

Who was Korah in the Bible?

The Bible introduces us to four people named Korah, but only one earned his place in infamy. The first is Korah, son of Esau and Oholibamah (Genesis 36:5, 14, 18; 1 Chronicles 1:35); the second is Korah, son of Eliphas and grandson of Esau and Adah (Genesis 36:16); the third is Korah, son of Hebron and a descendant of Caleb (1 Chronicles 2:43); and, finally, there is Korah, son of Izhar, a Levite whose blatant rebellion against Moses and Aaron brought about his own demise as well as the deaths of everyone aligned with him (Numbers 16:1-40).

This fourth Korah, a contemporary of Moses, is best known as the man who was swallowed alive by the earth along with his family and all his associates after they revolted against the authority of Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. Korah's story illustrates a vital truth about the seriousness of sin and rebellion against God's chosen leaders.

The years of wilderness wanderings were fraught with episodes of murmuring, complaining, and rebellion by the Israelite people. Numbers 16 weaves together the stories of two of these uprisings against Moses and Aaron. The chief figure in the revolts is a subordinate Levite named Korah. Joining him are Dathan and Abiram, two Hebrews from the tribe of Reuben, as well as 250 of the top leaders of Israel.

Korah was the grandson of Kohath. As a Kohathite, Korah was one of those responsible for transporting the items within the tabernacle, including the ark of the covenant, from place to place (Numbers 3:27-32). The Kohathites reported to Aaron's son Eleazar, who oversaw the items in the tabernacle. But Korah was not satisfied with his assigned service. He wanted to be a priest. Jealous and resentful of his lower position, he questioned the claim of Aaron and his sons to be God's only ordained mediators for the

people. Korah argued that the entire community had an equal right to the priesthood. His power play not only challenged Moses and Aaron but God Himself, affronting the Lord's divine authority to anoint whomever He chooses.

The group that Korah led came to Moses and said, "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?" (Numbers 16:3). When Moses heard Korah's opposition, he fell facedown and said, "In the morning the LORD will show who belongs to him and who is holy, and he will have that person come near him" (verse 5). Moses challenged Korah to a test, calling him and his followers to the sanctuary the next morning to offer incense before the Lord: "The man the LORD chooses will be the one who is holy. You Levites have gone too far!" (verse 7). The rebels had accused Moses and Aaron of going too far with their assertion of authority, so Moses countered, saying Korah and the Levites had gone too far in their rebellion.

At that time, Moses also reprimanded Korah for his ingratitude and grasping for power: "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? He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too" (Numbers 16:9-10). And he reminded Korah that his rebellion was not against Moses and Aaron, but "it is against the Lord that you and all your followers have banded together" (verse 11).

The next morning, the moment of truth arrived. Korah and his followers met Moses and Aaron at the entrance to the tabernacle, and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the

people. The 250 Israelite leaders each had a censer, and they put coals and incense in them to offer before the Lord (Numbers 16:18). God spoke, telling Moses He would destroy the whole congregation (verse 20), but Moses and Aaron interceded, preventing the destruction of the entire camp (verse 22).

God then commanded that the rest of the assembly move away from Korah, Dathan and Abiram, and their tents. Moses pronounced a curse upon the rebels, and immediately “the ground under them split apart and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all those associated with Korah, together with their possessions. They went down alive into the realm of the dead, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community” (Numbers 16:31-33). A fire then came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 leaders who had offered incense before the Lord (verse 35).

Regrettably, God’s severe judgment on Korah and his associates did not silence the people’s grumbling. As the Israelites continued in opposition to Moses, once more the Lord threatened to destroy the whole nation. But as before, the faithful intercession of Moses and Aaron saved the people again, although more than fourteen thousand Israelites died of a plague. Thus, the rebellion of Korah was finally quelled (Numbers 16:41-50).

There are two postscripts to Korah’s tragic story. In the New Testament, the fate of Korah is used as a warning to false teachers who harass the church: “Woe to them! . . . They have been destroyed in Korah’s rebellion” (Jude 1:11). On a happier note, the descendants of Korah found favor in God’s eyes. Seven generations after Korah died, the prophet Samuel arose from the line of Korah (1 Chronicles 6:31-38 and 1 Samuel 1:1, 20). The Korahites later became doorkeepers and custodians for the tabernacle (1 Chronicles

9:19-21; 1 Chronicles 2.) One group of Korahites (1 Chronicles 12:6) joined King David in various military exploits and won the reputation of being expert warriors. And, during the time of King David, the sons of Korah became the leaders in choral and orchestral music in the tabernacle. Among the biblical psalms, eleven are attributed to the sons of Korah: Psalms 42, 44-49, 84-85, and 87-88.