person of Christ, and apparently working the works of Christ? What will hold God's people from giving their allegiance to false Christs? "Go not ye after them." [see Jeremiah 23:21]—Ellen G. White comments, *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 1114.

If people can be led to follow men like Korah, Dathan, and Abiram in the face of all the evidence of God's leadership, how difficult will it be for Satan to get the whole world to follow him at the end? (Revelation 13:3,4,7,8)

28. In this lesson we have considered numerous occasions when God's leadership was challenged. But the most serious challenge to God's leadership will happen at the very end of time. Satan impersonating Christ will convince almost the entire world to follow him. (Revelation 13:1-8) What will we have to do to stand firm and faithful at that time? Are we prepared for such a confrontation? Satan will put on a show the likes of which has never been seen in human history. Those who are impressed by show will be "swept off their feet." Only those who have faithfully studied the Scriptures and are firmly grounded in the truth will be able to withstand that deception. (GC 593.2) Only those who are so settled into the truth that they cannot be moved will survive. (4BC 1161 (1902); LDE 219.4)
29. So, what must be settled before the end can come? The great controversy is not over who has the most power! When Satan considers God's power, he trembles with fear. (James 2:19) The question is: Who is telling us the truth?

© 2009, Kenneth Hart, MD, MA, MPH. Permission is hereby granted for any noncommercial use of these materials. Free distribution is encouraged. It is our goal to see them spread as widely and freely as possible. If you would like to use them for your class or even make copies of portions of them, feel free to do so. We always enjoy hearing about how you might be using the materials and we might even want to share good ideas with others, so let us know. Info@theox.org

Last Modified: October 5, 2009

Z:\My Documents\WP\SSTG-Hart\Numbers\SS-7-Numbers-2009_11_14-2009_09_19-Fin+.wpd