

מִקְרָאוֹת גְּדוּלוֹת

The
**COMMENTATORS'
BIBLE**

THE JPS MIQRA'OT GEDOLOT

NUMBERS בְּמִדְבָּר

*With the 1917 and 1985 English translations of
the Jewish Publication Society TANAKH, the questions of Abarbanel,
the commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides,
and selections from the Masorah and from the commentaries of
Bekhor Shor, Kimhi, Hizkuni, Gersonides, Abarbanel, and Sforno*

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KORAH

קֹרַח

NJPS 16 Now Korah, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, betook himself, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—descendants

OJPS 16 Now Korah, the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On, the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben,

RASHI 16:1 Korah ... betook himself. The Hebrew says merely that he “took”; the “men” of OJPS come from v. 2. NJPS has taken “betook himself” from the Tanhuma, which explains this passage beautifully. He took himself to one side, splitting off from the community in order to protest Aaron’s being given the priesthood.

Onkelos translates “took” as “split off.” He split off from the rest of the community and persisted in disputing the selection of Aaron. The verb “take” is used similarly in “How your heart has carried you away” (Job 15:12): it has “taken” you to split you off from the rest of humanity. Another reading: Korah enticed the heads of the tribal councils among them—he “took” them with persuasive words, as in “Take Aaron” (Lev. 8:2); “Take words with you and return to the LORD” (Hosea 14:3). **Son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi.** It does not go on to add “son of Jacob,” because Jacob begged God not to have his name associated with this dispute: “Let not my person be included in their council, let not my being be counted in their assembly” (Gen. 49:6). Where is Jacob’s name associated with Korah? In connection with his descendants’ service at the Tabernacle with song, where the full genealogy of “Heman the singer” is given, right down to “son of Korah son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi son of Israel” (1 Chron. 6:17–28). **Along with Dathan and Abiram.** Since Reuben was camped just south of the Kohathites, these Reubenites took Korah’s side in the quarrel. Woe to the wicked and woe to their neighbors! But why would Korah quarrel with Moses? He was jealous of Elizaphan son of Uzziel, whom Moses (by divine command) had appointed as chieftain of the Kohathites. [A] Korah reasoned: My father was one of four brothers: “The sons of Kohath: Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel” (Exod. 6:18). The two sons of Amram, the oldest, got the highest positions, one as king and

[A] See 3:30.

NAHMANIDES 16:1 Korah ... betook himself. The Tanhuma is not saying what Rashi thinks. They are reading “Korah” as the object of the verb, not the subject: Something “took Korah”—his heart, which moved him to split himself off from the community, as in “How your heart has carried you away” (Job 15:12). But it does not mean that he took himself to one side; it means that he took counsel with his heart to decide what he should say. “He took thought,” as the idiom has it. (The Job verse is somewhat more complicated than it sounds on the face of it.) Note also “Accept my discipline rather than silver” (Prov. 8:10) and “They stiffened their necks and would not pay heed or accept discipline” (Jer. 17:23). Numbers Rabbah also explains it as I do. Onkelos drew his translation here

not from the language but from the situation, as he does in many places. For example, he translates *davar* in 17:14 as the “splitting off” of Korah, while in 31:16 he translates the same word as the “bidding” of Balaam (as does NJPS there). He translates freely rather than literally. Ibn Ezra explains the “taking” to mean that he “took men,” as OJPS translates, but this is unnecessary. The verb “take” is used idiomatically in Hebrew to mark the beginning of an action: “He took and gathered men to rise against Moses,” that is, in the comparable English idiom, “he up and did it.” This is the proper understanding as well of “Absalom, in his lifetime, had taken the pillar which is in the Valley of the King and set it up for himself” (2 Sam. 18:18)—he took and set it up for himself.

Ibn Ezra says further that this incident took place at the time when the Levites replaced the first-born. The Israelites were upset (according to him) that the Levites had taken their positions, while the Levites themselves were upset that the priesthood was reserved for Moses’ brother Aaron and his sons. This follows Ibn Ezra’s opinion, which he repeats often, that the Torah is not written in chronological order. He thinks he can apply this principle whenever he wants. But, as I have said, [A] in my opinion the Torah is indeed perfectly chronological except when it explicitly indicates that a particular incident took place at an earlier or later time. (Even in such a case there is always a good reason for putting that passage out of order.) In fact, this incident took place in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh-barnea, after the incident with the spies. What is correct about Ibn Ezra’s interpretation is that Korah was upset (as the Sages tell us) that

[A] See Nahmanides’ comments to 1:1, 9:1, Lev. 8:2, and his introduction to Exodus 18.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 16:1 Korah ... betook himself. V. 1 is somewhat abbreviated, counting on the reader’s understanding that v. 2 completes it. Similarly 13:30 tells us that Caleb “hushed the people” for Moses, but does not tell us what Moses said, trusting that we will learn that from Deut. 1:29 (Bekhor Shor). He took himself and his comrades to put together their plot (Kimhi). He took Dathan and Abiram and the others; the “with” that appears in the translations is simply a letter *vav*, which can be ignored, as it often is in Biblical Hebrew. In 14:35 God announced, “In this very wilderness they shall die to the last man,” and we now begin to learn how they died: some in the Korah affair, some in the plague, some at Shittim (ch. 25), and so forth, till not a one of them was left (Hizkuni). He “took” them in the sense that he talked them into it—though the Torah does not tell us what he said to them (Gersonides). **Dathan and Abiram.** The prayer shawl challenge described by Rashi in his comment on this phrase was the obvious one to use; God had just issued

טו ויקח קֹרַח בְּיָצֵהוּ בְּיָקוּחַ
בְּיָלְוֵי וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם בְּנֵי אֱלִיאָב וְאֹן

ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS + V. 1 in the Hebrew says merely “Korah took”—but what did he take?

RASHBAM 16:1 Korah ... betook himself. Rather, “Korah ... took men” (OJPS)—just as “Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot” (Gen. 12:5). So too Korah took with him Dathan and Abiram and so many other men that a full 250 of them stood before Moses.

IBN EZRA 16:1 Korah ... betook himself. Rather, he “took men” (OJPS), where the object “men” (which is not found in the Hebrew) is understood. Compare “Jesse took an ass laden with bread” (1 Sam. 16:20), where “laden with” does not actually appear in the Hebrew. There are many such cases. See further my comment to “men of repute” in v. 2. The NJPS translation follows Jonah ibn Janah.

This incident took place in the wilderness of Sinai, when the Levites were set apart for God’s service, replacing the first-born. The Israelites thought that our lord Moses had done this on his own, in order to bestow high standing upon his brother; the other Kohathites, his relatives; and the Levites as a whole, his clan. But the other Levites conspired against him because they had been assigned to Aaron and to his sons. Dathan and Abiram got involved in the conspiracy because Moses had removed the first-born status of their tribe, Reuben, and given it to Joseph. [A] (They may have suspected he did this because his attendant,

[A] Which had two tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh, matching the double portion of the inheritance that was the right of the first-born.

NJPS of Reuben—²to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute.

RASHI one as High Priest. Shouldn't I, as the son of Izhar, the second brother, get the next position? But he appointed a son of the youngest brother of all as our chieftain! I am going to dispute this decision and get it canceled! — What did he do? He up and collected 250 heads of tribal councils (most of them from Reuben, his neighboring tribe): Elizur son of Shedeur and his associates: "chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly" (v. 2; and see also 1:16). He put prayer shawls on them that were completely of blue. They came and put this question to Moses: "Must a prayer shawl that is completely blue still have a fringe added to it with a cord of blue?" He replied, "It must." They began to make fun of him. "A different kind of garment needs only a single thread of blue—can it be possible that this one, which is completely blue, still needs more blue?" **Descendants of Reuben.** Literally, "sons of Reuben" (OJPS), but Dathan, Abiram, and On were of course not his sons but later descendants.

NAHMANIDES Elzaphan, not he, was given the leadership, and that he was jealous of Aaron's priesthood. After all, he says this explicitly in v. 10. Dathan and Abiram got involved with him not because of Reuben's losing first-born status—it was Jacob himself who took this from Reuben and gave it to Joseph [B] —but for the reasons they express plainly in vv. 13–14. No such evil as this took place while Israel was at Sinai. In fact, even in the famous Golden Calf incident, very few people died. They were saved by Moses' spending 40 days and nights in prayer for them. For that very reason, they loved him as they loved their own lives, and they obeyed him. If someone had rebelled against Moses back then, they would have stoned him. That is precisely why Korah put up with Aaron's being given high rank and why the first-born put up with losing their own positions to the Levites. But once they got to the wilderness of Paran, with the fire at Taberah (11:1–3), and the many who died at Kibroth-hattaavah (11:33–34), and Moses' subsequent failure to pray for them after the sin of the spies, so that the chieftains died of plague and the decree that they would all perish in the wilderness was not rescinded—then they became desperate enough to think that all the bad things that had happened to them were Moses' doing. That is when Korah found his opportunity to quarrel with Moses, and that explains the argument of vv. 13–14: "Even our children will never get out of this wilderness and will not possess the good land that you promised them!" The bottom line is that this incident took place exactly when it is written in the Torah, immediately after the incident with the spies. It certainly is plausible that those involved in the dispute were first-borns upset about losing the priesthood. This would explain why Moses told them to take fire pans (v. 6)—just as they used to do—to see which group the Lord had really chosen.

[B] See 1 Chron. 5:1–2.

the holiness of the first-born. After all, in Exod. 13:2 God explicitly said, "Consecrate to Me every first-born." It was they who were "the priests who come near the LORD" of Exod. 19:22 and the foremost men of the whole assembly.

2 To rise up against Moses. Literally, "in the face of Moses" (OJPS; that is, "before him"). They did not rise up against him in secret. When the preposition is not "in" or "to" but "from," however, this expression can indeed refer to something done in secret. [C] **Chieftains of the community.** One grammarian says that they were those who supervised the census of ch. 1. **Chosen in the assembly.** Literally, "those called to meeting," for they were the ones called to the Tent of Meeting. **Men of repute.** Men who had already

[B] See Exod. 14:31. [C] Compare "the man and his wife hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden" (Gen. 3:8).

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS the command about the fringes at the end of ch. 15 (Hizkuni). Ibn Ezra's explanation that this took place at the time when the Levites replaced the first-born is wrong and false; if Dathan and Abiram took part because they were camped nearest to Korah, it obviously could not have happened before the census of ch. 1 and the arrangement of the divisions in ch. 2 (Abarbanel). **On son of Peleth.** The name "Peleth" occurs only once elsewhere in the Bible, in 1 Chron. 2:33 (Masorah). The straightforward sense of the Hebrew is that he was one of the 250 men of v. 2. Remember that Jacob himself was counted as one of the 70 people "of Jacob's issue" in Exod. 1:4 (Bekhor Shor). Peleth is Pallu of 26:5 and elsewhere (Abarbanel). **Descendants of Reuben.** They were angry that Reuben's first-born status had been taken away, given to Judah (see ch. 2) in military rank and to Joseph (see ch. 26) with regard to the allocation of the land (Abarbanel).

2 Two hundred and fifty Israelites. He took 23 men (enough for a "small Sanhedrin") from each of the 11 tribes other than that of Levi, making 253—the 250 of our verse and Dathan, Abiram, and On (Hizkuni). It is not the 250 men who are the "Israelites" of our verse; rather, the 250 rose up "in face of Moses, with certain of the Israelites" (compare OJPS). They picked a moment when a large group of people stood before Moses for judgment, so that the news of their dispute would spread quickly and widely through the camp (Sforno). **Men of repute.** The phrase occurs nowhere else in the Bible (Masorah).

OJPS took men; ²and they rose up in face of Moses, with certain of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty men; they were princes of the congregation, the elect men of the assembly, men of renown;

בְּ-פָלֶת בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן: ²וַיִּקְמוּ לְפָנַי מִלְּשָׁה וְאֲנָשִׁים מִבְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲמִשִּׁים וּמְאַתָּה נְשִׂיָאֵי עֵדָה קְרָאִי מוֹעֵד אֲנָשֵׁי-שָׂם:

ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS † Why is the action of rebellion repeated in different words in v. 2—"they rose up" (OJPS)—and yet again in "they combined" of v. 3?

RASHBAM 2 Chosen in the assembly. The Hebrew phrase is essentially the same as "elected of the assembly" (1:16). It literally means not that they were "chosen" or "elected" but "called." These were the men the community called upon when it was time to send people to the assembly that was regularly scheduled in order to resolve legal disputes.

IBN EZRA Joshua, was from the tribe of Ephraim.) Korah was a first-born himself: "the sons of Izhar: Korah, Nepheg, and Zichri" (Exod. 6:21). Remember that Reuben camped on the south, and Korah, being a Kohathite, was among the Levites camped south of the Tabernacle. The "chieftains of the community" (v. 2) were all first-borns, so they would have been presenting the offerings up until now; that is why they were willing to take the fire pans when Moses suggested it. The proof of this explanation is the miracle of the staffs in 17:23. For only then did all Israel see that the Lord had chosen the tribe of Levi to replace the first-born. As God explained to Moses there, the purpose of this miracle was precisely "so that their mutterings against Me may cease" (17:25); this issue of the Levites versus the first-born was what the muttering was about. You see that Moses told them this plan was "not of my own devising" (v. 29); that was exactly what they suspected him of. When he goes on (in that verse) to remind them, "If these men die as all men do ... it was not the LORD who sent me," he must be specifically referring to this plan, for in other respects the people had faith in Moses. [B] Another absolute proof of my theory is Korah's saying that "all the community are holy" (v. 3). He was alluding to

NJPS ³They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the LORD is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the LORD's congregation?"

⁴When Moses heard this, he fell on his face. ⁵Then he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, "Come morning, the LORD will make known who is His and who is holy, and will grant him access to

RASHI ³ You have gone too far! Rather, "you have too much" (compare OJPS). You have taken far too much greatness for yourselves. **All the community are holy.** You are not the only ones who heard "I the LORD am your God" (Exod. 20:2) at Sinai—the whole community heard it. **Why then do you raise yourselves above the LORD's congregation?** It is one thing for you to have taken the kingship for yourself—but you shouldn't have assigned the priesthood to your brother.

⁴ **He fell on his face.** Because of the dispute. For this was already their fourth act of defiance. In the case of the Golden Calf, "Moses implored the LORD" (Exod. 32:11); after "the people took to complaining" (11:1), "Moses prayed to the LORD" (11:2); and then with the spies, Moses told the Lord, "When the Egyptians ... hear the news" (14:13). But in the quarrel with Korah he felt that his hands were tied. A parable: A king's son defied his father. The king's friend pacified the king once, twice, and then a third time. But when the son defied the king a fourth time, the friend's hands were tied. "How many times can I pester the king about this? Perhaps he will not listen to me anymore."

⁵ **Come morning, the LORD will make known.** Now, in the evening, when we have had a bit to drink, is not the right time to appear before Him. — But what Moses was really

NAHMANIDES ⁴ **When Moses heard this, he fell on his face.** But Aaron did not. He did not say a word during this entire dispute, being both too sacred and too disciplined to do so. He kept silent, as if admitting that Korah's status was greater than his own, but that he was simply doing what Moses said and obeying the king's decree. [C]

⁵ **The LORD will make known who is His and who is holy.** Rashi explains the difference between these two phrases nicely. The first means that the Lord would make known whether the first-born (3:13) or the Levites (8:14) were now "His." Being "holy," of course, referred to the priesthood, for which (according to 1 Chron. 23:13) Aaron had been set apart. For Korah was disputing even this, in order to get the people on his side, intending to give even the priests' duties back to the first-born. But the fire (v. 35) made clear that the first-born had not been chosen, and the acceptance of Aaron's incense made clear that he had. [D] **He will grant access to the one He has chosen.** The repetition indicates that, beyond the immediate result, this will be a sign for all future generations not to dispute either about whichever one was chosen or about his descendants for all time. In fact, Moses had already had the idea of making such a test. He picked incense

[C] It is not clear whether by "king" here Nahmanides means Moses or God. [D] "The acceptance of Aaron's incense" may refer either to 17:11-15 or simply to the fact that, unlike the 250 men, Aaron was not burned.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS ³ **They combined.** Three separate disputes were going on at once: that of Korah, who "betook himself" (v. 1) about the High Priesthood; that of the Reubenites, who decided "to rise up" (v. 2); and that of the first-born, who "combined" against Moses (Abarbanel). **You have gone too far!** Taking this greatness for your own family—making Aaron and his sons priests, and giving them garments of gold, precious stones, and pearls, all at public expense—while you call the rest of the people "outsiders" (Bekhor Shor). This is not *rav* meaning "many," but *rav* from the verb "to dispute": "You have a quarrel on your hands!" (Abarbanel). **All the community are holy.** And they are all worthy of the priesthood, for in Exod. 19:6 God called the entire people "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Bekhor Shor). Rather, "they are all holy," from head to foot (Sforno).

⁴ **When Moses heard this.** That they suspected him of helping his brother lord it over them (Bekhor Shor). "Heard" here carries the sense it sometimes has in Biblical Hebrew of "understood"; Moses now understood that he was facing three separate disputes (Abarbanel). **He fell on his face.** Out of shame at their suspicion (Bekhor Shor).

⁵ **Come morning, the LORD will make known who is His** with regard to the priesthood **and who is holy, and will grant him access to Himself,** whether the first-borns or the Levites, and **He will grant access to the one He has chosen** as first-born, whether Reuben or Judah and Joseph (Abarbanel). Rather, "the Lord will make known who is for Him"—who speaks of Him with respect (Sforno).

OJPS ³and they assembled 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 the LORD is among them; wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?"

וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב-לָכֶם בִּי כָל-הָעֵדָה בָּלָם קִדְשִׁים וּבְתוֹכֶם יְהוָה וּמִדַּע הַתְּנַשְׂאוֹ עַל-קִהְלֵי יְהוָה:

וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפֹּל עַל-פָּנָיו: ⁵ וַיִּדְבֹר אֶל-קִרַח וְאֶל-בְּלִיעֶזֶר לֵאמֹר בְּקֹר וַיִּדַע יְהוָה אֶת-אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ וְאֶת-הַקְּדוֹשׁ וְהַקְּרִיב

ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS + Just what were the rebels complaining about when they said, "You have gone too far!?" + Why did Moses respond with the threat of v. 5 rather than saying, as he eventually would in 16:9, "Is it not enough for you" and so forth? + What call was there for Moses to say not only "the LORD will make known who is His" but also "and will grant him access to Himself" and "He will grant access to the one He has chosen"? Assuming that the argument was whether Aaron or Korah should be High Priest, wouldn't one of these three expressions have been enough?

⁴And when Moses heard it, he fell upon his face. ⁵And he spoke unto Korah and unto all his company, saying: "In the morning the LORD will show who are His, and who is holy, and will cause him to come near unto Him; even him whom

RASHBAM ⁴ **He fell on his face.** To pray. There he was told what he then said to Korah in vv. 5-7.

IBN EZRA had a reputation before they came out of Egypt. All three of these (according to that grammarian) are the objects of the verb "take" in v. 1, as if it read, "Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and On took the chieftains of the community aside to speak with them." This does put the object a bit far away from the verb. [D]

³ **You have gone too far!** Literally, "you have a greater," meaning, "you have enough!" You have taken the greater share. **For all the community are holy.** All the community have been holy since the day we stood at Sinai. **The LORD is in their midst.** For the Levites were not chosen until after the Presence was in the midst of the Israelites. [E] Though Moses, who had been on Mount Sinai, knew that the tribe of Levi had been chosen, the rest of the Israelites did not know this. **Why then do you raise yourselves above the LORD's congregation?** Making Aaron the High Priest and Moses, who taught him what to do, even higher than him.

⁴ **He fell on his face.** He did so deliberately. But some think he did it in a fit of prophecy.

⁵ **Who is His.** Which is the chosen tribe. This was Moses' answer to Dathan, Abiram, and the chieftains, all of whom were first-borns. **And who is holy.** Who

[D] Some understand Ibn Ezra to be making a stronger comment here: "Admittedly this is a bit far fetched." [E] When "the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the LORD filled the Tabernacle" (Exod. 40:34).