**Korah, Dathan and Abiram**

The U.S. Navy Blue Angels and Air Force Thunderbirds are air demonstration teams that have for decades performed before crowds across the country. While their shows are spectacular, they are not without risk. About 10% of the pilots who have joined these teams have died during accidents. The worst accident occurred on 1/18/82 when 4 Thunderbird pilots were killed while training. They were practicing a side by side loop maneuver when all 4 planes struck the ground after descending several thousand feet. After an investigation, the Air Force concluded that a stabilizer jammed on the plane of the lead pilot and the other pilots followed him in formation. There was no margin for error as the planes were supposed to level off at 100 feet. There was no time for the other pilots to react after the lead pilot went down. In our study of Numbers chapter 16 we see men who have had ample warnings from seeing the consequences of previous events but go to their deaths as they follow an evil leader.

The chapter begins with yet another rebellion against the authority of Moses. A man named Korah who was a Levite stirred up opposition to Moses and was joined by 2 Reubenites and then a total of 250 men. Their complaint was that the priesthood was reserved for only Aaron and his sons. They contended that the entire assembly of Israelites was holy and that Moses and Aaron had no right to set themselves above them. Matthew Henry pointed out the irony of this claim given that the assembly had been so frequently and so lately polluted with sin. Rather than aspiring to a lofty position, they should have been thankful that they had priests to mediate between them and God. Although Korah was a Levite and privileged to serve at the tabernacle, he was not a priest. My NIV study Bible notes that he had perhaps seen the advantages of Egyptian priests who had great wealth and political power and wanted those things for himself. The initial response of Moses was to fall on his face in prayer before God who gave him direction on how to deal with the latest insurrection. Moses instructed Korah and his followers to bring censers before the Lord the following day and God would choose the one who was holy. Moses rebuked Korah telling him that he was already honored by working in the tabernacle and that their argument was with God.

The following day, the 250 men with their censers filled with incense stood before God along with Aaron and Moses. His anger burned against all the Israelites and as before, told Moses that He would destroy the entire nation. Moses again interceded on their behalf and God allowed the people to live but told them to separate themselves from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. The KJV uses the term “the tabernacle of Korah, Dathan and Abiram indicating that they may have built a separate tabernacle for themselves and their followers. Moses told the people that if the men opposing them died a natural death, then God had not sent him but if the earth swallowed them it would be because they had provoked God. God did exactly as Moses predicted and those who had joined Korah died. After that the fire from God consumed the 250 men who held censers. Moses then instructed Aaron to have his son Eleazer to take the censers and have them made into plates to cover the alter since they were holy.

Even after seeing the consequences of opposing God, the people complained that Moses and Aaron had killed Korah and his followers (the KJV says they said to Moses and Aaron “You have killed the people of the Lord”). God then appeared and again vowed to kill the congregation. Moses and Aaron prayed to God on behalf of the people then Moses had Aaron to offer incense as an atonement for the people and his actions satisfied God and the plague was stopped, however 14,700 people died.

Some observations about this chapter:

It is ironic that the ire of Korah and his followers was directed mainly at Aaron because he was the high priest. They wanted to put themselves on equal footing with Aaron just as he and Miriam had done previously in opposing Moses. The difference was that Aaron immediately knew he was in the wrong and confessed their sin (see 12:11).

Those who wanted to rebel against Moses and Aaron had not learned from the fate of the 10 men who had been sent to scout Canaan (see 14:37). In fact, this rebellion seem worse since it was such a large group of men. Rather than spreading a bad report about Canaan, these 250 men were very publicly defiant as were also those who complained about the deaths of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.

As is often the case, pride probably played a role in the fate of Korah. Moses offered him a way to retreat by pointing out that he was privileged to serve at the tabernacle. When Moses told him to have the 250 men present censers Korah would have known that was not allowed by God since only priests could offer incense and only as prescribed by God. Korah would not back down and he was responsible for the deaths of his followers.