

## Chapter 18

### Striking Death of Aaron's Sons; Rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram

THERE WERE further exhibitions of the visible hand of God during the wilderness journey of Israel under Moses, which deserve attention, before we cross the Jordan under Joshua's leadership, and behold the wonderful display of divine power by which a country fortified to heaven was subdued by the unmilitary congregation of the children of Israel. Some of these have a special significance, in addition to their interest as acts of miraculous interference.

Foremost, we may take the summary death of Aaron's sons while engaged in the service of the sanctuary. The incident occurred in connection with the initiation of Aaron and his sons into the office of priesthood. The required offerings having been made and accepted by fire, Nadab and Abihu proceeded to offer incense. They took their censers and put fire in them from some other source than the one prescribed. The commandment was that they were to take "burning coals of fire from off the altar before the Lord" ([Lev. 16:12](#)); but, either in ignorance or in negligence, they "offered strange fire before the Lord" ([Lev. 10:1-2](#)). It was an express breach of the ordinance. Yahweh had "commanded them not" to do this thing. The disobedience was undoubted, and it was severely visited. "There went out fire from the Lord and *devoured them.*" Their dead bodies were immediately afterwards carried out of the camp by near relations. Following this, here is a noticeable item. It was Aaron's duty, in the service marred by this incident, to eat the appointed portion of the goat of the sin-offering. When the time came for this eating, Moses found the goat flesh to be eaten had been burnt. The fact was, Aaron was not able to eat, for grief at the death of his sons, and had burnt all. This was Aaron's answer to the sharp reprimand of Moses on discovering the omission ([Lev. 10:19](#)). The circumstances is worth noting as a casual evidence of the genuineness of the narrative—apparent at every step. It is a touch of nature which never could have found its way into an invented story, and it is a story that never could have been invented; for all invention has an object, and it would baffle the most ingenious imagination to suggest an object in representing Aaron as remiss in the offices of the priesthood. If not an invention, it is a true account—that Nadab and Abihu were smitten dead in the precincts of the sanctuary for a violation of the law regulating their office.

It was a miracle, but as real a performance in nature for all that, as when a couple of labourers are struck dead by the forked lightning in the field. The difference lay in the fire of the sanctuary being specifically directed, which ordinary lightning is not. There was a very specific object in view. A principle had to be asserted against the negligence of Nadab and Abihu at the supreme moment when the Mosaic schoolmaster-discipline of the law was being established. This principle is defined in the explanation addressed to Aaron by Moses: "This is it that Yahweh spoke saying, *I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me*, and before all the people I will be glorified" ([Lev. 10:3](#)). A miracle was necessary in the circumstances to enforce this necessity for extreme deference and punctilious obedience in approaching to God. In the absence of miracle, Nadab and Abihu's dereliction would have become a precedent and a habit, and the

institutions of the sanctuary would soon have fallen into disuse. They had no basis but the divine appointment; and if the earnest terrible reality of that appointment had not thus promptly been shown in the presence of disobedience, they would never have been planted in the midst of Israel at all. These and other severities established the fear of Yahweh for several generations: and though Israel in their history has in the main proved disobedient, to this day is to be seen, in their fear of Yahweh's name and law—(slavish and superstitious though it be)—the effect and the proof of the reality of those measures by which in the beginning the foundations of obedience were laid.

The tragic incidents of the rebellion of the priests and princes exhibit another instance both of this discipline and the necessarily miraculous nature of the means employed to enforce it. The jealous feeling entertained by Aaron and Miriam towards Moses, considered in the last chapter both as to its origin and suppression, was largely shared by several influential men in the congregation, whose disloyal spirit infected quite a numerous body of the princes, and spread extensively in the camp. The feeling spread and fermented until it took the shape of a formidable deputation of over 250 men, headed by Korah, a leading priest, of the family of the Kohathites, and Dathan and Abiram, leading princes in the camp of Reuben. These men (all “princes of the assembly, famous in the congregation, men of renown,”) came formally into the presence of Moses and Aaron with a mutinous challenge: “Wherefore lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?” The proposed grounds of this challenge were of the usual sort. The truth was not put in the front. In reality the challenge was the offspring of ambitious aspiration in the part of the challengers—men small-minded enough to aspire to headship, but not large-minded enough to be qualified to exercise it, which, had they been, they would not have desired it: for the men fit to exercise authority are not those who find a personal gratification in it. But the real grounds are never put forward in such a case. Consciously or unconsciously men in such an attitude play the hypocrite. They put forward pleas that are serviceable, but not sincere—sincere enough as regards the earnest use made of them, but not sincere as regards the real motive at work. And they usually take the garb of a professed regard for somebody else's rights, or for justice in the abstract—to both of which, in ordinary circumstances, the class in question exhibits a total indifference. “All the congregation are holy, every one of them; and the Lord is among them: wherefore, then, lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?” Such was the speech in which Korah, Dathan, and Abiram sought to call in question the work of Moses, aggravating their insinuation further on with this question: “Is it a small thing that thou has brought us up out of a land that floweth with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, except thou make thyself altogether a prince over us?” Here was the revolt of democracy very early in the world's history—the cause of “the people” *versus* government divinely appointed; and the Lord's “people” too: for it was quite true what the insurgents said—that the congregation was the congregation of the Lord, and holy every one—in the sense of having been separated and sanctified to the divine use. The revolt, therefore, against the “one-man-system” of Moses would, superficially, seem a very legitimate and worthy affair. We shall see how it appeared in the divine eyes, with whom nothing is less in favour than the loud-praised modern thing, called “the voice of the people.”

“When Moses heard it, he fell on his face.” What could he do? The situation demurred to by these malcontents was not of his creating, as we have seen times without number. He was certainly in sympathy with the work which God was accomplishing by his hand: but as for his personal part, it was none of his seeking, and so far from being the gratifying thing the insurgents imagined, it was the cause of much burden and mortification of spirit. Moreover, he knew the

congregation were now placing themselves on the brink of a volcano. Past experience had shown him the heat of the anger glowing under the surface of the divine patience with wayward Israel: and he could not but fear that the catastrophe he had averted by personal entreaty on the summit of Sinai, would now burst forth and consume the whole congregation in a moment. No wonder he was overwhelmed in the presence of the mutinous attitude of the princes. "He fell upon his face."

Rallying to the duty belonging to the situation, he proposed an arbitration which could not fail of a satisfactory settlement. "To-morrow the Lord will show who are his ... This do: take your censers, Korah and all his company, and put fire therein, and put incense in them before the Lord to-morrow, and it shall be that the man whom the Lord doth choose, he shall be holy." There is no evidence that Moses knew what was to transpire on the morrow. The succeeding narrative would rather suggest that he did not know, but merely acted on the confidence that Yahweh, who had vindicated his appointment against the murmurings of Aaron and Miriam, would in some way indicate his mind in the more serious crisis now forming in their midst. If they all appeared before Yahweh on this issue: "whom hath Yahweh chosen for the priesthood?" Moses did not doubt that the question would receive some palpable and conclusive answer. He had no doubt on the point in his own mind; how could he, after all that had transpired? But he desired the malcontents to receive their answer. Therefore he made this proposal, not altogether without the reproof which their attitude called for: "Ye take too much upon you, ye sons of Levi ... Seemeth it but a small thing unto you that the God of Israel hath separated you from the congregation of Israel to bring you near to Himself, to do the service of the tabernacle of the Lord, and to stand before the congregation to minister unto them? And He hath brought thee near to Him, and all thy brethren, the sons of Levi with thee; and *seek ye the priesthood also?* For which cause both thou and all thy company are gathered together against the Lord: *and what is Aaron that ye murmur against him?*" ([Num. 16:7, 9, 11](#)). These words were addressed to Korah, the priest, and his company. Dathan and Abiram, their sympathisers of the Reubenites, were not present at the time. Therefore Moses sent a message to them to arrange for to-morrow's test-assembly. But they refused to come, and sent back a scornful answer, at which Moses was angry, saying to God, "Respect not thou their offering: I have not taken one ass from them, neither have I hurt one of them." To Korah and his company Moses said they were not to fail to present themselves next day, with all their sympathisers, before the Lord, at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation.

Next day arrived. Korah was duly at his post, with his 250 priestly supporters, each man furnished with his censer, and stationed with erect and brazened confidence. Not only that, but Korah had been through the camp in the interval, making known what was in question, and found nearly the whole assembly in a mood to take part with him. The result was the gathering of an immense concourse of the people, along with Korah and his abettors, at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. "All the congregation," we are told, were gathered against Moses and Aaron. They had every disposition to revolt, as they showed on several previous occasions; and now that the priestly families themselves were moving in this direction, they doubtless felt a wonderful liberty in the matter—a kind of feeling that revolt became sacred under such leadership, and alacrity in their evil cause a matter doubly sweetened by inclination and sanction. Moses and Aaron stood in their midst—possibly feeling somewhat nervous in the presence of such a powerful opposition. It was not for long.

"The glory of Yahweh appeared unto all the congregation." This was the exciting moment. Expectancy would grow to a great pitch. The shining out of the divine glory would make one and

all in that immense assembly feel that the matter in debate was recognised as worthy of divine adjudication. But on which side? That was the question. For a moment doubtless, the rebels—standing in the presence of the divine brightness—all illuminated with the glory to the utmost fringes of the multitude—would feel justified in their cause, and expectant of a divine endorsement: not for long. “Yahweh spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, *Separate yourselves from among this congregation that I may consume them in a moment.*” Brief but tremendous utterance on the case! Korah and his company were the complainants: the congregation of the people but sympathised: here was a decree to destroy one and all, and Moses and Aaron advised to step aside for safety! It is a fearful thing to fight against God. Moses and Aaron did not desire such an appalling vindication. They recognised that, as regarded the bulk of the assembly, they were misled—that the true offenders were the priests and princes of the people, who ought to have known better. They were overwhelmed in the presence of the divine anger. “They fell upon their faces and said, ‘O God, the Elohim of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin and wilt thou be wroth with all the congregation?’ ” God respected the intercession of Moses, and relaxed the sentence against the people. Determining, however, on the total destruction of all the priestly rebels, and their immediate abettors among the princes, He instructed Moses to order the people to get away on every side from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Dathan and Abiram were not among the company of Korah. They would not honour Moses so much as to come to the trial of their own complaints against him. With callous obstinacy, they remained within their tents, and laughing, doubtless, with their wives and families, at the commotion they had raised, refusing to recognise the discussion of the question in any way—insisting only on their unreasonable objections, without any concern for a rational settlement. (Such men are still to be met with). But if they would not go to Moses, Moses now comes to them—not, however, with words of conciliation—the time for that is past; but with words of warning to all the people about them: “Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest ye be consumed in all their sins.” The people about them showed themselves not insensible: “They gat up from the tabernacle of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram on every side.” Dathan and Abiram showed their foolhardy bravery by coming outside their tents, and standing there with their wives and families, trying to look unconcerned as the manner of such is. It was but for a moment. Moses addressing the people, said, “Hereby ye shall know that *Yahweh hath sent me to do all these works*: FOR I HAVE NOT DONE THEM OF MY OWN MIND. If these men die the common death 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.” Thus the nature of the issue and meaning of the events being enacted were very precisely defined. The lesson so sharply taught on the occasion remains good to this day. Action followed quickly on these ominous words: “It came to pass as Moses had made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground clave asunder that was under them. And the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up and their houses and all the men that appertained unto Korah and all their goods. They and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit, and the earth closed upon them, and they perished from among the congregation.” As for the phalanx of the “two hundred and fifty princes of the assembly, famous in the congregation, men of renown,” drawn up in front of the tabernacle, lightning flashed from the divine presence and struck them dead on the spot, and their brazen censers, scattered in the burning, were, by divine direction, gathered and converted into plates to cover the altar in remembrance of the dire calamity, and in token to Israel, “that no stranger which is not of the seed of Aaron come near to

offer incense before Yahweh.”

But the rebellion was not yet at an end. In a fictitious narrative, such a visitation as that just described would certainly have been represented as a complete settlement of the discontent of the people. But in a record of facts, we have the characteristics of human nature veraciously illustrated. While the destruction of the princes had cowed the people and sent them to their tents, a night’s rest gave a new turn to their rebellious thoughts. They could not deny what their eyes had seen—the destruction of a formidable body of influential rebels; but now they refused the reasonable lesson of the fact, and gave a colour to it in harmony with their own feelings: “Ye have killed the people of the Lord.” They could not deny the killing; but instead of accepting it as God’s act, they imputed it to the power of Moses and Aaron, and made it only a new reason for discontent. Their insubordination was incorrigible. They were inclined to re-open the question so dreadfully settled on the previous day. “They gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, saying, Ye have killed the people of the Lord.” Again the clouds gathered threateningly. Again they were dispersed by miraculous interposition. The glory of Yahweh again shone from the tabernacle: Moses and Aaron, making hasty obeisance in the presence of the glory, were adjured to get away from the midst of the congregation that they might be destroyed. Moses, in the promptitude of faithful and earnest fear, enjoined on Aaron the making of an immediate atonement for the congregation, in accordance with Yahweh’s own previous appointments, declaring to Aaron, “There is wrath gone out from Yahweh: the plague is begun.” Aaron, with kindled censer, ran into the midst of the congregation, and made an atonement, as commanded. He found the plague making dreadful ravages. He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stayed, but not till 14,700 persons had fallen victims.

The concluding incident of this terrible episode ranks prominently among the exhibitions of the visible hand of God. The miraculous budding of Aaron’s rod was no frivolous or wizard feat, such as it is apt to appear when mentioned as an isolated fact. It was a reasonable measure adopted for an earnest purpose. The object is thus stated: “I will make to cease from me the murmurings of the children of Israel.” To accomplish this Moses was directed as follows: “Speak unto the children of Israel, and take of every one of them a rod, according to the house of their fathers, of all their princes, according to the house of their fathers, TWELVE RODS: write thou *every man’s name upon his rod* ... And thou shalt lay them up in the tabernacle of the congregation, before the testimony where I will meet with you. And it shall come to pass that the man’s rod whom I shall choose shall blossom.” The rods were accordingly collected and laid up in the tabernacle; and next day, the rods being brought out, it was found that “the rod of Aaron, for the house of Levi, was budded, and brought forth buds and bloomed blossoms and yielded almonds” ([Num. 17:8](#)). And Moses brought out all the rods from before the Lord *unto all the children of Israel*” (there were no concealments or demands for “confidence” in the measures that established the authority of Moses) “and they looked and took every man his rod,” except Aaron, whose budded rod was ordered to be laid up in the tabernacle, and “kept for a token against the rebels.”

The people had no answer to such demonstration of the divine choice of Levi for the service of the priesthood. But they were not pacified. They retired into the caverns of a silent and gloomy discontent, muttering, “Behold, we die; we perish; we all perish. Whosoever cometh anything near unto the tabernacle of the Lord shall die.” Yahweh might then and there have righteously annihilated the incorrigible murmurers at a stroke; but He had patience with them for the sake of His ultimate purpose, which would have been hindered by their destruction. “*For my name’s sake* will I defer mine anger; and *for my praise* will I refrain for thee that I cut thee not

off;” an explanation admitting us to this consoling reflection, that the prosperity of godless men is only a part of the necessary programme of the divine work upon earth; and, with comforting firmness, commanding “patience”!

On the nature of these miracles it is unnecessary to say more than has been said in other cases. With all of them men are already acquainted in the operations of nature. The thunderbolt or the forked lightning slays in a moment, at any time; and as for the yielding of leaves, blossoms and almonds, who is not familiar with it every year wherever an almond tree is planted in the earth? The only difference is that in the case before us, the fire was intelligently directed, and the almond blooms quickly instead of being slowly formed. What wise man will say that fire intelligently formed, cannot be intelligently directed? and that the process of vegetable formation cannot be accelerated to any degree of speed that the Inventor of vegetable growth sees fit? Fools, who are in a large majority according to Mr. Carlyle, may demur readily enough; but even they have to admit that fire is subject to even human manipulation, and that the hothouse forcing of fruit and flowers is not an unknown phenomenon.