

"The Gainsaying of Korah"
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St. John Henry Newman
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"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 11.

1 THERE are two special sins which trouble the Church, and are denounced in Scripture,
2 ambition and avarice, the sin of Korah and the sin of Balaam; both of which are spoken
3 of in the text. The sin of Balaam is denounced again and again by St. Paul, in his
4 Epistles to Timothy and Titus; as where he says, "A Bishop must be ... not greedy of
5 filthy lucre ... not covetous;" "the Deacons must be ... not greedy of filthy lucre;" noticing
6 the while that some supposed that "gain was godliness," and "taught things which they
7 ought not for filthy lucre's sake." [1 Tim. iii. 8; vi. 5. Tit. i. 7, 11.] And the sin of Korah, or
8 ambition, is condemned by our Lord, when He commands, Whosoever will be great
9 among you, let him be your minister; by St. James, when he says, "Be not many
10 masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation;" and by St. Paul,
11 when he directs that a Bishop should not be a "novice, lest being lifted up with pride he
12 fall into the condemnation of the devil." [Matt. xx. 26. James iii. 1. 1 Tim. iii. 6.] And both
13 sins together are spoken of by St. Peter, in his exhortation to the Elders to "feed the
14 flock of God ... not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's
15 heritage, but being ensamples to the flock." [1 Pet. v. 2, 3.]

16 Accordingly, these are the two sins brought before us by our Church in the first lessons
17 of the first Sunday after Easter, which is, as it were, the festival in commemoration of
18 the Ministerial Commission. After celebrating the resurrection of Christ, when He
19 became "a Priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek," we proceed to make mention
20 of the means which He has instituted for exercising His Priesthood on earth
21 continually,—for commemorating and applying in the Spirit, among His elect people,
22 again and again, day after day, to the end of the world, that atoning death and glorious
23 resurrection, which He wrought out once for all in His own person on Calvary. He
24 Himself instituted that means on the very day that He rose from the dead, ordaining
25 man, frail and fallible as he is, to be the vessel of His gifts, and to represent Him. When
26 He was risen, He did not first show Himself to His enemies, nor manifest the Spirit, nor
27 unfold His new law, nor destroy the Temple; but He consecrated His Ministers: "As My
28 Father hath sent Me," He said to His Apostles, "even so send I you." And, as if after His
29 pattern, we too, even at this day, follow up the celebration of His "taking to Himself His
30 great power," with that of His delegating it to His Church, as the Gospel selected for the
31 same Sunday shows.

32 Of such high importance then, in our Church's judgment, is the subject of the Christian
33 Ministry; so intimately connected with the Divine scheme of mercy, so full of reverence
34 and awe. This will be best seen by proceeding, as I shall now do, to consider the lesson
35 derived from the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, which, though properly

36 belonging to the Old Covenant, our Church certainly considers applicable to us
37 Christians.

38 The history in question contains an account, not only of the ambition of Korah himself,
39 who was a Levite or minister, but of the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram, who were not
40 ministers, but, as we now speak, laymen.

41 In considering it, I shall confine myself to this point, viz. to determine the feelings and
42 circumstances under which these wicked men rebelled against Moses and Aaron, and
43 that, with a view of warning those who speak lightly of schism, separation, and dissent,
44 in this day. For I think it will be seen that they are feelings and circumstances which
45 prevail very widely now as well as then, and, if they do prevail, are as evil now as they
46 were then; St. Jude, in the text plainly intimating that such gainsaying as Korah's is a sin
47 in a Christian, as well as formerly in the Jews, and that those who commit it are in the
48 way to perish. This, then, is a very serious thought; considering, as I have said, how
49 men in these days make light of it.

50 The outline of the history of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram is this: they rebelled against
51 Moses and Aaron, and in consequence Dathan and Abiram were swallowed up by an
52 earthquake, and Korah's company was burnt with fire. Now, then let us proceed to the
53 remarks proposed.

54 1. First, then, let the number and dignity of the offenders be observed. They seem to
55 have been some of the most eminent and considerable persons in Israel. Dathan and
56 Abiram's party are said more than once, with some emphasis, to have been "famous in
57 the congregation, men of renown." [Numb. xvi. 2; xxvi. 9.] Moreover there were among
58 them as many as two hundred and fifty *princes*, or as we should now say, noblemen. A
59 very great and formidable opposition to Moses and Aaron was it, when so great a
60 number of eminent persons rebelled against, or (in modern language) became
61 dissenters from the Church. Nor was this all,—a portion of God's appointed ministers
62 joined them. The Levites, as we all know, were the especially holy tribe: a portion of
63 them, viz. the family of Aaron, were priests; but all of them were ministers. Such was
64 Korah; but, dissatisfied with being merely what God had made him, he aspired to be
65 something more, to have the priesthood. And it appears that just as many of his
66 brethren joined him in his rebellion as there were princes who joined Dathan and
67 Abiram. Two hundred and fifty Levites, or ministers, were banded together in this
68 opposition to Moses, forming, from their rank and number a body (to use once more
69 modern language) of very high respectability, to say the least, that is, respectability in
70 the eyes of men.

71 2. Next, let us observe how confident they were that they were right. They seemed to
72 have entertained no kind of doubt or hesitation. When Moses denounced Dathan and
73 Abiram, and bade all those who wished to escape their curse, to "depart" at once "from
74 the tents of those wicked men," "Dathan and Abiram came out, and stood in the door of
75 their tents, and their wives, and their sons, and their little children." You see they had no
76 misgivings, no fears, no perplexity; they saw their way clear; they were sure they were

in the right; and they came out, to stand any test, any sentence of wrath which Moses might attempt, as thinking that nothing could come of it. Nor was Korah's confidence less. Moses challenged him and the rest to appear before God, to perform the priest's office, and so to stand the test whether or not He would accept them; and they promptly accepted the proposal. They were to "take their censers, and put fire therein, and put incense in them before the Lord," "and it shall be, that the man whom the Lord doth choose, he shall be holy." Korah and his company accordingly "stood in the door of the tabernacle of the congregation with Moses and Aaron;" nay, in that sacred and awful place, where was the glory of the Lord visibly displayed, did Korah endure to "gather all *the congregation*" against Moses and Aaron. Sceptics, were there such standing by, might have made the remark, that both parties were equally sincere, equally confident; and therefore neither was more pleasing to God than the other.

Such was the confidence of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, of the two hundred and fifty princes or nobles, and the two hundred and fifty ministers of God. And we, who believe that in spite of their confidence Almighty God was against them, are perhaps at first sight tempted to attribute it to some extraordinary infatuation, judicial blindness, special hard-heartedness, or the like,—something quite out of the way, peculiar perhaps to the Jews,—something which cannot happen now. We cannot comprehend how their confidence could possibly be based on *reason*—I do not say on correct reason, but on even *apparent* reason. We do not consider that perhaps they *thought* they had good reasons for what they did, as we often think in our own case, when we really have not. Rather we attribute their conduct to something irrational, to pride, obstinacy, or hatred of the truth, as indeed it was in its origin; but I mean, to some such evil principle operating on the soul *at once*, and not operating on it *through* the pretence of reason, not so operating as to be hidden whether from themselves or others. And thus we lose the lesson which this solemn history is calculated to convey to us at this day; because, since the opposition made to God's Church in these days is professedly based upon reason, not upon mere prejudice, passion, or wilfulness, persons think that the confidence with which they oppose themselves to it, is a very different sort of confidence from that of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, whereas it is really very much the same.

3. What, then, were the reasons or arguments which made Korah, Dathan, and Abiram so confident they were in the right,—so confident, that they even ventured to appeal to God, and to rise up against Moses and Aaron as if in the Name of the Lord? Their ground was this: they accused Moses and Aaron of what is now called *priestcraft*. Let us pay attention to this circumstance.

Now, let it be observed, that there were many rebellions of the people, founded on open and professed *unbelief*. This was not the character of the particular sin under review: it was not a disbelief in God, but in Moses. Distrust in Moses, indeed, was mixed up in all their rebellions; but generally their rebellion was more strictly directed against Almighty God. Thus, when the spies returned, and spread about an evil report of the good land, and the people believed them, this implied a disbelief in the Divine Arm altogether, as manifested in their deliverance and protection. Thus they complained of the manna; and

thus they went out on the seventh day to gather it. But it is remarkable, that in the rebellion before us, there is no hint of the promoters of it disbelieving in the power or providence of God over the chosen people; only they accuse Moses of altering or (as we should say) corrupting the divine system. Dathan and Abiram were sons of Reuben, the first-born of the tribes: they might consider that Moses was interfering with their prerogative by birth to lead and govern the people. But, any how, they seem to have relied on their rank and eminence; they and their companions were "famous in the congregation, men of renown," and they could not bring themselves to submit to God's appointment, by which the nation was formed into a Church, and Levi was chosen, at God's inscrutable will, to be the priest instead of Reuben. Accordingly, far from denying that God was with the nation, they maintained it; they only said that He was not specially with Moses and Aaron; they only claimed an equality of honour and power with Moses and Aaron; they only denounced Moses and Aaron as usurpers, tyrants, and hypocrites. Far from showing any scoffing or lightness of mind, or profaneness, such as Esau's who rejected the blessing, they so esteemed it as to claim it as their own, in all its fulness; nay, they claimed it for the whole people. They were only opposed to what is now called *exclusiveness*; they were champions of the rights of the people against what they called the encroachments, the arrogant pretensions, the priestcraft of Moses their Lawgiver, and Aaron the Saint of the Lord. They said, "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 congregation of the Lord?" Their objection was, that Moses was interposing himself as a mediator between God and them,—limiting the mercies of God, restraining the freedom, obscuring the glory of His grace, and robbing them of their covenanted privileges; that he had instituted an order of priests, whereas they were *all* priests, every one, and needed no human assistance, no voice or advice, or direction, or performance, from fallible man, from men of like passions and imperfections with themselves, in order to approach God withal, and serve Him acceptably. "*All* the congregation are holy," say they, "*every one of them*; and the Lord is among them." "The Lord is not far off; He is not in the clouds only, He is not on Sinai, He is not on the mercy-seat, He is not with Aaron; but He is among us, in the congregation, as near one man as another, as near to all of us as He is to Moses." Their partisans affect the same tone even after God's judgment has fallen on the rebels. The people say to Moses and Aaron, "Ye have killed the people of the Lord." Yes; they call those separatists and schismatists "the Lord's people," and they accuse Moses and Aaron forsooth of having, by some device of juggling priests, some strange and diabolical stratagem, some secret of magic or science, compassed the death of their enemies, while they pretended to refer it to a miraculous judgment; and they seem as if to pride themselves on their discernment, on the clearness of intellectual vision by which they saw through the fraud, and brought it home to the impostors.

Awful guilt indeed in these self-wise men, if this representation be true! yet it is apparently true, as the words show with which the rebels themselves answer the summons of Moses to come to him. "Wilt thou," say they, "put out the eyes of these men? we will not come up." No; we have eyes; we are not mere dull, brutish, superstitious bigots, to crouch before a priest, and submit to his yoke of bondage; we can reason, we can argue, we are resolved to exercise our free unfettered private

165 judgment, and to determine (candidly indeed and dispassionately), but still to determine
166 for ourselves before we act. We will indeed give a fair hearing to what is told us; we will
167 listen with a becoming deference and with all patience, nay with a sort of consideration
168 and prepossession to what you, O Moses and Aaron, say to us; but still we will not have
169 our eyes put out. No, seeing is believing; we will not go by instinctive feeling, by
170 conscience, by mere probabilities; but everything shall be examined in a rational and
171 enlightened way, everything searched, and sifted, and scrutinized, and rigidly tested,
172 before it is admitted. The burden of proof lies with you; till you have proved to us your
173 claims, we will not go up, we will not obey. To tell the truth, we are suspicious of you.
174 We are "jealous with a godly jealousy" (alas! for men do so speak!) of any
175 encroachments on our spiritual liberty, any assumption of superior holiness, superior
176 acceptableness in one of us over another. We are all brethren, we are all equal, all
177 independent. "Wilt thou make thyself altogether a prince over us?" "Moreover," they
178 continue, "thou hast not brought us into a land that floweth with milk and honey, or given
179 us inheritance of fields and vineyards;" or as men now speak, The present system does
180 not work well; there are many abuses, abundant need of reform, much still undone
181 which should be done, much idleness, much inefficiency, many defects in the Church.
182 We see it quite plainly. Do not seek to defend yourselves. "Wilt thou put out the eyes of
183 these men? we will not come up."

184 Something of the same kind of spirit had already shown itself in the sin of the golden
185 calf, though that sin was open idolatry. Then also the people thought that they had
186 found a better religion than Moses had taught them. They were far from denying God's
187 miraculous providences; but they said that Moses had taken to himself what belonged
188 to the nation; he had taught them in his own way, and they had a right to choose for
189 themselves. "Up," they said, "make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this
190 Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become
191 of him." [Exod. xxxii. 1.] And where was Moses? He was with God in prayer and vision.
192 They did not know, or at least understand this. So they said, "What a time for a ruler to
193 be absent! in what a crisis! how much is there that wants doing!—forty days are gone,
194 and he is still away. Is he lost? has he left us here to ourselves? is he feigning any
195 communication from heaven? any how, what binds us to *him*? We are bound indeed to
196 the God who has brought us out of Egypt, but not to the rule of Moses or the line of
197 Aaron." Moses was away; and where was Aaron?—where? the people could not ask,
198 for they were partakers in his sin, rather, they had forced him into their sin, the sin of the
199 golden calf. Aaron was receiving their gold ornaments, and was moulding them into an
200 idol. Alas! the people could not accuse him, who had seduced him into the sin. But
201 there *were* those who might, who did complain; and who they were, since I have been
202 led to the subject, it will be found to our present purpose to inquire.

203 They were the Levites. While Aaron sinned, they, the inferior ministers, stood silent, but
204 wondering and distressed. These had no part in the sin; and when Moses came down
205 from the mount and said, "Who is on the Lord's side?" [Exod. xxii. 26.] then they, and
206 they only, answered the call. "All the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto
207 him;" and when he ordered them, they promptly "put every man his sword by his side,
208 and went in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slew every man his

brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbour;" and "there fell of the people that day about three thousand men." This is considered in Scripture [Note 1] the act of consecration by which the Levites became the sacred tribe; so that their advancement to the ministerial office is historically coincident with Aaron's temporary defection from his more sacred duties in it. All this had happened, as some suppose shortly before, as others think as much as twenty years before, the occurrence which has been under our immediate review; but whether or not the one occurrence, as has been reasonably conjectured, led to the other, whether or not Korah's stouthearted rebellion was the result [Note 2] of ambitious views in the Levites, which their advancement to the sacred ministry had occasioned, still certain it is that at this time "it seemed but a small thing unto them" (in Moses' words) "that the God of Israel had separated them from the congregation of Israel, to bring them near to Himself to do the service of the tabernacle of the Lord, and to stand before the congregation to minister unto them;" and "they sought the priesthood also," Aaron's portion, on whom they were appointed to attend [Note 3]. And the circumstance that Aaron had failed on that trying occasion when they were rewarded, might dispose them to condemn him at this time, not recollecting that God's will made the difference between man and man, and that He who gave them His covenanted blessings through bulls and calves, might also vouchsafe them, did it please Him, through frail and erring men; and might dispense with inward perfection, and take up with mere earthen vessels, and be content with faith instead of consistent obedience, as He dispensed with eloquence, or wisdom, or strength. Such then were the circumstances under which the Levites rebelled, being elated by their existing privileges, as the Reubenites were stimulated by jealousy.

The parties then concerned in this formidable conspiracy were not besotted idolaters; they were not infidels; they were not obstinate, prejudiced, unreasoning zealots; they were not the victims of unscrupulous and desperate ambition; but though ambitious, proud, head-strong, obstinate, unbelieving, they veiled all these bad principles, even from their own conscience, under a show of reason, of clear, simple, straightforward, enlightened reason, under a plain argument open to the meanest capacity: "All the congregation," they said, "were holy, *every one*." God had signified no exception or exclusion; all had been baptized in the Red Sea, all had been at Sinai. Moses, however, thus they might speak, had added to this simple and primitive religion a system of his own, a system of priestcraft. The especial favours which God had shown Moses were done twenty years before, and could be denied without much chance of contradiction; or if the rebellion took place (as others say) shortly after the Exodus, then it came close upon Aaron's sin in the matter of the golden calf. Any how, an excuse was easily found for explaining away the authority of Moses and Aaron, for denying the priesthood, and accusing it of being a corruption; and for professing to be the champions of a pure and enlightened, and uncorrupt worship,—a worship which would be quite clear of the idolatrous acts of Aaron, because in it Aaron's prerogative would be destroyed altogether.

Such is the history of the Church in the wilderness, in which we see as in a type the history of the Gospel. And how did it end? I stated in the commencement. The earth opened, and swallowed up Dathan, and covered the congregation of Abiram, their

253 houses, their families, their possessions, and all that belonged to them. Fire went out
254 from the Lord, and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who offered incense.

255 A very few words will suffice to suggest the lesson to be derived from this awful history;
256 it is this:—If the Old Testament is still our rule of duty, except in such details as imply a
257 local religion and a material sanctuary; if it is our rule of duty in its principles, its
258 doctrines, its precepts; if the Gospel is but the fulfilment and development of the Law: if
259 the parts in both are the same, only the circumstances without and the Spirit within new;
260 if though Circumcision is abolished, yet there is Baptism instead of it; the Passover
261 abolished, yet Holy Communion instead; the Sabbath abolished, yet instead of it the
262 Lord's Day; if the two tables of stone which contained the Law are destroyed, yet the
263 Sermon on the Mount takes their place; if though Moses is gone, Christ is come; and if
264 in like manner, though Aaron is gone and his priestly line, another order of priests is
265 come instead; (and unless this is so, the Old Testament is in a great measure but a
266 dead letter to Christians; and if there be but a chance that it is so, and if it has always
267 been taken to be so, it is a most serious matter to act as if it were not so;) how great
268 must be the sin of resisting the ministers of Christ, or of intruding into their office! How
269 great the sin of presuming to administer the rites of the Church, to baptize, to celebrate
270 the Holy Communion, or to ordain, or to bless, without a commission! Korah's sin was
271 kept in remembrance for ever on the covering of the Altar, "to be a memorial," says the
272 inspired writer, "that no stranger which is not of the seed of Aaron, come near to offer
273 incense before the Lord, that he be not as Korah and his company;" in other words (as
274 the warning is to be interpreted now), "that no one, who is not descended from the
275 Apostles by laying on of hands, come near to perform the ministerial office before the
276 Lord, that he be not such as Korah and his company." Many, you will say, intrude into it
277 in this day in ignorance. True, it is so. Therefore, for them let us pray in our Lord's
278 words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Notes

279 1. Exod. xxxii. 29.

280 2. Vid. Patrick on Numb. xvi. 2.

281 3. Numb. iii. 10.