

## Korah, Dathan and Abiram

In his exhortation to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints”, Jude warns the believers of the dangers of false worship. Speaking of false brethren, he writes: “Woe unto them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core” (Jude 1:11). Our Old Testament reading brings us to consider the gainsaying of Korah – we need to understand what Jude is referring to, in order to ensure we do not follow his example.

Numbers chapter 16 opens by describing how certain prominent members elevated themselves against Moses:

“Now Korah, the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On, the sons of Peleth, sons of Reuben took men, and they rose up before Moses, with certain of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty princes of the assembly, famous in the congregation, men of renown: and they gathered themselves together against Moses and Aaron ...” (Num. 16:1-3).

The ringleaders of the rebellion are thus named as Korah, Dathan, Abiram and On. They gathered an assembly of prominent members to support their cause, and to instigate change within the camp. Seeking to elevate themselves, they demonstrated the spirit of despising dominion (Jude 1:8), and railed against Moses and Aaron. We are told that the words “men of renown” in the Hebrew signifies “men of name”. These were famous in the congregation, in a way not unlike those in the ecclesia at Sardis: “... I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead” (Rev. 1:1). They had made a name for themselves, and had a reputation of being alive and zealous – but in fact, they were spiritually bereft of life.

The rebellion is described thus:

“They gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them, Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and Yahweh is among them: wherefore then lift ye up above the congregation of Yahweh” (Num. 16:3).

Essentially, they were arguing that they were just as good as Moses, so why should he think himself to be greater than they? But they missed the point entirely: Moses was the man appointed by Yahweh Himself. He had not taken it upon himself to lead the ecclesia in the wilderness, indeed, it would appear that he was initially reluctant to accept this role. But Moses “was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3). He did not raise up a railing accusation against his adversaries. He did nothing to try and justify either himself or Aaron, rather he prostrated himself on the ground before Yahweh: “when Moses heard it, he fell upon his face ...” (vs 4). He placed the matter before Yahweh and left it for Him to demonstrate who He had Chosen:

“He spake unto Korah and unto all his company, saying, even tomorrow Yahweh will shew who are his, and who is holy; and will cause him to come near unto him; even him whom he hath chosen will he cause to come near unto him. This do; Take you censers, Korah, and all his company; And put fire therein, and put incense in them before Yahweh tomorrow: and it shall be that the man whom Yahweh doth choose, he shall be holy ...” (Num. 16:5-7).

Notice the expression he uses: “Yahweh will shew who are his”. This is picked up again in Paul’s second letter to Timothy:

“... nevertheless, the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, ***The Lord knoweth them that are his.*** And, let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity” (2 Tim. 2:19).

The Lord knows “them that are his”, and He will make it known in due time, when the rebels will be set at nought. The promise is given to those who show the meekness of Moses: “Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say that they are Jews, and are not, but do life; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee” (Rev. 3:9). All things will be determined according to the Wisdom of God, and he will reveal His Chosen ones, in due time

As we read above, the means by which God would reveal those who are His, was through the offering of incense. This was a priestly function, and the acceptance of offered incense demonstrated the acceptance of the offeror. So we read in Leviticus 10, of how Aaron’s sons offered not according to the Law:

“Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before Yahweh, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from Yahweh, and devoured them, and they died before Yahweh” (Num. 10:1-2).

This occasion demonstrates the importance of only offering worship that is in accordance with the revealed Will of God. It is commonly assumed that men have the right to worship whatever deity they may choose, and in whatever means they may choose – just so long as it doesn’t impinge upon the rights of others. But that is not so in Scriptural terms: man can only offer acceptable worship in the way that their Creator determines. As Cain found, worship upon any other basis is “evil” (1 Jno 3:12) and would not be accepted by God. And the example of Aarons’ sons likewise demonstrates the same point – to offer in a manner that “he commanded them not” will only bring His wrath upon the rebellious offerors.

It was very appropriate then, that the process of Divine Selection was demonstrated by the offering of incense. The principle is expressed that “I will be sanctified in them that come near me” (Lev. 10:3), and it would be repeated again in the case of Korah’s company.

The rebels refused to come at the calling of Moses. They said:

“We will not come up: is it a small thing that thou hast brought us up out of a land that floweth with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, except thou makest thyself altogether a prince over us?” (Num. 16:13).

Notice, that this was the second time they accused Moses of exalting himself – yet the opposite was true: He has been appointed by the Almighty, and it was they who were unduly exalting themselves. So it was in the case of the Lord Jesus Christ: “so also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest: but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee” (Heb. 5:5).

Compare this humble spirit with that of the people as recorded in Numbers. They had already murmured against Moses earlier: “they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt” (Num. 14:4). Notice here, democracy in action – they desired an elected leader, and not one that had been appointed over them. They said: “let us make a captain,” in a way not dissimilar to

the days of Samuel, when the people rejected Yahweh in requiring a king. But who was the proposed “Captain”? Could it have been Korah, the ringleader of the later rebellion? We are not told, but the occasion of Korahs’ revolt was not the first time when the authority of Moses was called into question.

The people were commanded to separate themselves from the rebels:

“And Yahweh spoke unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the congregation, saying, get you up from about the tabernacle of Korah, Dathan and Abiram ...” (Num. 16:23-24).

This reference to the rebel’s tabernacle – singular - is interesting. This would appear to be different from the tabernacles that they lived in: they are spoken of in verse 26:

“... Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of their’s lest ye be consumed in all their sins” (Num. 16:26).

Again, we read:

“So they gat up from the tabernacle of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, on every side: and Dathan and Abiram came out, and stood in the door of their tents, and their wives, and their sons, and their little children” (Num. 16:26-27).

This singular reference to another tabernacle suggests that they actually set up an alternative system of worship within the camp. As it might be called in our day, they had a fellowship within a fellowship! But be that as it may, the exhortation for the people was to “depart” from the rebels, “and touch nothing of theirs”. The Apostle echoed these principles: “... Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you ...” (2 Cor. 6:17). And the context here, is to do with embracing the unbelievers: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers ... what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?” (vs14, 16). In our day, there is also a need to come out and be separate from the Apostates that we be not partakers of other men’s sins (1 Tim. 5:22). There is no virtue in fellowshiping the rebels, despite the claims of some.

The judgments that would come upon the rebellious members was twofold: a swallowing up by the earth for the ringleaders, and the consuming by fire of the famous princes. So Moses said to the people:

“If these men die after the common death of all men, or if they be visited after the visitation of all men; then Yahweh hath not sent me. But if Yahweh make a new thing, and the earth open her mouth, and swallow them up, with all that appertain unto them, and they go down quick into the pit, then ye shall understand that these men have provoked Yahweh” (Num. 16:29-30).

So it was, that as the Psalmist wrote:

“they envied Moses also in the camp, and Aaron the saint of Yahweh. The earth opened and swallowed up Dathan, and covered he company of Abiram. And a fire was kindled in their company; the flame burned up the wicked” (Psa. 106:16-18).

This language, which signified the rejection of the offerors of incense, is alluded to again in the context of Israel as a nation. The prophet Isaiah describes their punishment:

“Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth shall descend into it. And

the mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled: but Yahweh of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that his holy shall be sanctified in righteousness" (Isa. 5:14-15).

To be consigned to an eternal death in the dust of the ground is the final end for those who rebel against Yahweh's Anointed One. But as to the 240 famous men of renown – they were consumed by fire. Despite their prominence in the sight of men, they were consumed under the fiery judgment of the God whose ways they despised.

What is interesting for us to consider, is how the censers in which the incense was offered were used:

"Speak unto Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest, that he take up the censers out of the burning, and scatter thou the fire yonder; for they are hallowed. The censers of these sinners against their own souls, let them make them broad plates for a covering of the altar: for they offered them before Yahweh, therefore they are hallowed: and they shall be a sign unto the children of Israel" (Num. 16:38).

Notice that here (and in the verses that follow), the censers were beaten into plates, which were then placed as a covering of the Brazen Altar. That, would then "be a sign" to Israel. One example of this effectiveness of this sign, is in the case of Asaph, when he went before that altar. He begins Psalm 73 thus:

"I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked"

And then continues:

"When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me; **Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end.** Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castest them down into destruction. How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors" (Psa. 73:3, 17-19).

Here, when he went into the Sanctuary, Asaph would have seen the plates upon the brazen altar. And in considering those things, he was exhorted to think more soberly. No matter how "famous" and "renowned" these men were, despite having a reputation of being alive to the things of the Spirit, when they rebelled against the Anointed one of Yahweh, they were destined to fail. Those brazen plates testified to the final end of the rebels.

There is another passage that alludes back to these events of Numbers 16. We began with reference to the book of Jude which refers to false brethren, as having "perished in the gainsaying of Core" (Jude 11). Of these, it is written that they "despise dominion, and speak evil of dignities," just like Korah, Dathan and Abiram spoke evil of Moses and Aaron, despising their dominion. But Jude ends by describing how the power of God is directed towards those who trust in Him: "Now unto him that is able to **keep you from falling**, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy. To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen." (Jude 24-25). With a marked contrast to those who were cast down in slippery places, our Father will hold us by the hand, and keep us from falling, if we but trust in Him, and his power to save. Rather than to exalt ourselves against the Holy Ones of Yahweh, we must share the meekness of Moses. Trusting that even if we be set at nought by sinful men, we look forward in hope to the glorious prospect of life with our Lord. The Lord knows those who are his, and it is our part to wait patiently for the day to come, when the Divine Selection will be declared.

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