

WHERE WAS KORAH KILLED AND WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE? A BRIEF STRUCTURAL-THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF NUMBERS 16:1–40

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ABSTRACT

Careful readers often become confused when trying to follow the graphic account of Korah's rebellion against Moses recorded in Numbers 16:1–40. Bible commentators do not help very much because either they avoid discussing the apparent narrative inconsistencies, or they are divided on how to construe the Hebrew text. Furthermore, Korah is not the only rebel involved, and his dramatic downfall is just one of two uprisings that are reported, which subsequently spark an even greater insurrection that involves all the people (16:41–50). One also wonders: is this the main message of the chapter — namely, that the Lord will punish, most severely, all those who rise with impunity against his authority and the leaders whom he has chosen as well as the religious rules that he has instituted? This study reflects upon certain aspects of the elaborate structural organisation that characterises the book of Numbers as a whole in order to suggest a way of explaining the intricate arrangement that we find in the text of Chapter 16, one which serves to highlight important themes that constitute its main paraenetic message for the people of God. After an overview of some pertinent background information that provides a frame of reference for understanding this pivotal chapter, the pericope covering verses 1–40 is outlined and explained in sections, including several important intertextual references to Korah. Finally, the significance of this investigation for interpreting as well as formatting the biblical text is summarised and illustrated.

THE MACROSTRUCTURE OF NUMBERS

Even in the narrative-framed texts of Numbers, the LORD's overriding concern is for his people Israel to remain holy to him and his covenant requirements, including the avoidance of any type of moral and ritual contamination. This broad thematic principle of "holiness" (religious purity) is more important in the overall organization of the book than the strict chronological order of events. These events serve as vivid object lessons regarding the results of obedience — or more often, disobedience — to God. Ritual purity and defilement along with their relational consequences (the "disorientation" of individuals or the entire people in relation to the LORD) are key

concepts that are repeated throughout the book, but especially in its central portion (see below).

Numbers can be outlined rather simply according to a general geographical pattern as follows (after Ashley 1993:8):¹ After an initial period of rest in the desert region of Sinai following the exodus from Egypt (I: 1:1–10:10), the second part records the gradual movement of the people of Israel from Sinai northwards towards the land of Canaan, noting the major events that occurred along the way (II: 10:11–21:35). The book concludes with another period of non-movement, as the people are encamped on “the plains of Moab, along the Jordan River, across from Jericho” in anticipation of their eventual entrance into this land of divine promise (III: 22:1–36:13). This broad threefold framework based on movement and location is roughly paralleled thematically, as suggested above, by a psycho-spiritual dimension with regard to the prevailing religious orientation of the people of Israel in relation to Yahweh: Orientation—Disorientation—Reorientation (Brueggemann 1995:24). It is helpful then to locate Korah’s story (Num 16) within this proposed organisation of the book of Numbers as a whole:

I. **Orientation:** Regulations in the Desert of Sinai (1:1–10:10)

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| A. Organisation | 1:1–4:49 |
| 1. Census of the Israelites: the old generation | 1:1–54 |
| 2. Encampment of the Israelite tribes | 2:1–34 |
| 3. Census of the Levites and their tasks | 3:1–4:49 |
| B. Purity | 5:1–6:27 |
| 1. Unclean people; unfaithful wives | 5:1–31 |
| 2. Nazirites | 6:1–21 |
| 3. The priestly blessing | 6:22–27 |
| C. Rituals and the system of worship | 7:1–10:10 |
| 1. Offerings for dedicating the altar | 7:1–89 |

¹ For a summary of several other major proposals, see Forsling (2013:15–17) and Cole (2000:36–36). Cole offers a detailed “structural analysis” based on thematic and literary criteria (Cole 2000:40–42).

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| 2. The lamps | 8:1–4 |
| 3. Dedicating the Levites | 8:5–26 |
| 4. Passover | 9:1–14 |
| 5. The cloud above the Tent of Meeting | 9:15–23 |
| 6. The trumpets | 10:1–10 |
| II. Disorientation: Moving from the Desert of Sinai to the Land of Moab (10:11–21:35) | |
| A. From the Sinai to the wilderness of Paran | 10:11–12:16 |
| 1. The Israelites break camp | 10:11–36 |
| 2. The people complain | 11:1–35 |
| 3. Miriam and Aaron contest Moses' authority | 12:1–16 |
| B. Near the Land of Canaan | 13:1–20:13 |
| 1. Spies explore the land of Canaan and report | 13:1–33 |
| 2. The people rebel and provoke the Lord's judgment | 14:1–45 |
| 3. Laws about sacrifices and offerings | 15:1–29 |
| 4. Deliberate sin – a man breaks the Sabbath | 15:30–36 |
| 5. Tassels as reminders | 15:37–41 |
| 6. Korah and others contest Moses' and Aaron's authority | 16:1–50 |
| 7. Aaron's budding staff demonstrates his authority | 17:1–13 |
| 8. Duties and offerings of priests and Levites | 18:1–32 |
| 9. Rituals using water for purification | 19:1–22 |
| C. From Kadesh to the plains of Moab | 20:1–21:35 |
| 1. The people contest Moses' and Aaron's authority again | 20:1–13 |
| 2. The king of Edom refuses to let the Israelites pass | 20:14–21 |
| 3. The death of Aaron | 20:22–29 |
| 4. Victory over Canaanites | 21:1–3 |
| 5. Rebellion. The snake made of bronze | 21:4–9 |
| 6. Journey to the plains of Moab | 21:10–20 |
| 7. Victory over King Sihon and King Og | 21:21–35 |
| III. New Orientation: Encamped in the plains of Moab (22:1–36:13) | |

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| A. Balaam is forced to bless Israel; Israel is unfaithful | 22:1–25:18 |
| 1. The king of Moab sends for Balaam | 22:1–20 |
| 2. Balaam and his donkey travel to Moab | 22:21–40 |
| 3. Balaam’s first prophecy | 22:41–23:12 |
| 4. Balaam’s second prophecy | 23:13–26 |
| 5. Balaam’s third prophecy | 23:27–24:14 |
| 6. Balaam’s final prophecies | 24:15–25 |
| 7. Israel’s unfaithfulness at Peor; Phinehas’ faithfulness | 25:1–18 |
| B. Events near the Land of Canaan | 25:19–33:49 |
| 1. Second census of the Israelites: the new generation | 25:19–26:65 |
| 2. The inheritance case of Zelophehad’s daughters | 27:1–11 |
| 3. Moses’ leadership and authority transferred to Joshua | 27:12–23 |
| 4. A calendar of offerings and ritual festivals | 28:1–29:40 |
| 5. Vows of women | 30:1–16 |
| 6. Punishment and plunder of the people of Midian | 31:1–54 |
| 7. Territory of the Israelite tribes east of the Jordan | 32:1–42 |
| 8. Summary of the journeys from Egypt to the Jordan | 33:1–49 |
| C. Division of the land of Canaan | 33:50–36:13 |
| 1. Instructions to defeat and divide the land | 33:50–34:29 |
| 2. Cities for the Levites and cities of refuge | 35:1–34 |
| 3. The land inheritance of married women | 36:1–13 |

As the preceding outline suggests,² the book of Numbers reveals itself to be a coherent whole despite the obvious diversity of internal content.³ Concerning this variety of style, Forstling suggests that the book has “a composite artistry with micro- and macro-levels, which may pull in different directions but still constitute one whole, where narratives play a role, and which in turn have a modern analogy in the genre of

² For further details concerning this outline, see the Introduction of de Regt and Wendland (forthcoming).

³ For example, Olson notes that “among the 33 commentators who based their suggested outlines of Numbers on its geographical notations, 18 significantly different proposals were presented” (Olson 1985:35).

composite novels or short story cycles” (2013:39). However, instead of a conflicting “pulling in different directions,” in Numbers 16:1–40 we find two distinct narrative strands that are harmoniously combined to highlight different aspects of the holiness of Yahweh and his concern that his people would reflect this same characteristic in their relationship with him and among themselves as the covenant people of God. Finally, we note that Chapter 16 appears roughly in the middle of the principal historical portion covering chapters 1–33 — the central section of a literary structure tending to be an area of importance in relation to the author’s primary theme and theological purpose.

The careful analysis of Mary Douglas supports the overall coherence of Numbers from a somewhat different, but complementary perspective. She notes that the legal and narrative texts are not just separate bodies of unconnected material, but they alternate throughout the book and in fact form a larger chiasmic structure (Douglas 1993:102–103). The outline below reveals this alternating arrangement involving the book’s narrative and legal chapters; a circular ring structure is her proposal for summarising Numbers as a whole (Douglas 1993:118–122):

- A Narrative (1–4): God’s Order for Israel
- B Law (5–6): Keeping Faith
- C Narrative (7–8): Offerings
- D Narrative and Law (9–10.10): Feasts (Passover) and Trumpets
- E Narrative (10.11–14.45): In the Wilderness
- F Law (15): Offerings and Purification
- X **Narrative (16–17): Crisis and Resolution**
- F’ Law (18–19): Offerings and Purification
- E’ Narrative (20–27): In the Wilderness
- D’ Law (28–30): Feasts (Passover) and Trumpets
- C’ Narrative (31–33.49): Offerings
- B’ Law (31.50–35): Keeping Faith
- A’ Narrative (36): God’s Order for Israel

Through this genre-based interchange, law and narrative segments reinforce and respond to each other in an ongoing process of elaboration and development (Gane 2004:479). Again, we observe in this system of discourse organisation that Chapter 16 occurs in the centre of the proposed macrostructure which, as noted, is often a point of emphasis in the rhetorical development of biblical texts, whether in the Old Testament or the New.

The various laws thus prescribe how the people of Israel are to be organised as the holy army⁴ of God as they travel to the land of Canaan, and what they are to do when they arrive there, while the narrative describes the journey that takes them towards their ultimate geographical goal. Not only is the Israelite army to be well-ordered, but their camp setup and their system of worship should be well-organised — that is, the people must manifest complete, obedient devotion to the LORD (Wenham 1981:14). The observance of the required legal ceremonies and rituals is not limited to crisis situations. Rather, it is clear that the legal prescriptive texts have been established to create a total religious environment that continually reminds the people of God's immediate holy presence (Wenham 1981:30) and how they must behave in order to remain in sacred fellowship with him.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTER 16

Numbers 16 appears to carry on the account of Israel's intransigent ways from the end of Chapter 14, where it is reported that the Israelite army has been defeated in battle when trying to push ahead towards Canaan against the LORD's will (14:32–45). Immediately then, after the legal section promoting ritual purity in the community (Ch. 15), we hear the story of Korah and other leaders who insolently question the headship of Moses and Aaron, and by implication, they also challenge the right of the LORD God to choose the leaders for his people. The rebels are given ample opportunity to repent, but they boldly refuse and stand their ground, both literally and figuratively. In response, both groups, the wannabe priests and the Reubenites, are

⁴ The two terms “holy” (קֹדֶשׁ) and “army” or “host” (צְבָא) both occur very frequently in Numbers, also together (but not juxtaposed) in Num 31:6.

punished with immediate, violent death, but in two very different ways. By acting decisively in such a dramatic punitive manner, God confirms his holy justice as well as his chosen community and religious leaders, Moses and Aaron. Furthermore, the LORD indicates that all ritual functions associated with the central Tent of Meeting must be performed precisely and only by those who have been duly appointed.

Several significant aspects recorded in Chapter 15 — that the LORD speaks only through Moses (15:1, 17, 37); the need for complete communal holiness (15:13–16, 40); the abhorrence of wilful, defiant sin (15:30–31); and the essential covenantal foundation of Israel’s relationship with Yahweh (15:41) — provide the general background to the specific rebellion that is reported in Chapter 16. This chapter again illustrates what happens when anyone deliberately disobeys the LORD and his commands (cf. chs. 11, 12, 14). God’s will includes certain cultic functions associated with the Tent of Meeting which must be strictly performed only by those whom he has designated in the law code (Olson 1985:107–108). In this case, the legitimacy of the people’s leaders is called into question, and by implication, the right of the LORD himself to choose his representatives is also challenged. The intention behind this text then is to confirm that their authority has been given by Yahweh, which is strongly supported by his drastic, but thoroughly righteous retributive response to overt rebellion.

As noted above, the legal and narrative texts in the book of Numbers alternate and are not just detached bodies of material. By thus regularly interchanging, these distinct but complementary portions reinforce and respond to each other. In this alternating sequence of Israel’s “Story” and “Law,” chapters 16–17 form the dramatic midpoint of the book (Douglas 1993:118). This is the first rebellion found in the book of Numbers in which Levites are involved. Ironically, it is recorded in the biblical text immediately after the Lord’s renewed proclamation of his covenant relationship with the people (15:41). Korah is a close relative of Moses and Aaron, and he makes a rival claim to leadership of Israel (16:3). In general, his clan, the Kohathites, were responsible for “the most holy things” (4:4). But now Korah wants his entire clan to be included in the priesthood, perhaps because he views his group as having more important religious

work than that of the clans of Gershon and Merari (chapters 3–4). In this respect then, Korah’s complaint focuses on the authority of Aaron as the “high priest” whose position Korah wants to overthrow in his proud desire for priestly egalitarianism (16:9–10).

Dathan and Abiram, on the other hand, were Reubenites, and they objected in particular to Moses’ strategic leadership of the nation, as did Aaron and Miriam in Chapter 12. But Dathan and Abiram’s main reason apparently had to do with the people’s lack of success in reaching the land of Canaan and the various hardships that they were facing along the desert route (16:13–14), which echoes aspects of the periodic rebellions narrated in chapters 11–14. The proximity of the camps of these two groups — Korahites and Reubenites — on the southern border of the composite camp of Israel (2:10; 3:29) may have contributed to their joint rebellion at this point in time, when the present generation were now facing many years of trial and travail while travelling along a seemingly endless wilderness trail (14:31–35).

Thus, it appears that the narrator has expertly conjoined two distinct but closely related instances of group insurrection in the first major section of Chapter 16 (vv. 1–40), to be followed by an uprising of the entire community (vv. 41–50). These revolts blatantly protest the religious (Aaron) and social (Moses) leadership that the LORD God had chosen for Israel in bringing the people out of Egypt and directing them towards the promised land of Canaan. These two stories of rebellion, which apparently occurred at the same time, are carefully interwoven in their telling, with a certain degree of overlapping or merging in the distinct sequence of scenes, or episodes, that constitutes the account as a whole. This “non-Western” way of reporting a narrative sequence raises certain questions for commentators and ordinary readers (listeners) alike, which the following exposition is intended to clarify. While it is recognised that there is a certain amount of ambiguity in the Hebrew text, thus allowing for more than one interpretation, the aim will be to present an explanation that seems to best fit the facts of the text and also reflects the Hebrew narrator’s consummate literary artistry in the history at hand. Several important theological implications will be seen to arise in the development of this approach, with special reference to the account’s principal

antagonist, Korah (קֹרַח), and the manner, or means, as well as the location of his fatal punishment meted out directly by the LORD.

THE STRUCTURE OF CHAPTER 16:1–40

One way of interpreting and arranging the dramatic sequence of events in this first major section (verses 1–40) is summarised in the following outline:

Introduction (1–2):

Two major groups of rebels are named: Korah the Levite with his followers, apparently 250 council members (v. 2), and the Reubenites, Dathan, Abiram and On, are all united in their opposition to the leadership of Moses and Aaron.

Conflict 1 (3–11):

Korah and his “community” (הַקְּהִלָּה) of 250 come to confront Moses regarding Aaron’s role and that of the priesthood (vv. 10–11); Moses tries to convince the rebels to back down and, failing that, proposes a “holiness” test involving incense censers to take place the next day at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

Conflict 2 (12–15):

Moses also summons Dathan, Abiram, and the Reubenites to a meeting at the Tent to consider their complaints, but they insolently refuse to come; this arouses Moses’ anger and he imposes a ban on their offerings.

Conflict 1 continues (16–19a):

Moses’ speech carries on from verse 11, reiterating his challenge with greater intensity and detail now to Korah and his 250 followers. The next day they all appear before the Tent of Meeting to burn sacred incense along with Aaron.

Revelation and Intercession (19b–24, 27a echoing verse 24):

The “glory of the LORD” suddenly appears (19b), at the structural centre of the narrative. Yahweh speaks and threatens to destroy the entire community of Israel, thus prompting the fervent intercession of Moses

and Aaron. Yahweh relents, but warns of impending judgment upon all the rebels and their families.

Conflict 2 continues (25–26, 27b):

Moses goes to confront the Reubenites at their campsite, where they stand, seemingly in hostile resistance, at the entrance to their tents.

Judgment pronounced (28–30):

An extraordinary, unnatural death for all the rebels is predicted.

Judgment inflicted (31–35):

The LORD's awesome punishment befalls the two groups of rebels in reverse order: First, an opening in the earth below (perhaps caused by an earthquake) swallows the Reubenites (and the servants of Korah); second, fire from the LORD (perhaps a bolt of lightning) consumes Korah and the rest of the 250 men who were burning incense in an unauthorised manner (cf. vv. 16–18).

Judgment utilised (36–40): The LORD commands that the incense censers of the executed men be forged into an overlay for the altar as a warning “sign” to the community concerning what had just happened — that such ritual priestly pollution must never be repeated.

DISCUSSION OF DISCOURSE UNITS

The following notes provide greater detail regarding the sequence of major compositional units that comprise Numbers 16:1–40. The purpose is to reveal the Hebrew text's formal cohesion and conceptual coherence despite the fact that two different events (rebellions) and motivations are being interwoven, namely, that of Korah (Levite) and that of Dathan and Abiram (Reubenites). What joins the two revolts is their common aim of opposing Israel's appointed leadership, Aaron and Moses respectively, and ultimately the LORD God who chose them. My brief commentary will focus on these antithetical relationships that drive the narrative forward while complicating its structural organisation.

Narrative opening (vv. 1–2)

“Korah” is seemingly introduced as the ringleader of several groups of malcontents who oppose the authority of Moses and Aaron and, by implication, that of Yahweh as well. Korah’s prominence among the rebels is signalled by his being mentioned at the beginning of the account, along with his distinguished ancestral line:⁵ “Now Korah the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi ...” Korah is also mentioned by name at the very end of this pericope (v. 40), thus acting as an *inclusio* for the unit as a whole. According to Numbers 3:19 and Exodus 6:18, Izhar was Kohath’s second son, and Amram (the father of Aaron and Moses) was his eldest. Korah is thus closely related as a cousin to Moses and Aaron. This immediate family connection might have led Korah to feel that he had a right to contest Moses’ and Aaron’s authority. The text says that Korah “took”, but no object for this verb is supplied in v. 1. It is possible that the missing object is the 250 “men” of v. 2 (as in the NET), that is, well-known leaders in the community and council members — perhaps (mainly) Levites like Korah himself (v. 7). Dathan, Abiram, and On were chiefs in the prominent tribe of Reuben.⁶ This was indeed a powerful coalition of opposition that “rose up” against Moses. The stage has thus been set for the dramatic events which follow in this fast-moving account of rebellion in action.

Conflict 1 (vv. 3–11)

That Aaron is included with Moses as a target of the insurrection is indicated at the onset of this section. However, the referent of the pronoun in the initial verb “they assembled” is not immediately clear, and hence initiates some of the ambiguity and overlapping that characterises this account. In this case, “they” probably refers to Korah and his group since the text later reveals that the Reubenites remained in their camp (vv. 12–14). That “Korah” was the group’s spokesman is again indicated several

⁵ Subsequent verses which say “Korah and his/your followers” would support the conclusion that Korah was, in fact, the leader of the rebels or at least their primary instigator in some sense (vv. 5, 6, 16, 19).

⁶ On is not mentioned again after this verse, so perhaps he withdrew from the revolt when Moses issued his powerful — and dangerous — “fiery” challenge (vv. 6–7).

times in the verses that follow (vv. 5–6, 7). Moses and Aaron are accused of “going too far” (lit. “much to you [pl]”) — in other words, “you have assumed too much authority” and “you have exalted yourselves” above everyone else. The rebels feel that as Levites they are “holy” or “consecrated” enough to be offering sacrifices and carrying out ritual activities like all priests (v. 3). Korah concludes by uttering the LORD’s name (יְהוָה), and Moses subsequently begins with it,⁷ announcing that Yahweh himself will reveal exactly who is “holy” enough to approach his altar for sacrificial service (v. 5). Moses throws Korah’s words back at him with the accusation that “You Levites have gone too far”, and declares that a divine judgment will take place by ordeal the very next morning “before the LORD” (v. 7), that is, at the altar in front of the sacred tabernacle (v. 9). This test will involve a joint burning of incense in “censers” (מִקְטָוֹת, v. 6)⁸ that God himself will respond to by “choosing the one who is holy”, the implication being that those who are not chosen will be punished severely. Moses further documents their crime of demanding the rights of “the priesthood” (כֹּהֲנָה, v. 10) and reveals the magnitude of their guilt by saying that they have in fact rebelled “against the LORD” (v. 11a). In reality, the overt target of their complaint, “Aaron” the appointed high priest, had nothing to do with this case (v. 11b).

Conflict 2 (vv. 12–15)

Moses now turns his attention to the other group of rebels and summons them to come for a meeting. The Reubenite “sons of Eliab”, Dathan and Abiram, adamantly refuse to “come up” to meet Moses (vv. 12a, 14b – *inclusio*).⁹ They continue with a

⁷ Moses sarcastically refers in v. 5 to Korah and “his community” (עֲדָתוֹ), a term that is often employed in reference to Yahweh’s covenant community. By heading up this disloyal Levite company, Korah has created a caricature of a true “community”; he believes that he can thereby speak for the people of Israel as a whole (Noth 1968:124). Korah’s convocation is a rebellious threat to the real community of God.

⁸ “Censer”, or “firepan”, is a key term in this chapter since it is also used symbolically to represent the priesthood, those who are duly authorised to burn incense for worship in the LORD’s house. The censers will be used as containers for embers or coals used to ignite a burning of incense at the altar.

⁹ There is an as yet unrevealed irony in the use of this verb “go/come up” (‘lh). In punishment for their impudent disobedience, the Reubenites will “go down” (yrd) *en masse* into the ground (v. 33).

disrespectful response (vv. 13–14) that insults the leadership of Moses, and by implication, the LORD as well. They claim that they have been led away from “a land flowing with milk and honey” (cf. 13:27) — namely, Egypt! — out into the desert to die, which is murder implied. The divine promise of “an inheritance of fields and vineyards” has not materialised — it was all a big lie! Several rhetorical questions punctuate their offensive accusations against Moses: that he really wanted to “lord it over” the people (v. 13b),¹⁰ and that he was “gouging out their eyes” (v. 14b), in other words, pulling the wool over the eyes of the people with all his promises, supposedly from God! By thus expressing their contempt for the LORD’s gracious plan for his people, Dathan and Abiram were expressing “the sort of unbelief that condemned the nation to die in the wilderness (cf. 14:2ff)” (Wenham 1981:136). The usually “humble” Moses (12:3) was enraged by this sacrilegious reply — just as after the infamous golden calf incident (Exod 32:19) — and he proceeds to levy a curse upon their offerings (v. 15a), in effect de-fellowshipping them (Noordtzijs 1983:146–147).¹¹ Moses concludes with a public formulaic assertion of complete honesty and integrity in all his public dealings as the leader of Israel (v. 15b; cf. 1 Sam 12:3). He also maintains his innocence in that he has never treated any of the rebels badly (v. 15c).

Conflict 1 continues (16–19a)

Moses returns (in discourse, if not location) to Korah and his corps of 250 would-be priests. He carries on with his instructions, as it were, from verse 16, now giving more details concerning how the test of authority was going to take place on the morrow (v. 17, perhaps to allow them some time for sober reflection and possibly repentance). The account then jumps immediately to that day and the occasion “at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting” (אֶת־פֶּתַח מִוֶּעֵד, v. 18). The great incense offering seemingly

¹⁰ This false accusation regarding Moses’ motives appears as the core of a chiasmic structure that organises the Reubenites’ protest: A: refusal to appear before Moses, B: reference to “land flowing with milk and honey”, C: Moses’ desire for “lordship”, B’: reference to “land flowing with milk and honey”, A’: refusal to appear (12–14).

¹¹ Moses’ appeal to the LORD “not to pay attention to the offerings” of the Reubenites (v. 15a) implicitly applies also to the incense that is to be offered by the Levites the next day (v. 17).

commences there at the Tent (v. 19a), and the spectacular climax in this confrontation over authority and legitimacy is about to begin.

Revelation & intercession (19b–24, 27a)

The ritual proceedings in front of the Tent of meeting are suddenly interrupted by a brilliant manifestation of “the glory of the LORD” (כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה, v. 19b; cf. 14:10) before the entire “community” (עֲדָה), which now included the officiants (Aaron, Korah, and the 250 priestly pretenders) as well as the rest of the people of Israel. This wondrous appearance of Yahweh’s Shekinah glory and his subsequent shocking words (v. 20) occur in the middle of this narrative, often a position of structural and thematic significance in Hebrew discourse. The LORD’s crucial command, first uttered only to Moses and Aaron, is “Separate yourselves from this community” — that is, from all the people of Israel...! (v. 21).¹² Why? Because they have become polluted due to the insurgence of the rebels; therefore, they all must be destroyed. Moses intercedes (v. 22) for mercy before the Creator of all humanity (lit. “the God of the spirits of all flesh” – cf. 27:16)¹³ that he would not destroy the entire nation on account of the sin of “one man” — most likely a reference to the ringleader, Korah (Cole 2002:266; Wenham 1981:137). The LORD relents, but demands that there must be another separation — this time, the people at large from the “tents (families) of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram” (v. 23). Since the Reubenites were not present at the Tent of Meeting, there is an apparent shift of setting now to a point not far away, where their dwellings were located on the south side of the camp (vv. 25–26). The central scene of divine confrontation at the Tent is concluded with a displaced report of the people’s obedience to God’s prior command — they move away from “the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram” (v. 27a).

¹² The thematic core of this section is announced by Yahweh’s command in v. 21a: “separate yourselves!” (הִבַּדְלִי).

¹³ In the Hebrew Bible *ruach* generally refers to “spirit” in the sense of “wind, breath”, and hence also the breath of life (Gen 6:17). “All flesh” refers to all humankind, or even all living creatures, including animals (cf. Gen 7:15 and Job 12:10).

Conflict 2 continues (25–26, 27b)

Moses leaves Aaron with Korah and his 250 followers burning incense,¹⁴ presumably somewhere near the bronze altar at the front of the tabernacle, and he proceeds to the campsite of Dathan and Abiram which, we recall, was situated not that far away from the tent of Korah (v. 25).¹⁵ Moses is accompanied by “the elders of Israel” (cf. 11:16, 30) and perhaps by other leading men to serve as witnesses to what is about to happen, but he warns them all not to get near the dwellings of the rebels or to touch any of their property, which was now ritually polluted “because of all their sins” (v. 26). For their part, Dathan and Abiram had gathered all their family members in front of their tents — either as a last act of defiance or perhaps in the hope that Moses had come to negotiate with them (v. 27b; Noordtzij 1983:152).

Judgment pronounced (28–30)

The fact that leadership of the nation was the issue of controversy between the Reubenite rebels and Moses is indicated in the latter’s words to the entire assembly, the guilty and their families as well as the witnesses (v. 28a). Moses reveals that his leadership of Israel was not something that he desired (lit. “from my heart”, v. 28b). The ordeal to determine whether the LORD “sent” (i.e., chose) him or not was a simple but potentially lethal one: if the agitators die “a natural death,” i.e., nothing at all happens, then Moses will be revealed as a liar and a fraud (v. 29). But if, contrary to nature (lit. “Yahweh creates a creation”), the earth opens up and swallows them all alive along with their belongings “into Sheol” (הֶלְאָשׁ),¹⁶ then the men’s sin of “treating the LORD with contempt” will have been revealed and thereby punished (v.

¹⁴ Reference to “offering incense” is not entirely correct since “the purpose of burning incense was to provide protection against the deadly radiating out of the divine holiness by means of the incense smoke (Lev. 16:13, ‘so that he will not die’)” (Noordtzij 1983:150).

¹⁵ The Hebrew term *mishkan* is in the singular, probably implying that their tents were all in close proximity to each other in the southern section of the camp.

¹⁶ “Sheol” was regarded as a dark and gloomy place where all the dead — both the wicked and the righteous — were gathered in a shadowy and slowly disappearing existence. It was believed to be located beneath the earth; therefore the expression is “go down to Sheol”. A common translation of Sheol is “world of the dead” (GNT).

30).¹⁷

Judgment inflicted (31–35)

Typically the LORD's direct announcement of judgment takes place immediately, in this case, "as soon as [Moses] finished speaking" (v. 31a). The punishment occurs in the order in which it was pronounced (with some differences in wording): the ground split asunder, and "swallowed them" — Dathan, Abiram, their "households" (lit. "houses"), and all their property (v. 32) — but now with the addition of (literally) "the humankind/people belonging to Korah" (כָּל־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר לְקֹרַח). This last expression has been interpreted very differently by commentators, with most concluding that Korah himself was included among those now "descending alive into the grave (Sheol)" — for good measure being "covered over with earth" and "perished from the community" (v. 33) (see Cole 2000:269; Gane 2006:205; Harrison 1992:238; Wenham 1981:137). But the text does not specifically say that Korah was present at this location with the Reubenites;¹⁸ rather, he was situated over with Aaron at the tabernacle, reverently swinging his censer along with the 250 Levites, thus seeking to ward off the wrath of God's glory (cf. vv. 6–7, 16–19). Ironically, in the end, Korah, who wanted to make a name for himself in the community of Israel, is not even named among those who were suddenly immolated by "fire from the LORD" (perhaps lightning),¹⁹ even as they were engaged in the unlawful act of burning their incense (v. 35). Illustrating an aspect of *lex talionis*, Korah's punishment was meted out "before the LORD" (לְפָנֵי יְהוָה), vv. 7, 16–17) at a "holy" place where, as a non-priest, he was not authorised to be standing (vv. 5–7, 17–19), no matter how much he hungered for the "priesthood" (vv. 9–10).

¹⁷ We note that Moses does not say in v. 29b "then the LORD has indeed sent me". But he realises that it is the LORD's honour, not his personal calling, that is at stake. The rebels have "despised" Yahweh by regarding him "as one whose will and choice can be safely ignored (cf. 14:11, 23)" (Noordtziĳ 1983:152).

¹⁸ As 26:11 states explicitly, Korah's sons had not perished during their father's revolt. It is also noteworthy that the brief account of this episode in Deut 11:6 and Psalm 106:16-18 only mentions Dathan and Abiram, but not Korah.

¹⁹ Lightning is also likely in 11:1 (cf. 1 Kgs 18:38); alternatively, a divine fireball from the Holy Place could be referred to here (cf. Lev 10:2).

Judgment utilised (36–40)

The denouement of the Korahnic narrative is not an anti-climax.²⁰ There is considerable irony here, to be sure, as Aaron's son Eleazar is given the grim task of collecting the 250 burnt censers from among the smouldering ashes in order to hammer the pieces of metal into a special overlay for the main altar within the tabernacle courtyard.²¹ These censers were now “holy” (קֹדֶשׁ),²² that is, set apart solely for the LORD's use in sacrificial worship, so God determines to use them as a concrete object lesson. Yahweh's instructions, delivered by Moses to Eleazar in verses 37–38 are carried out precisely as recorded in verses 39–40, a verbal reflection of the need for procedural accuracy when carrying out all divine commands (a periodic motif in the Pentateuch). Indeed, those censers had no doubt shone brilliantly with the LORD's glory when it appeared earlier in the day (vv. 19b), so it was fitting that they now, in refashioned form, would serve as a protective “sign (אֵיֹת) for the Israelites” (v. 38b) — a reminder that “no one except a descendant of Aaron should burn incense before the LORD” (v. 40b). This was also a serious warning lest any future offender should incur such a fiery fate “like Korah and like his community” (בְּקֹרַח וּבְעֵדָתוֹ, v. 40c; cf. v. 5a; Jude 11), who dared to claim that “the whole community is holy” (כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל קֹדֶשִׁים, v. 3b) as far as priestly service is concerned (cf. v. 10). Most certainly, the “glory of the LORD”, so closely associated with his service and his chosen servants, was nothing to be trifled with (vv. 19–22; cf. 14:10–12)!

WHERE WAS KORAH? SOME HERMENEUTICAL CONFUSION

In the hermeneutical effort to determine where Korah was when he died, one must of course know also who Korah was and why he is being featured in this narrative

²⁰ This closing segment occurs after the obvious narrative climax in vv. 31–35, where we have a “crowded stage” displaying all sorts of dramatic, indeed supernatural action, with the terrified, screaming onlookers scattering in all directions (v. 34).

²¹ The reason why Eleazar is chosen for this role, rather than Aaron, is probably that the high priest himself must have no contact of any kind with the dead (Lev 21:11; Budd 1984:195). Eleazar's present task also falls within his assignment in 4:16.

²² The religious idea behind this is that materials used in a sacrifice in the complex of the Tent of Meeting have become holy and should be given some legitimate ritual use, even if the sacrifice just carried out was illegitimate (Noth 1968:130; Levine 1993:418).

account in the first place. However, that is not an easy exercise if one is left dependent upon the scholarly advice of many commentators. For example, adopting a typical source-critical perspective on Numbers 16, Budd comes to this conclusion (1984:181):

In this section there appears to be a very complex combination of traditions. It is generally accepted that there is a major priestly element in the chapter, but also a well-preserved Yahwistic tradition. It is customary to associate the Korah material with P, and the Dathan/Abiram texts with JE.

Budd then expends a great deal of energy and commentary space seeking “to differentiate the literary strata in the section” (Budd 1984:181). His “suggested literary history” is a rather speculative pastiche (1984:184):

A pre-Yahwistic tradition tells the refusal of Dathan and Abiram, two Reubenites, to engage in the successful settlement from the south (v 12). The Yahwist takes up this story into his tradition of a Transjordanian journey... An early priestly accretion introduces 250 laymen whose claim to the right to offer incense is refuted by a test. ... The author of Numbers introduces Korah as a rebel, identifying him as a Levite, and elaborating the existing tradition ... His contribution is evident in vv 1a, 3, 8–11, 16–17, 26–27a, 32b, 33b.

On the other hand, some commentators discuss Numbers 16 as if there were no difficulties or digressions in the text at all, for example:

The Lord instructed the assembly to move away from the southsider’s camp (v. 24). . . . Moses warned the people that the earth would swallow up Dathan, Abiram, and Korah, along with their wives and their children and their little ones (vv. 23–27). That is exactly what transpired (vv. 31–33). . . . All those who were in the families of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were judged together and died together. (Duguid 2006:205)

Other commentators readily resort to deletion or displacement to resolve certain

apparent anomalies or inconsistencies that they perceive in the text. With regard to the location of “Korah and his community”, for example, Noordtziĳ reasons as follows (1983:148, italics added):

The ... problem is that verses 24b, 27a speak of ‘the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram’ ..., while in the context of the destruction of Dathan and Abiram we hear of ‘all of Korah’s men’ (v. 32). But it is clear that *these must be later additions*, the result of a desire to present the unity of the rebellion at any cost. ... Verses 19–24, 27a and 35 already spoke of ‘Korah and all his followers’; this simple fact proves that ‘and all Korah’s men’ in verse 32 *cannot have been a part of the original text*.

Some scholars go much farther in their efforts to probe behind the Hebrew text and reveal its compositional history, for example:

In this section [16:1–40] on the revolt of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, there is some mixing of traditions. ... Commentators have divided these stories into two major strands (with subplots within them): a priestly strand with the story of Korah’s rebellion and an old epic strand with a secular rebellion by the Reubenites ... (Meeks 1993:230–231)

Now one might simply attribute assertions of this nature to scholarly speculation; however, they can lead further to unwarranted and quite conjectural interpretations that only serve to confuse and mislead unwary readers, for example, with regard to verse 3 we are told (Meeks 1993:231, added italics):

There are actually two levels of priestly conflict in this Korah narrative. ... In [one] level, we assume *Korah and his followers are not Levites* (see 27.1–3, where a Manassite’s family feel they must defend their father against any suspicion that he was part of Korah’s group) and that the censer test is a matter of *non-Levitical people* using censers, something that had been a prerogative of the Levites. On a second level, however, *Korah’s group is addressed as Levites* attempting to usurp the prerogatives of the Aaronic priesthood (vv. 1, 7b, 8–11), and the test is

one of *lesser-ranked Levites* using the censers of the Aaronic priesthood (see v. 40 ...).

After reading such background information, how could the perplexed reader possibly determine where Korah is at any point in the account and why he happens to be there — that is, if he cannot be sure who Korah is at all?

This is not to say that I have resolved all of the difficulties associated with “Korah and his community”, in particular, the location and manner of his execution. There is one later passage in Numbers that contributes to the problems in this respect. Numbers 26:10 reads, literally (RSV): “... and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up together with Korah, when that company died, when the fire devoured two hundred and fifty men; and they became a warning.”

וּתְפֹתַח הָאָרֶץ אֶת־פִּיהָ וּתְבַלַּע אֹתָם וְאֶת־קִרְחַן בְּמֹות הָעֵדָה
בְּאֹכַל הָאֵשׁ אֶת חֲמִשִּׁים וּמְאַתַּיִם אִישׁ וַיְהִיו לְנֹס:

According to this construal, it would seem that Korah died together with Dathan and Abiram, when the earth suddenly swallowed them up along with their families. However, the underlined portion of the text is not completely clear, and there is a certain textual variant at this point. Thus, making a slight modification, it would be possible to suggest a reading as follows: “... and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up when the company died with Korah, when the fire devoured two hundred and fifty men; and they became a warning.” This understanding is the basis for the rendering of the Good News Translation: “The ground opened and swallowed them, and they died with Korah and his followers when fire destroyed 250 men; they became a warning to the people.” This is similar to the *Tanakh* translation of the Jewish Publication Society, which preserves the ambiguity of the original Hebrew: “Whereupon the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with Korah — when that band died, when the fire consumed the two hundred and fifty men — and they became an example.”

It might possibly be that the Hebrew text is paradoxically ambiguous in this particular passage — deliberately designed to heighten Korah’s crime as leader-instigator of the rebels as well as his punishment — that is, seemingly scorched to

death in an inferno and also devoured alive by the ground.²³ As argued above, however, the account of Chapter 16 quite clearly indicates that Korah died at the very forbidden altar that he desired to minister at, being burnt by the LORD's fire for daring to burn incense using unauthorised fire.²⁴ He impudently duplicated the crime of Nadab and Abihu and was punished correspondingly (Lev 10:1–2).

THERE WAS KORAH! SOME TRANSLATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

In this section I will suggest some practical applications that arise from the preceding analysis with special reference to Bible translation and Scripture text formatting. This deals with the “so what?” factor and how a careful exegesis of the “original text” can have some practical implications for ordinary Bible readers. How can we guide readers in their study of this pericope of Numbers 16:1–40 with reference to the particular problem posed by the location of Korah when his capital punishment was inflicted by the LORD?

A quick survey of popular published versions reveals a great diversity of opinion on this matter, as reflected in the sequence of paragraph units and section headings that are given at major break points in the text. For example, is verse 15 indicated as being more closely linked with verses 12–14 or verses 16–18? It surely makes quite a difference for one's understanding of whom Moses' anger was directed against — Dathan and Abiram, or Korah and his company? Then at v. 18, is a new paragraph indicated in the format to suggest a shift in scene (a day later) and location (at the Tent of Meeting) — or not? What difficulty does this pose for readers (potentially also listeners) if such paratextual text-marking strategies are not implemented? Some features are optional, such as placing a new sectional heading at v. 19 to coincide with

²³ There is a rabbinic tradition that supports this interpretation concerning Korah's double punishment for his impetuous pride and impiety (see www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korah).

²⁴ In Numbers 27:3 the daughters of Zelophehad mention only Korah as the leader of a major rebellion; the text seems to say that Korah was killed with all his “sons” — but the latter group actually refers to Zelophehad, their father, who died (not as a rebel) without any sons. The text of Psalm 106:16–18 refers to Dathan and Abiram who were swallowed up by the earth, but Korah is not mentioned in reference to the fire from heaven that consumed “their followers — the wicked”. The two rebel groups are apparently united in their infamy in this poetic tradition.

the appearance of the LORD’s glory.

With regard to section headings, a title such as “Korah and Others Contest the Authority of Moses and Aaron” will highlight the character of these instances of rebellion more explicitly than GNT’s section heading — “The Rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram”. On the other hand, we might ask: was this revolt directed solely at Israel’s leaders? Clearly, the answer is no — the authority and leadership of the covenant LORD was also involved, perhaps primarily so, as indicated by God’s swift responses to the protesters in word and deed, including the fearful manifestation of his glorious presence (v. 19). So how can the LORD be referenced economically in a title? A possible solution, as exemplified below, is to utilise a few additional headings to help guide the progressive interpretation of the passage as a whole.

The discourse analysis outlined above is reflected in the following NIV text of 16:1–40 as it has been re-formatted using different font styles so that the alternating narrative flow can be more easily discerned. The left-margin indent represents the principal action line, which features the Levite Korah and his fellow 250 rebels. The innermost column of indentation represents the inserted reflective account of the Reubenites, Dathan and Abiram and those who followed them, including in punishment apparently the members of their families. Other indents and font styles display additional formal patterns within the text based on iterative and/or thematic significance.

Korah and some Reubenites rebel against Moses and Aaron

¹ Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites — Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth — became insolent² and rose up against Moses.

With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council.

³ They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, “*You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the*

LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD'S assembly?"

⁴ When Moses heard this, he fell facedown. ⁵ Then he said to Korah and all his followers: "In the morning the LORD will show who belongs to him and who is holy, and he will have that person come near him. The man he chooses he will cause to come near him. ⁶ You, Korah, and all your followers are to do this: Take censers ⁷ and tomorrow put fire and incense in them before the LORD. The man the LORD chooses will be the one who is holy. *You Levites have gone too far!"*

⁸ Moses also said to Korah, "Now listen, you Levites! ⁹ Isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near himself to do the work at the LORD'S tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them? ¹⁰ He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too. ¹¹ It is against the LORD that you and all your followers have banded together. Who is **Aaron** that you should grumble against him?"

¹² Then Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab. But they said, "We will not come! ¹³ Isn't it enough that **you** have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the desert? And now **you** also want to lord it over us? ¹⁴ Moreover, **you** haven't brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will **you** gouge out the eyes of these men? No, we will not come!" ¹⁵ Then Moses became very angry and said to the LORD, "Do not accept their offering. I have not taken so much as a donkey from them, nor have I wronged any of them."

¹⁶ Moses said to Korah, "You and all your followers are to appear before the LORD tomorrow — you and they and Aaron.

¹⁷ Each man is to take his censer and put incense in it — 250 censers in all — and present it before the LORD. You and Aaron are to present your censers also."

¹⁸ So each man took his censer, put fire and incense in it, and stood with Moses and Aaron at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

¹⁹ Korah gathered all his followers in opposition to [Moses and Aaron] at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

The LORD punishes each rebel group in turn

The glory of the LORD appeared to the entire assembly, ²⁰ and the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ²¹ “Separate yourselves from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once.”

²² But Moses and Aaron fell facedown and cried out, “O God, God of the spirits of all mankind, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?”

²³ Then the LORD said to Moses, ²⁴ “Say to the assembly, ‘Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.’”

²⁵ Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. ²⁶ He warned the assembly, “Move back from the tents of these wicked men! Do not touch anything belonging to them, or you will be swept away because of all their sins.”

²⁷ So they moved away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.

Dathan and Abiram had come out and were standing with their wives, children and little ones at the entrances to their tents.

²⁸ Then Moses said, “This is how you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: ²⁹ If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the LORD has not sent me. ³⁰ But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt.”

³¹ As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart
³² and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households
and all Korah's men and all their possessions. ³³ They went down alive into
the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they
perished and were gone from the community. ³⁴ At their cries, all the Israelites
around them fled, shouting, "The earth is going to swallow us too!"

³⁵ And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men who were
offering the incense.

The burnt censers become a warning sign for the people

³⁶ The LORD said to Moses, ³⁷ "Tell Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, to take the
censers out of the smoldering remains and scatter the coals some distance
away, for the censers are holy — ³⁸ the censers of the men who sinned at the
cost of their lives.

Hammer the censers into sheets to overlay the altar,

**for they were presented before the LORD and have
become holy. Let them be a sign to the Israelites."**

³⁹ So Eleazar the priest collected the bronze censers brought by those who had
been burned up,

and he had them hammered out to overlay the altar, ⁴⁰ as the LORD
directed him through Moses.

**This was to remind the Israelites that no one except a
descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense
before the LORD, or he would become like Korah and
his followers.**

Other paratextual devices would be helpful to add to the preceding textual display, including cross-references to those passages that mention Korah and his accomplices, Dathan and Abiram (e.g., Lev 26:10, 27:3; Psalm 106:16–18). Most helpful would be the inclusion of explanatory footnotes to fill in gaps of information or to clarify points of confusion, for example, about the disappearance of "On" (1); the concept of

“holiness” (5); the ritual labours of the “Levites” (9); the nature and purpose of “censers” (17); the special assignment of “Eleazar” (37); and why the “altar” could use a metal “overlay” (38). Additional comments would be needed to explain the shifting locations of Korah and the site of his death in contrast to those of the Reubenite rebels. An Introduction to Chapter 16 might be employed to explain the importance of its position within the book of Numbers (cf. the earlier structural outline) and, to point out among other details, certain aspects of the contrastive and ironic texture of this account, for example:

Korah: rebels against religious authority of Aaron and the priesthood and is later executed by “fire from the LORD” along with 250 followers, notably Levites, at the very sacred spot near the altar outside the Tent of Testimony, where they sought to use unauthorised fire when burning incense to God in worship.

Dathan and Abiram: rebel against the socio-political authority of Moses and are executed at their tents upon the ground on which they stand because they did not want to move forward under his leadership towards the “ground” of Canaan in accordance with the LORD’s promise.

Numbers 16 is another account of the consequences of purity versus pollution. The earthly-minded Reubenites hanker after the good-life in Egypt — hence pollute themselves and are swallowed by the earth beneath them. The Levites want to get closer to God and gain the rights of priesthood, but they employ a polluted method — hence are burned up in the falling flames of God’s holy fire.

CONCLUSION

The literary composition of Numbers 16:1–40 is clearly complex, but this is not uncommon in biblical narrative. The account is not told in a precise, chronological manner, as we might prefer today in the Western world, but rather, selected key events and speeches are foregrounded in a dramatic fashion that focuses on certain crucial

attitudes or actions on the part of the rebels and the LORD's righteous response. Thus, the text is distinctly formulated to be read (also heard) as a unified account and understood as a single graphic admonition that warns of the serious consequences of rebelling against Yahweh by opposing the leadership whom he has chosen or by corrupting the way of worship that he has prescribed.

This is a familiar story of "rebellion", "retribution", and "reaffirmation". The cause and effect message of crime and punishment rings out loud and clear in Chapter 16 as well as in the book of Numbers and the Pentateuch as a whole. The holy LORD God of Israel will surely most severely chastise those who rebel against his covenantal laws and established leaders. But there is actually another, more important theme that the text reveals, as highlighted by its intricately fashioned structural arrangement. This concerns reaffirmation — that is, a dramatic vote-of-confidence, as it were, in Israel's Exodus leadership, Moses and Aaron, and above all, in Yahweh himself as the holy God who deals with his covenant people righteously — not only meting out dire justice upon those guilty of individual and communal pollution, but mercifully sparing the innocent who remain faithful to his religious requirements.

Thus, in a real sense, who Korah was, where he died, and why, does make a difference to the meaning of this narrative. Without that important perspective a great deal of the theological and moral lesson of this memorable account, for receptors both then and now, would be lost.

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