

**MOSES AND LEADERSHIP STRUGGLES  
IN THE EXODUS NARRATIVE**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this whole thesis,  
unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text,  
is my own original work and it has not been submitted  
to any other institution.

Lubunga Date 02 March 2007

Lubunga w'Ehusha



## DEDICATION

To

My father Lumbwea Asende Joel and my mother Azina Mwanue Yvonne,  
for their encouragement and support

And

my wife Esther Kenge Lubunga,  
for love and standing with me in all circumstances of life  
I dedicate this work.

## ABSTRACT

Through a contextual reading of the exodus narrative, this study explores various struggles that Moses faced as he led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. During the journey the people complained, not only because of the hardship in the wilderness, but, at a time, they rebelled against Moses' leadership and challenged the institutions he put in place. Moses responded to these rebellions, either by earnest intercession in favor of the community or by letting God's wrath suppress violently the contention. The narrative raises a number of issues related to the exercise of leadership, especially leadership contest that many leaders today still wrestle with.

This study offers an overview of Moses' leadership from his bringing up in Pharaoh's palace until his handing over to Joshua in the desert of Moab. However, the focus of our analysis is on a series of revolts woven together in what is known as the revolt of Korah, as recorded in Numbers 16-17, which illustrates the dynamic of leadership and the complexity of responses to leadership' contests in the Moses story. Moses in this narrative faced three different kinds of charges. The first one was presented by Korah and 250 nobles among the people who contested the special appointment of Aaron and his family to the permanent high priesthood. They questioned the mediation role of this new institution since the entire community is holy and Yahweh could use any person. And also why should the high priesthood be given to Moses' siblings and not to any other family? Dathan and Abiram, the Reubenites, lay the second charges against Moses. They felt that Moses had failed in his mission to lead the people to the Promised Land because most of them were condemned to die in the wilderness. They claimed that Moses should step down or let the people go back to Egypt. The last charges came from the congregation as they reacted over the death of many leaders and families of those who opposed Moses' leadership. They accused Moses of killing the people of God. The intercession of Moses and the atonement of Aaron had spared the congregation from being completely destroyed by God's wrath. Nevertheless, many persons involved in those revolts lost their lives and the death toll at the end of the series was huge for the slaves rescued from Egypt.

In this study we have discussed that, despite, the horror of punishment that every rebellion entailed, the people did not show any sign of repentance or acceptance of the structure of leadership set by Moses. The passage ends with a new approach proposed by God to solve the crisis, de-personalizing the conflict. He suggests that family staffs be used instead of individuals in a test designed to establish the legitimacy of the priesthood. The entire congregation accepts the proposal and cooperates with Moses in applying God's suggestion. The result is amazing as the people declare that they would not oppose God's institutions, lest they all perish, when they see the budded staff of Aaron.

This study encourages a dialogical reading, which takes into account the various steps of contextual hermeneutics defined by African theologians in a very integrated way so that at each level of the analysis the reader can engage his/her own context and the context of the narrative. This reading has the advantage of identifying areas where the two contexts

agree for appropriation and points of disagreement for in-depth understanding. From the Moses story, the researcher has highlighted lessons that contemporary readers may learn from leadership issues reflected in the narrative. These include legitimacy, succession, teamwork, sacral authority, democracy and kinship. On the other hand, the study draws the attention of the reader to the pitfall of applying some ways of appointing leaders or dealing with opposition that do not fit the present context. Those areas of disagreement between the two contexts become matters of further investigation for readers who believe in the authoritative character of the biblical text and its power to shape people's conduct. The insights that the reader can gain from the Moses story may help understand and deal adequately with the many oppositions to established leadership that Africa experiences both in the Church and secular setting.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude explore, à travers une lecture contextuelle de la narration de l'exode, plusieurs luttes que Moïse a rencontrées quand il a mené les esclaves Hébreux hors d'Égypte. Pendant le voyage les gens se sont plaints, pas seulement à cause de la vie dure du désert, mais aussi, ils se sont rebellés contre le leadership de Moïse et ont défié les institutions qu'il a mis en place. Moïse a répondu à ces rébellions, soit par une sérieuse intercession en faveur de la communauté, soit en laissant le courroux de Dieu supprimer la lutte violemment. La narration soulève plusieurs questions en rapport avec l'exercice du leadership, surtout l'opposition au leadership que beaucoup de dirigeants aujourd'hui rencontrent.

Cette étude offre une vue d'ensemble du leadership de Moïse depuis son enfance dans le palais de Pharaon jusqu'à sa succession par Josué dans le désert de Moab. Cependant, le centre de notre analyse est sur une série de révoltes tissées ensemble dans ce qui est connu comme la révolte de Koré, comme cela est enregistré dans Nombres 16-17. Ceux-ci illustrent le dynamisme du leadership et la complexité de réponses à donner à l'opposition au leadership dans l'histoire de Moïse. Moïse dans cette narration a fait face à trois différentes sortes d'opposition. La première a été présentée par Koré et 250 nobles parmi le peuple qui ont contesté la position spéciale d'Aaron et sa famille comme souverain sacrificateurs perpétuels. Ils ont mis en doute le rôle de la médiation de cette nouvelle institution puisque la communauté toute entière est sacrée et Yahweh pourrait utiliser n'importe quelle personne. Et aussi Ils se demandaient pourquoi est-ce que la haute prêtrise devrait être donnée aux frères et sœurs de Moïse et pas à toute autre famille? Dathan et Abiram, de la tribu de Reuben, ont soulevé la seconde opposition contre Moïse. Ils ont senti que Moïse avait manqué dans sa mission de mener les gens à la Terre Promise parce que la plupart d'eux ont été condamnés pour mourir dans le désert. Ils ont réclamé que Moïse devrait démissionner ou laisser les gens retourner en Égypte. Les dernières accusations sont venues de la congrégation comme ils ont réagi contre la mort de beaucoup de dirigeants et familles de ceux qui se sont opposés au leadership de Moïse. Ils ont accusé Moïse de tuer les gens de Dieu. L'intercession de Moïse et l'expiation d'Aaron avait épargné le peuple d'être complètement détruit par le courroux de Dieu. Néanmoins, beaucoup de personnes impliquées dans ces révoltes avaient perdues leurs vies et le chiffre des morts à la fin de la série étaient énormes parmi les esclaves libérés d'Égypte.

Dans cette étude nous avons discuté qu'en dépit de l'horreur de punition que chaque rébellion a entraînée, les gens n'ont pas montré signe de repentir ou acceptation de la structure d'ensemble du leadership établi par Moïse. Le passage se termine avec une nouvelle approche proposée par Dieu pour résoudre la crise, de-personnaliser le conflit. Il suggère que les bâtons de la famille soient utilisés au lieu d'individus dans une épreuve conçue pour établir la légitimité de la prêtrise. Toute la congrégation accepte la proposition et coopère avec Moïse dans l'application de la suggestion de Dieu. Le résultat est étonnant comme les gens déclarent qu'ils ne s'opposeraient pas aux institutions de Dieu, de peur qu'ils périssent tous, quand ils voient le bâton bourgeonné d'Aaron.

Cette étude encourage une lecture de dialogue qui prend en considération les différentes étapes de l'herméneutique contextuelle définie par les théologiens africains d'une manière très intégrée afin qu'à chaque niveau d'analyse le lecteur peut engager son propre contexte et le contexte de la narration. Cette lecture a l'avantage d'identifier des domaines où les deux contextes s'accordent pour appropriation et points de désaccord pour une profonde compréhension. A partir de l'histoire de Moïse, le chercheur a relevé des leçons que les lecteurs contemporains peuvent apprendre de questions du leadership reflétées dans la narration. Ceux-ci incluent légitimité, succession, collaboration, autorité sacrée, démocratie et parenté. En revanche, l'étude attire l'attention du lecteur au danger d'appliquer quelques façons de nommer des dirigeants ou de confronter l'opposition qui ne correspondent pas au contexte présent. Ces points de désaccord entre les deux contextes deviennent matières d'enquête supplémentaire pour les lecteurs qui croient dans l'autorité du texte biblique et son pouvoir de façonner la conduite de gens. La perspicacité que le lecteur peut gagner de l'histoire de Moïse peut aider à comprendre et à confronter efficacement les nombreuses oppositions au pouvoir en place que l'Afrique éprouve aussi bien dans l'Église que dans le cadre séculier.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

ABD	Anchor Bible Dictionary
ANC	Armée Nationale Congolaise
BDB	F. Brown, S.R. Driver and C.A. Briggs, Hebrew and English Lexicon
BHS	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia
BST	Bible Speaks Today
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
IB	Interpreter's Bible
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible
Int	Interpretation
ISBE	International Standard Bible Dictionary
JB	Jerusalem Bible
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JSNT	Journal for the Study of the New Testament
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JTSA	Journal of Theology for Southern Africa
LB	Living Bible
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NAS	New American Standard
NIDOTTE	New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis
NIV	New International Version
NKJ	New King James
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OTE	Old Testament Essays
TDNT	Theological Dictionary of the New Testament
TDOT	Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament
TynBul	Tyndale Bulletin
VT	Vetus Testamentum



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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1. Motivation for the Research**

I am interested in studying the struggles of and challenges to Moses' leadership for two main reasons. The first is that Moses is such an outstanding figure in the sight of both Jews and Christians that most of the writings are dedicated to presenting him as the hero of liberation and the lawgiver of Israel. This presentation tends to blur the other side of the reality, which has drawn our attention, of a human leader who has known the dilemmas of leadership and whose authority was several times challenged. Leadership for Moses was a learning experience beginning with being brought up in the Egyptian Palace, becoming a shepherd in the desert, and ending his life as the founder of a nation and prophet of Yahweh. But his leadership is manifested as he faced multiple oppositions. One of the biblical typologies of Moses in the New Testament is Paul. Yet we know more about the opponents of Paul than we do of Moses. This present study is designed to make a contribution to our knowledge of Moses the servant of God who experienced the applause and also the rejection of his followers.

The second is that the Church in Africa is called to reflect theologically on issues that plague our society. Poverty and HIV/AIDS have caught the attention of writers and politicians so that people tend to overlook the general instability of our institutions. The struggle for leadership and the lack of leadership skills stand among the major causes of instability of many religious, economic, and political institutions on the continent. If this issue is not adequately addressed it may annihilate all efforts to bring sustainability and development in Africa. The proliferation of independent Churches in sub-Saharan Africa can be explained partly by the revolt against the current leadership in religious institutions. Politically, the situation is chaotic with civil wars and military coups in several countries. There have been revolts not only against dictatorial leaders such as Mobutu Sese Seko (Zaire) and Idi Amin Dada (Uganda), but also presidents democratically elected have been either killed or overthrown, for example Ndadaye in Burundi and Pascal Lisouba in Congo Brazzaville. My country, D. R. Congo, has experienced a serious crisis of leadership in its history. Congolese were not prepared for leadership positions when the Belgians were forced to end their colonial rule. When

independence came to Congo in 1960 there were only sixteen Congolese college graduates. There were no army officers, engineers, agronomists, or physicians.<sup>1</sup> This lack of preparation for leadership led the first regime to political chaos, which opened the door to the dictatorship regime of the former president Mobutu Sese Seko. In His comment on this period Martin Meredith argues,

Yet the Congo paid heavily for the chaos surrounding the advent of independence. For years to come it became a battleground for warring factions, marauding soldiers, foreign troops, mercenary forces, revolutionary enthusiasts and legions of diplomats and advisers.<sup>2</sup>

From the time of independence time political leadership crisis has prevailed up to now. Laurent D. Kabila, took power after Mobutu was killed, and his son Joseph Kabila replaced him, then the country was divided into four territories led by different factions. In order to bring peace and satisfy the lust for leadership of the chief rebels a huge government of unity with one president and four vice-presidents was put in place. The recent elections held in two turns, on 30 July and 29 October 2006, since none of the candidates got the 50% +1 passing votes required by the electoral commission in the first leg, are intended to put an end to the transition and open the way to the democratic exercise in the country. People are eager to see how other chiefs of armed gangs will cooperate with the newly elected president who was sworn on 6 December 2006. The Church in Africa if it is to be relevant, has to participate in solving issues like this when they arise in the country by providing theological insights drawn from biblical models. This study on leadership struggles during the exodus and especially the revolt of Korah and Moses' reaction is designed to provide biblical principles in the challenges to leadership in Africa. One should not ignore that there are today various and sometimes divergent approaches to reading the Bible and not all of them portray models or principles that are agreed upon by all. Nevertheless, those who turn to the Bible for guidance and direction as the inspired word of God may locate their applications within a framework which accommodates their various views.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on the circumstances under which Congo came to independence, read Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Creed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (London: Papermac, 2000), 300-306. See Also Sanford J. Ungar, *Africa: The people and Politics of an Emerging Continent* (New York: Touchstone, 1989), 62-67.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Meredith, *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2005), 114.

## 1.2. Research Problem

There is often a price to pay for leadership. Even Moses, a God-appointed leader, did not escape from the rule. The story known as the 'revolt of Korah' is actually a complex narrative on rebellion combining two distinct movements, one led by Dathan and Abiram, and the other of Korah and his company. They revolted against the authority of Moses and the priesthood. The movement spread and involved the whole congregation of Israel. The rebellion bore both religious and political characteristics as we shall show later, which makes the story relevant and applicable to our African context. It is considered as the most serious testing of Moses leadership recorded in the Bible. Mary Douglas notes, "As Korah speaks for the Levites against Aaron's authority, he has roused the population of Israel who were the subject of the second census. He also collects to his banner other malcontents, led by sons of Reuben, and 250 of the leaders."<sup>3</sup> The people had many times expressed their discontent because of the lack of water and food and even Aaron and Miriam murmured because of Moses' supremacy (Num 12). But in this story there is no hardship reported, the motive is only contestation of leadership. It brings forth how latent conflict, which grew within the community, became an organized revolt, before it burst into the open and affected everybody, Moses, Aaron, Korah and his group, the people and finally God. In his book, *The Nursing Father: Moses as a Political Leader*, Aaron Wildavsky argues that, "Throughout the Bible, conflict plays a creative as well as a destructive role. Opposition—whether between Egyptian masters and Hebrew slaves or Moses' commandments versus Aaron's license—is necessary to test the mettle of leaders and to work out the coming sharing of power with followers."<sup>4</sup> What Wildavsky means is that conflict (revolt) can be positive for both leaders and followers if it enables people to improve their relationship and achieve unity, or it may be negative if its consequences bring harm to one party. This study has to pay attention to the testing of Moses' leadership by Korah and his company in order to establish how positive or negative it was for all the parties involved in the conflict.

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Douglas, *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers*, JSOTS, 158 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academy Press, 1993), 130.

<sup>4</sup> Aaron Wildavsky, *The Nursing Father: Moses as a Political Leader* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1984), 124.



What makes Korah's revolt critical is the unique position Moses held in the sight of God and in his role as the liberator of Israel. The biblical narrative portrays him as a man who was so close to God, more than any other person on earth, so much so that he could see God face to face (Num 12:8). Moses alone could intercede to provide food and water in time of want or avert God's wrath when the people sinned. Therefore he won the reverence of the people because of this powerful position. It is written in the narrative that, "And when the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant" (Ex 15:2). It becomes thus dangerous to confront such a mighty leader, because whatever is done against Moses affects God who appointed and supported him. As George W. Coats rightly puts it, "The tradition equates the leadership of Moses with the leadership of God. To rebel against Moses is to rebel against God."<sup>5</sup>

The fact that Korah and his group had decided to revolt against Moses, despite his prominent position among the people, raises questions in the mind of the reader that this study should explore. These may include the following:

- Had Moses used his position to enslave the people of Israel?
- Or, Is Korah one of the jealous, who are never satisfied with their position but always need more?
- Then, How did this revolt affect Moses, the people, and God?
- What lesson can our society learn from this story?

A critical examination of these questions in their biblical context will help the researcher to understand the dynamic of leadership contest during the time of Moses<sup>6</sup> and how it can illuminate the actual situation in our society today. This discovery will enlighten our understanding of leadership struggle, its motives and how to handle it. This study is a contribution to dealing with a rebellious spirit observed in many Churches as well as by nations in Africa, mainly among the youth in quest of a new order. They reject the leadership inherited from missionary agencies and colonial government which has been carried out by the elders in power at present.

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<sup>5</sup> George W. Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man of God*, JSOTS, 57 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 110

<sup>6</sup> Be it during the time of the exodus or the time of the compilation of these traditions, the people of faith had used these narratives to shape their life and behaviour.

### 1.3. Literature Review

Some skeptics consider the study of Moses as a risky adventure into a very dangerous jungle. The main reason is the disagreement persisting among scholars concerning various assumptions on the historicity of Moses and the coherence and unity of the texts which portray him. There is as much controversy over the authorship of the Pentateuch as over the historical existence of Moses. This study will not be concerned with questions related to reconstructing the history of Moses, but wholly with the account of events as preserved and described by the writer of this narrative. The reconstruction of the historical Moses remains controversial among biblical scholars and may distract us from engaging with the narrative in its present form. Nonetheless, one cannot explore the Pentateuch without taking into account critical issues raised against the text as we have it. For the purpose of this study it is essential to sketch a broad outline of contemporary issues facing Pentateuchal research. The issue has been dealt with in details over centuries and a review of major debates over biblical criticism of the Pentateuch may be obtained from a number of contemporary works.<sup>7</sup> Let us summarize some controversial issues in the theological study of the Pentateuch.

Although the traditions of Judaism and early Christianity have assigned the authorship of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible to Moses, a close reading of the Pentateuch reveals diversity of materials—genealogies, laws, rituals, stories, and poetry—combined in the document which came to be considered as an entity. The question of a single author for these disparate materials has for long haunted biblical scholars. The rise of critical inquiry in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries based on the rationalism of Descartes and the Enlightenment had affected the mindset of the scientific world of the epoch and was also adopted by biblical scholars. The Bible was analyzed with the same

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) gives a good assessment of what has been achieved in the study of the Pentateuch. See also J. Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century. England and Germany* (London: SPCK, 1984); J. Van Seters, *The Pentateuch: Social-Science Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).



scientific scrutiny as any other work and this exercise resulted in the rejection of the traditional belief in the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch.<sup>8</sup> From that time on the formation of the Pentateuch has raised intense debates among scholars. The different viewpoints in pentateuchal research can be grouped in two main streams of theories—the documentary hypothesis and the fragmentary/block hypothesis.

- (1) The Documentary Hypothesis, also known as the literary-critical method or source criticism, is represented by Julius Wellhausen<sup>9</sup> who polished and revised preceding works and gave to the theory the form which has become a classic in pentateuchal study, the 'JEDP'.<sup>10</sup> This approach attributes the formation of the Pentateuch from continuous sources (JEDP) running through the book. The insight comes from the occurrence of different divine names, Elohim (E) and Jehovah (J) in the narrative and the coexistence of matters related to laws and regulations qualified as Priestly (P) with stories in the book. Scholars noted also that Deuteronomy had literary differences from Genesis-Numbers and attributed the book to a separate source (D).<sup>11</sup> Wellhausen's theory of multiple authorship of the Pentateuch has dominated the research up to now despite many challenges.

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the Five Books of the Bible*, 4. Blenkinsopp cites Spinoza in his book *Tractus Theologico-politicus* published in 1670 as the first to declare candidly that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses but by someone who lived long after Moses. Spinoza deduced his argument from the biblical verses in the Pentateuch that could not have been written by Moses, including the last chapter of Deuteronomy about Moses' death and burial. The same document cites some among Spinoza's contemporaries who adopted the same conclusion as Hobbes and a French priest Richard Simon in his book *Historique Critique du Vieux Testament* in 1678. Ever since research on the formation of the Pentateuch has been set on its way.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on Wellhausen's works, *The Composition of the Hexateuch and Historical Books of the Old Testament* (1889) and *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (English version in 1885), see R. Morgan and J. Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 77-88. Also J. Van Seters, *The Pentateuch: A social-Science Commentary*, 34-6; J. Blenkinsopp, *Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible*, 9-12 and Richard E. Averbeck, "Factors in Reading the Patriarchal Narratives: Literary, Historical, and Theological Dimensions" in David M Howard Jr. and Michael Grisanti (eds), *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* (Leicester: Appolos, 2003), 120-126.

<sup>10</sup> J=Jahvist in German; E=Elohist; D=Deuteronomist; and P= Priestly writer (s).

<sup>11</sup> D source was defined by W.M.L. de Wette. For more discussions on De Wette's work, see J. Blenkinsopp, *Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible*, 4-9.

(2) The fragmentary hypothesis is also called the Form Criticism and Tradition-History method. Hermann Gunkel is the prominent figure behind the development of this approach. In his commentary on Genesis published in 1901, he derives the final written form of the Pentateuch from individual units, that he called "saga" or "legend", which were originally independent, then brought together at the last stage of editorial work.<sup>12</sup> Gerhard von Rad and Martin Noth carried out the Tradition-Historical method after the World War II. Von Rad proposes that the reconstruction of the Hexateuch (Pentateuch + Joshua) was done from "little credos" pronounced during religious festivals as recorded in the "Historical credo" in Deut 26:5-9. He describes it as primitive liturgy recounting the history of the ancestors from the entry into Egypt up to the conquest of Palestine. Von Rad proposes that "little credos" were brought together in one document (Hexateuch) during the "Solomonic enlightenment."<sup>13</sup> But Martin Noth thinks that the Tetrateuch (Genesis-Numbers) was reconstructed from five large blocks of traditions which were compiled in one document during the time of judges.<sup>14</sup>

The study of the Pentateuch has been polarized by these two approaches. Though different in their starting point, they are quite similar in their conclusion. Each one has raised issues that should be tackled in order to understand the formation of the Pentateuch but none of them has offered a convincing theory of formation able to rally all biblical scholars.<sup>15</sup> The documentary hypothesis in its attempt to recover the different narrative sources of the Pentateuch, has shown weaknesses in failing to agree on the identification of the work of any particular redactor or source in a text. It has shown its inconsistency

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<sup>12</sup> For details on Gunkel see Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible*, 1-30.

<sup>13</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E.W. Trueman Dicken (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1996), 1-78.

<sup>14</sup> See block's designation by Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible*, 18. For more information see Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 1972).

<sup>15</sup> A survey of various problems raised by critical method see Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical Method* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977).

by splitting up the JEDP into multiple subdivisions and by increasing, therefore, explanatory models of the formation of the Pentateuch.

Different scholars have disagreed about the dating of each source and the question of the last redactor who gave the final form to the whole document remains unsolved. The fragmentary hypothesis is also problematic. It assumes the development of the Pentateuch from independent blocks of oral tradition, but becomes speculative on the transformation from oral origin into written form. There is no agreement on traditions proposed by different scholars and on how they came together. The problem of dating the final editorial work and its compiler(s) raises the question of when did Israel pass from an oral traditional community to a literate society. The same lack of consensus we have shown with the documentary stream can be observed among scholars of the tradition-history method.

The result of the failure to reach an agreement on the formation of the Pentateuch has led to an impasse in the study of the Pentateuch. Gerhard Von Rad has expressed the disillusionment created by the critical method in eloquent words as he confesses, "It might be held that we have reached a position of stalemate which many view with considerable anxiety. What is to be done about it? So far as the analysis of source documents is concerned there are signs that the road has come to a dead end."<sup>16</sup>

Von Rad exposes the disillusionment generated by continuous attempts to reconstruct the source of the Pentateuch and the process of development undergone by the document to reach the final form we have now. Biblical scholars are all conscious that the study of the Pentateuch should be carried on in spite of the ambiguity brought by the two streams of investigation mentioned above, but the question is: Is there any way out of this deadlock?

The answer to this question is 'yes' because there is a way to make sense of the Pentateuch even though it is difficult to solve the issue of its formation. The way out to which this thesis subscribes is found in shifting the emphasis from the unsolved problem

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<sup>16</sup> Gerard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, 1.

of the reconstruction of the origin of the document to the appreciation of the text in its final form. This new approach assumes that there is a core value in the written text which has shaped the faith and practice of the community of faith both in Judaism and Christianity. At the lead of this movement is Brevard S. Childs in what he calls 'the Canonical Criticism.' He defines his approach in these terms,

Canonical analysis focuses its attention on the final form of the text itself. It seeks neither to use the text merely as a source for other information obtained by means of an oblique reading, nor to reconstruct a history of religious development. Rather, it treats the literature in its own integrity. Its concern is not to establish a history of Hebrew literature in general, but to study the features of this peculiar set of religious texts in relation to their usage within the historical community of ancient Israel.<sup>17</sup>

The narrative approach we have adopted for this research shares the same concern for the final canonical form. Whereas the canonical approach is considered as seeking to establish the theological unity, the narrative perspective deals mostly with the literary unity of the narration as a piece of writing laid down by an intelligent narrator. Therefore a narrative approach stands in direct antithesis with what Robert Alter qualifies as "the excavative techniques of critical biblical scholarship"<sup>18</sup> that has led the study of the Pentateuch to impasse.

Let us conclude this review by recognizing that the historical and literary criticisms of the Pentateuch have made real advances in revealing the complexity of the formation of the document. Despite all the critiques by modern scholars, there is no agreed theory at the present to replace the ones set by documentary analysis. It must be noted that the prevailing disagreement over various hypotheses of the formation of the Pentateuch has led the study into a deadlock. The new shift from discussing stages of formation to the text itself has given to the study of the Pentateuch a new motion. The rise of the narrative

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<sup>17</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 73. See also Steven L. MacKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticism and Their Application* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993). Childs sees "canon" as the whole historical and theological process of selecting, collecting and ordering the Scripture.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 13.

approach, as part of the New Criticism movement, assumes that "the text has a life of its own independent of its origins and even of its author's intention, assuming it could be known."<sup>19</sup> The text-oriented approach has the advantage of hearing the message communicated to the audience of the final form and being able to interpret the same to the reader's context. The narrative may have had different audiences in the past but what is common is that the writer addresses people who are aware of the complexity of leadership as all contenders are given a voice without a cover up. This is what this study is all about, to recover those voices in order to understand the difficult role of leadership.

#### **1.4. Theoretical Framework**

This study will follow the new trend of contextual interpretation initiated by several African biblical scholars, which consists in linking the biblical text to the African context. Justin Ukpong defines the approach in these terms:

African readings are existential and pragmatic in nature, and contextual in approach. They are interested in relating the biblical message to contemporary and existential questions, and lay no claim to a universal perspective. They are concerned with the meaning of biblical text not in an intellectualist but in an existential sense. The results of their investigation are considered valid for the contexts concerned but with possible validity for other contexts.<sup>20</sup>

Our reading is guided by the particular situation prevailing in Africa. People feel desperate and are seeking solutions to the many problems on the continent. There is a call like the one sent by the sailors in the book of Jonah "Get up and call on your God! Maybe he will take notice of us and we will not perish" (Jonah 1:6). If we believe that our God is the creator of earth and heavens, then we have no choice other than interpreting the Bible

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<sup>19</sup> J. Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible*, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Justin Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics: An African Approach to Biblical Interpretation" in Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz (eds.), *The Bible in a World Context: An Experiment in Contextual Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 17. Some terms used by Ukpong need further discussion but this is done in chapter 2 where I share my reading approach as compared to the current African interpretation.



in context and telling our people "thus says the Lord." This contextual hermeneutics is positive and able to be applied by scholars worldwide because it establishes a real dialogue between the world of the text and that of the reader, dialogue that Gerald West expresses as follows:

When readers enter the world of the text it transforms them by providing a new way of seeing and being; it offers them new possibilities. When the world of the reader is brought to the text it transforms the text by allowing a plurality of possible readings not perceived in the past to be appropriated in the present by the reader; it offers the text a new way of speaking.<sup>21</sup>

The contextual approach seems to be the dominant trend adopted by African biblical scholars. The contours of the methodology are progressively being defined. The process might be slow because there is need of reconciling various views and approaches adopted by African scholars in their interpretation.

Although it is hard to locate my approach in the ongoing debate, as African scholars are still working towards a consensus in biblical hermeneutics, I would place this study in the third phase in Ukpong's classification—proactive.<sup>22</sup> The proactive phase involves a critical reading of the Bible against the life situation or context of the reader in order to bring change in his/her situation. My methodology may also fall into what David T. Adamo qualifies as "using Africa to interpret the OT and OT to interpret Africa" as he argues that, "the Biblical text was used as a critique of a particular theme or issue in

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<sup>21</sup> Gerald O. West, *Contextual Bible Study*, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993), 38. In another essay, West describes this dialogue as a "transaction" although in its economic connotation a transaction is not always equitable. See Gerald O. West, "Mapping African Biblical Interpretation: A Tentative Sketch" in Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 29-53.

<sup>22</sup> Justin Ukpong, has distinguished three major phases in the development of biblical interpretation in Africa. Phase I (1930s-70s): reactive and apologetic, focused on legitimizing African religion and culture. Phase II (1970s-90s): reactive-proactive dominated by inculturation-evaluative method and liberation hermeneutics (black theology). Phase III dominated by liberation and inculturation methodologies. See Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, 11-28.

Africa. After the use of a historical-critical method to analyze a particular Biblical text, the relevance of that text to African issues was drawn."<sup>23</sup> However, my methodology is literary rather than a historical-critical analysis. Extensive discussion on my methodology in relation to the African hermeneutics is dealt with in the following chapter. I perceive contextual hermeneutics as a step forward in the development of biblical interpretation in Africa. It differs from the reactive and apologetic character of liberation hermeneutics, which focus on the legitimization of African religion and culture and the liberation from domination or oppression. Liberation hermeneutics, including black theology and feminist hermeneutics, bear negative connotations in the sight of some scholars because of their militant use of the Bible as a resource for fighting oppression. They tend to describe a community in protest, seeking self-affirmation. Anthony Thiselton argues that, "Latin American liberation hermeneutics, black hermeneutics, and feminist hermeneutics tend to share certain major themes. First and foremost, they construct critiques of frameworks of interpretation which are used or presupposed in dominant traditions."<sup>24</sup> In his analysis, Thiselton has defined areas targeted by these approaches; liberation theologies seek to critique Western, thought-centered, or bourgeois-capitalist frameworks; black theology deals with colonialist, racist, or imperialist forces; and the feminist hermeneutics protest against androcentric or patriarchal societies.<sup>25</sup> Thiselton's argument should not lead one to overlook the positive contribution made by liberation, black, and feminist approaches in stirring up the consciousness of poor and oppressed people groups from undeveloped countries.

Contextual hermeneutics is an assertive procedure which strives to integrate the context of the Bible and the reader's context in order to bring awaited change in the society. The procedure is broad and should not be confined to or labeled as liberation hermeneutics alone. It is a positive contribution to understanding biblical text, as Gerald West suggests, in what he calls "contextual Bible reading," this interaction may include non-academic

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<sup>23</sup> David T. Adamo, "The Historical Development of Old Testament Interpretation in Africa," *Old Testament Essays (OTE), OTSSA*. Vol. 16/1. (2003), 9-33.

<sup>24</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 410.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 410.

readers in order to bridge the gap between academic and non-academic reading of the Bible.<sup>26</sup>

The contextual interpretation is not limited to African scholars, it is also recognized by the Western academic community as a suitable method for any people to appropriate the biblical message as it is stated in this assertion,

Considering the lack of context that prevails to a large extent in our Western Bible research and taking into consideration that in other continents the particular contexts are much more evident and apparently affect very fruitfully Bible reading and Bible scholarship, we need impulses for contextual Bible hermeneutics from Asia, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>27</sup>

### 1.5. Methodology

The text of this investigation falls among biblical narratives, therefore my interpretation will concentrate on its narrative aspect. Moses will be considered as a prominent character in the narrative. This study will not launch into the debate on historical and source criticisms which try to reconstruct the original form. Though scholars accept that there is a pre-history to biblical narratives when they were orally transmitted and that they have undergone some changes over the course of time, this thesis will exclusively deal with the written form because it contains the message that the narrator wanted to communicate. The focus is put on Moses as portrayed by the narrator and his role in the passage as it may inspire our context. This approach does not dismiss the historical and sociological facts that Moses and his people belong to a certain period of time in the development of the nation of Israel, nor that the final form narrative too is located in a particular time and place. The study will avoid falling into historical skepticism which tries to divide between the traditional Moses described in the narrative and the historical

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<sup>26</sup> Gerald O. West, "Contextual Bible Study in South Africa: A Resource for Reclaiming and Regaining Land, Dignity and Identity," in Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, 595-610.

<sup>27</sup> Wallter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz, *The Bible in a World context: An Experiment in Contextual Hermeneutics*, xi.



Moses reconstructed by the historians. James Nohrnberg expresses the skepticism shared by those who do not believe in Moses' historicity in these terms:

Moses is not less a hero "in Israel" for his extraterritoriality, but he is more a projection of what Israel wished to see in itself: election, consecration, separateness. Moses is thus an ideological construct—a reinvented memory of the uniqueness of Israel's experience of itself before God—and before there was an Israel.<sup>28</sup>

The dilemma of this reconstruction is that it rejects the biblical/traditional Moses and yet it cannot reconstruct the historical Moses because there is no extra-biblical material to support the historical evidence. All that is known of Moses comes from biblical texts. This historical analysis has led to labeling Moses' story as fiction, legend and myth, but this labeling does not affect his position in the narrative and the application the reader can draw from the text. In chapter 2, I have made a critical examination of my reading approach in relation to the current trend of African biblical interpretation, assessing its strengths and weaknesses, and sharing my hope for the future of the methodology.

The focus for this study is put first on the biblical narrative under investigation. This focus is not designed to oppose the literary context to the historical study of the narrative but it assumes that one can draw enough insights from the reading of a narrative to engage into dialogue the 'world of the text' and the 'world of the reader.' Although this study overviews the life of Moses as the leader of Israel in general, the focus is put on the opposition to Moses' leadership in the wilderness journey. The text of the revolt of Korah is analyzed to capture various aspects of contestation. Therefore the text has been located in its surrounding context and then in the book of Numbers. Because of the controversy about the historicity of the Mosaic tradition, I have established the relationship between this story and other narratives in the Pentateuch.<sup>29</sup> I approach the narrative by paying attention to characters, plot and how the narrative material is organized. The trend in the

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<sup>28</sup> James Nohrnberg, *Like Unto Moses: the Constituting of an Interruption* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 4. More discussions will be brought in the literature review, but we can affirm that the idea of seeing Moses as a reinvented memory, a projection of what Israel wanted to see in Moses, does not lay on solid evidence. Israel would like to portray the image of a perfect Moses, chosen and holy for Yahweh. But the narrative describes a person with his weaknesses and even a man who was refused entry to the Promised Land.

<sup>29</sup> Many references from the book of Exodus are mentioned to shed light on the revolt of Korah.

study of biblical narrative considers the whole Bible as a continuous narrative.<sup>30</sup> This view of the narrative as a whole has allowed me to bring in other texts from either Old Testament or New Testament in as much as they can shed light on the passage. The unity of the Bible is also in accordance with how Africans received the Bible from the hand of missionaries as one book and not two separate testaments. Up to now in African religious settings the Bible continues to be viewed and interpreted in its oneness.

The Hebrew text has been thoroughly investigated in order to get the meaning of the narrative in its context.<sup>31</sup> Though one cannot pretend to get the full original meaning because of the gap in time, space and context between the world of the interpreter and the Ancient Near East world of Moses, a serious examination of what the narrative makes available of Israel's life with Yahweh and their world has helped the researcher to understand the narrative. The understanding of the narrative rendering of transactions between Yahweh and different characters in the story and the world it portrays make it possible to be derivatively replicated in other times, places and contexts where similar characters are available and the same kind of transactions are found. In this study we have tried to avoid the danger of lifting verses out of their context without prior exegesis to be used by the interpreter as justification or proof of our argument. I have translated portions of the passage to render characteristic features of the Hebrew text and analyze key words in order to lay my interpretation on safe ground.<sup>32</sup>

In my investigation of the text, I focus first on the literary analysis (internal structure, style, etc.) to appreciate the nature of the narrative as well as its component elements. On occasion I relate my literary analysis to a socio-historical analysis by paying attention to pitfalls that the historical criticism presents.<sup>33</sup>

The focus on the final compilation of the narrative does not hinder this study from dealing critically with the text. We have paid due attention to the rhetoric of the narrative,

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<sup>30</sup> Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, JSOTS, 70 (Decatur, GA: The Almond Press, 1989), 94. Bar-Efrat states that "Several narratives, each one a complete unit in its own right, combine with one another in the Bible to create an extensive block, and thus the single narrative becomes one component of a greater narrative whole."

<sup>31</sup> Translation of the Hebrew text is made from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, second edition, amended 1977 (Deutsche Bibelstiftung Stuttgart).

<sup>32</sup> Apart from my own translation, most of the quotations from the Bible come from the New International Version. Quotations from other versions are indicated in the study.

<sup>33</sup> David J. Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001).

the language of the text and the play on words used by the narrator as he seeks to persuade, dissuade or instruct the reader. A close reading of the text has allowed us to uncover ambiguities of language or the text's complexities and to notice a variety of voices in the text that influenced the society of ancient Israel. Where it is possible this study has attempted to posit some segments of the text under investigation in their historical period in relation to the narrative, bearing in mind the problem of historical or source criticism discussed earlier.

After presenting the overall picture of Moses' leadership the analysis of the text consists in studying separately the three movements of revolt described in the narrative—Korah and his group, Abiram and Dathan, and the congregation. A chapter has been allocated to each of them. The hermeneutical procedure follows the narrative approach with slight modifications. Each section starts with the examination of traditional components of a narrative: characters (persons involved in the revolt), plot (cause, development, and end), elements of time, space and style. What is different from the classic narrative analysis is that my experience and context frequently interact with the literary analysis. A summary of important insights is given at the end of each section so that the reader does not need to wait for the last chapter to get the point of application.

Important leadership issues that are found in separate chapters have been grouped together in chapter 7. The implication of these issues in the context of the researcher has been also discussed in this chapter in order to give to the reader a full picture of major findings from the narrative. A final conclusion ends the study by showing areas of further investigations.

## **1.6. Limitation**

The topic of this study has a large range, which cannot be dealt with in a single thesis like this. Moses has played such a gigantic role in the formation of Israel that his influence has inspired an abundant literature in the history of the world. Religious writers, historians, artists and even television movies have explored the figure of Moses the lawgiver, the champion of liberation, and the prophet leader. Even Moses' leadership is too big a multi-dimensional subject to be covered in one volume. It would be presumptuous to pretend that this work has fully explored Moses' leadership.

The emphasis of this study is to deal with the opposition to Moses' leadership as it is recorded in Numbers 16-17. The choice of the text has been motivated by the discourse unit of the section and by the complexity of the nature of the revolt reported in this narrative. The story paints Moses and his opponents in their narrative representation in such a way that its understanding can illuminate other revolts found in the Bible. The investigation takes into account related passages of the Bible and even relevant materials from other writing to widen our understanding of the narrative.

The text is interpreted against the context of the researcher because this is the reality he lives in and can speak of with some degree of confidence. Whenever Africa is mentioned in this study the principal target is DR Congo, even though certain realities may as well be applicable to other countries. Although the situation of the country, emerging from a six-year civil war, does not allow the researcher to conduct a systematic field research to assert the current socio-historical context, there are several writings concerning DR Congo to confirm the facts. Nevertheless, nothing has been taken uncritically from my context, although in certain cases there is no written document to support my argument as required by the scientific rigor. Nevertheless, I have applied a critical and analytical search to select elements that are mentioned in this thesis. Since I did not conduct any field research, my study is only a literary research done against a particular context; therefore the application of my finding can be valid for other contexts only by means of similarities with the situation in my country and my Church.

### **1.7. Research Ethics**

It is presumptuous to think that this thesis launches into a new field never explored in the past by the community of biblical scholars. Many have undertaken this task before and each has made its distinctive contribution to the final form of this study. Therefore, I acknowledge the contribution of each one of my predecessors as I quote their work.

I have also the duty of being gender sensitive since this work is designed to address issues of a community constituted by both male and female. However, I avoid altering or adapting the gender from the biblical languages used in my exegesis or changing quotations.

### **1.8. Outline of the Study**

The thesis comprises eight chapters. The First Chapter consists of introductory materials; these include the statement of the problem, the significance of the research, methodology, and literature review. Chapter Two deals with defining my reading approach. In this chapter I have tried to locate my reading in the African contextual reading and also discuss its relevance and problems. Chapter Three lays the foundation upon which this study is built. It covers various aspects of Moses' life as they have an impact on his leadership. This is a wide overview of major facts and events running from Moses' childhood to his succession by Joshua in the desert of Moab.

Chapters Four to Six deal with the analysis of the biblical passage of our investigation (Num. 16-17). Chapter Four opens with an introduction to locate the narrative in its immediate context and within the book of Numbers then proceeds with the examination of the revolt of Korah and the 250 leaders. Chapter Five explores the case of the revolt of the Reubenites, Abiram and Dathan; and Chapter Six analyses the revolt of the congregation against Moses and Aaron. In each of these chapters the exegesis is conducted following the narrative approach, paying attention to characters, plot, and how the text interacts with the context and experience of the writer. A special focus is put on Moses' action and reaction and God's intervention as the main characters in the understanding of leadership dynamic in the exodus narrative. The insights from each chapter are collected in a summary at the end of the chapter. Chapter Seven brings together major leadership issues discussed under chapter four to six. These findings are discussed against the contemporary context and some lessons are drawn for application. Chapter Eight is a general conclusion, which summarizes all the materials and findings from the entire work. It provides also suggestions on areas that require further investigation.



## CHAPTER TWO

### MY HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

The interface between the reading and study of Scripture and contemporary reading of our contexts requires deliberate work and creativity.<sup>34</sup>

#### 2.1. Introduction

This chapter is an attempt to define the contours of my hermeneutics, especially my reading approach. The clarification of my reading is important at this stage of this work because it charts the itinerary that the reader of this study should follow in order to understand my approach. Each reading strives to operate within the limit of biblical hermeneutics. We assume in this study that the Moses story is pregnant with meanings that stretch from its first revelation to the contemporary era, provided we use appropriate interpretative methodology to unearth its message. Johnson Lim argues, "Understanding develops when a reader obeys the primary communicative perspective of the text and follows its movement from what it says to what it talks about."<sup>35</sup> Although there is a primary communicative perspective to follow, as suggested by Lim, the interpretative process itself remains very complex and varied. Donald Marshall captures well this complexity as he notes,

The universality of interpretation has the form of openness to endless dialogue. What is universal about interpretation is that it looks for confirmation in further experience, including the experience of others, and hence it must be published, brought into life not only of a particular community but of all humankind...The medium in which the promise of any text is fulfilled is not just the individual life but the lives of all those bound together in the interpretative process that stretches from the first revelation of the text to the end of time.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible With the Damned* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson T.K. Lim, *A Strategy for Reading Biblical Texts*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), 121.

<sup>36</sup> Donald, Marshall. "Truth, Universality, and Interpretation" in Roger Lundin (ed.) *Disciplining Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 84 [69-84].

Marshall's statement shows that the interpretative process is an endless dialogue as readers continue to dig into the sacred text for meaning in their context. Therefore, the flexibility in hermeneutical readings is designed to accommodate changes as they occur in time and space. This is why it is important to define one's reading's itinerary beforehand in order to lead the reader of this study to a destination. This study is built on a number of hermeneutical choices that I have made and maintained throughout in order to achieve the objectives set for this study.<sup>37</sup> My choices include: (1) to read the exodus narrative, particularly the Moses story, as a continuous narrative even though I acknowledge its complexity; (2) to use contextual reading as the framework of my study; (3) to read dialogically the text in order to allow a free interaction between the narrative and my religious, political and socio-economic contexts. This chapter discusses first the three elements of the above choices, then it attempts to locate my reading in the African hermeneutical trend and ends with an evaluation of the contextual reading.

## **2.2. Moses Story as a Continuous Narrative**

Reading the Moses story as a continuous narrative draws the focus of the reader to the overall unity of the story that has shaped the faith of Judaism and Christianity. It is important to point out that this approach does not overlook or avoid the ongoing debate about the multi-layered feature of the Pentateuch. Most Old Testament scholars admit that the biblical Moses is a complex figure, as is the narrative that describes his story.<sup>38</sup> This study pays attention to the complexity of both Moses as a character and the pentateuchal narrative. An important issue is raised by Brian Britt as he asks, "Is Moses merely a floating signifier, a name conveniently attached to many disparate figures, or

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<sup>37</sup> This study is designed to achieve the following goals: To understand the dynamic of the leadership contest during the time of Moses and how it can illuminate the current situation in our society today. To enlighten our understanding of leadership struggles, its motives and how to handle it. For more details read "The motivation of the research" in Chapter One.

<sup>38</sup> See the current discussions of the historical Moses under "Literature Review" in Chapter One.

can we identify some common thread running through every story about him?"<sup>39</sup> Britt raises a fundamental question in the study of the Moses narrative in particular and the entire Pentateuch in general. Scholars are trying to find whether there is any unifying thread in this story. According to Britt, there is a common thread that can bridge the divide between the maximalists and minimalists<sup>40</sup> in 'the Moses myth.' He argues,

But while the divide between minimalists and maximalists threatens gridlock, an entirely different approach to Moses has begun to flourish. The subject of these studies is the myth of Moses: legends, retellings, and elaborations of the biblical figure. In hagiography, Midrash, sermons, popular novels and films, the mythic Moses neither accepts nor rejects the historicity of the biblical text. Instead, the strands of this myth have proliferated by adapting the biblical Moses to many purposes, from Jewish, Hellenistic, and Muslim identity to liberation from slavery and oppression.<sup>41</sup>

This study acknowledges that there is a common thread running through the Moses story in the Pentateuch but it does not agree with Britt that the unifying factor is the 'Moses myth.' The term 'myth' bears such a negative connotation, regardless of how one may define it, that it would divert the reader from the goal pursued by the writer of the Pentateuch in putting together these materials for the future generation. The Moses myth expressed in legends, novels and films that Britt proposes cannot convey the legacy and relevance of the sacred text. Biblical narratives are designed to convey important lessons and to shape people's lives. They are therefore different from modern fictions as Gordon Fees stipulates,

Old Testament narratives are not just stories about people who lived in Old Testament times. They are first and foremost stories about what God did to and through those people...Characters, events, developments, plots and story climaxes all occur, but behind these, God is the supreme "protagonist" or the leading decisive character in all narratives.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Brian Britt, "The Moses Myth, beyond Biblical History"  
[www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Britt-Moses\\_myth.htm](http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Britt-Moses_myth.htm)

<sup>40</sup> Britt defines 'maximalists' as those who accept much of the Bible as historically valid, and 'minimalists', who accept very little. *Idem*.

<sup>41</sup> Brian Britt, "The Moses Myth..." [www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Britt-Moses\\_myth.htm](http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Britt-Moses_myth.htm)

<sup>42</sup> Gordon D. Fees and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 75-76.



Our choice of analyzing the Moses story as a unified narrative rests upon this acknowledgment that the various elements of biblical narrative (setting, plot, character, scene) work together for one goal under God's control. That goal is to communicate faith as readers discover God's action behind the text, despite the complexity of the story. I concur with Richard Averbeck as he notes, "The Bible was put together and fits together as divinely inspired *literature* written in particular *historical contexts* with *theological* concerns in mind."<sup>43</sup> While scholars have dichotomized the study of the Pentateuch by isolating and concentrating on one of the three dimensions mentioned by Averbeck, namely, *literary*, *historical* and *theological* dimensions, the narrative approach adopted in this study cuts across the three dimensions and affirms the wholeness and coherence of the text. Walter Kaiser distinguishes four major gains that a narrative approach offers to the student of the Bible. These are: (1) Focus on the present form of the text instead of taking isolated pieces of the text or working with a hypothetical text. (2) Efforts are placed on understanding the entirety of the story before us, despite what may appear to be inconsistencies or contradictions in the narrative. (3) Use of Bible's own literary conventions that are endemic to Hebrew literature rather than imposing categories that we have learned from other literary traditions. (4) Finally, by drawing our meaning on the text itself, we are protected against importing meanings and thereby overinterpreting the Bible.<sup>44</sup> On top of the gains described above we presume that a multidisciplinary hermeneutical approach is helpful for getting at the meaning of the text. In this study we have associated the narrative approach with the analysis of social and historical backgrounds of some events covered in the text without leaning too much on reading behind the text or deconstructing the text.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Richard E. Averbeck, "Factors in Reading the Patriarchal Narratives: Literary, Historical, and Theological Dimensions" in David M. Howard Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti (eds.), *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* (Leicester: Appolos, 2003), 115.

<sup>44</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr. "Preaching From Historical Narrative Texts of the Old Testament" in David M. Howard Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti (eds.), *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* (Leicester: Appolos, 2003), 442-43.

<sup>45</sup> 'Reading Behind the Text and Deconstruction' are alternative approaches in hermeneutics used for the study of the Bible by some contemporary scholars. Since this study will not elaborate on these methodologies, we recommend the reader who wants to deepen his/her knowledge in these two approaches to consult Craig Bartholomew,

To read the Moses story as a single and yet complex narrative also responds to the "ethical responsibility"<sup>46</sup> of the researcher to the academy and to people with or for whom we read the Bible. Firstly, we are accountable to the academy because our critical reading uses all the hermeneutical tools of narrative analysis, also paying attention to the literary and socio-historical context of the text, in order to explore its meaning. We do not use shortcuts in order to avoid addressing difficulties contained in the complex narrative about Moses. On the contrary, we engage in reading critically in order to uncover the underlying unity behind some contradictory elements in the Moses history. The exegesis and interpretation of texts is conducted with the scientific rigor that is required for such an academic work.

Secondly, our hermeneutics is accountable to people who are involved in our reading. This study is not designed to fill shelves of academic libraries but to be read and to engage people, to react to life situations for social change. We concur with G.O. West as he notices "The difference it makes with whom we read the Bible."<sup>47</sup> In the case of this study, our intent is to avail this work to all those who believe in the Scripture as the word of God able to bring change in life. We are aware that some scholars such as Itumeleng Mosala<sup>48</sup> would object to equating the Bible with the word of God. Mosala finds that this view has been used as a tool to oppress and exploit the poor and marginalized, therefore it endorses the view of the powerful and is anti-black-working-class and anti-black-

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Stephen Evans, Mary Healy and Murray Rae (eds.) *Behind the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 2004) and David Rutledge, *Reading Marginally: Feminism, Deconstruction and the Bible* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996).

<sup>46</sup> The term is borrowed from Daniel Patte in his book, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

<sup>47</sup> Gerald O. West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003). West stresses the dialogue between scholars and ordinary Bible readers (poor and marginalized) as a way of doing meaningful contextual reading of the Bible that can bring change. Sarojini Nadar in *Power, Ideology and Interpretation/s: Womanist and Literary Perspectives on the Book of Esther as Resources for Gender-Social Transformation* (Pietermaritzburg: PhD Thesis, University of Kwazulu-Natal, 2003) has designed her biblical study for Indian women bearing in mind that her community believes in the Bible as the word of God.

<sup>48</sup> Read Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: WB. Eerdmans, 1989).

women.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, we can transcend that period when the Bible was interpreted to oppress the weak and marginalized and read it today for its worth as an inspired text. Jonathan Draper underscores the peculiarity of the Bible as he notes that "It can be read as a historical source book by non-believer, but even then it will be systematically mis-read if its social location as a 'sacred text' is not taken into account."<sup>50</sup> For the believing community the Bible conveys God's message [kerygma] to our society. Our approach meets Graig Bartholomew's expectation as he argues, "A hermeneutic is required which takes full account of literary and historical aspects and explores their relation to the dominant kerygmatic aspect."<sup>51</sup> This quest for the kerygma cannot be satisfied by a fragmented text with fictive characters reconstructed by late compilers of the Pentateuch as defined by Wellhausen's source criticism.<sup>52</sup> The tendency of such a fragmentation of the scripture is to rob the Bible of its unity and life-changing power as the word of God. The impact of the Moses narrative on the community of faith, in spite of the difficulty to rediscover the historical Moses, is expressed in this statement by a Jewish writer: "But it was never the 'historical Moses' who really counted for Judaism. Not who Moses was but what Moses signified and taught was always the crucial issue and it still is."<sup>53</sup> I concur with Anthony Balcomb as he argues that narrative should be considered as an "alternative way of teaching theology that enhances both our faith and our critical faculties."<sup>54</sup> Exploring the Moses' story as a unified narrative would achieve what Balcomb suggests. As Africans we believe in the power of narratives to communicate the truth and shape human behavior.

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<sup>49</sup> Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Jonathan Draper. "Old Scores and New Notes: Where and What Is Contextual Exegesis In The New South Africa?" in M.T. Speckman and L.T.Kaufmann (eds). *Towards and Agenda for Contextual Theology: Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publication, 2001), 152 [148-168].

<sup>51</sup> Graig G. Bartholomew, "A Table in the Wilderness: Towards a Post-liberal Agenda for Old Testament Study" in Richard S. Hess and Gordon J. Wenham (eds.). *Make the Old Testament Live* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 38.

<sup>52</sup> Read our discussion on historical criticism of the Pentateuch in Chapter One under "Literature Review."

<sup>53</sup> Arnold Jacob Wolf. "Moses at the Millennium." *Judaism*, Wntr, 2000.  
[www.24hourscholar/p/articles/mi](http://www.24hourscholar/p/articles/mi) retrieved on 11 May 2006.

<sup>54</sup> Anthony Balcomb, "Narrative: Exploring an Alternative Way of Doing Theology in the New South Africa." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*. No 101 (July 1998), 11-21.

### 2.3. Contextual Reading of the Moses Story

There are many factors both within and around the writer that inform one's reading and application of biblical texts. Hugh Wetmore acknowledges that, "Each of us brings to the study of the one authoritative Bible our own unique pre-understanding and our own unique personality. Together these form a grid through which we read and interpret everything."<sup>55</sup> My personal context shapes my grid of reading as an African theologian, teacher and pastor, engaged in reading the Bible in order to address life situations in my community at a given period of our history. Contextual reading seems to be a useful tool in the hands of many African theologians today. Ukpong notes that in contextual reading "the bible is read against a specific concrete human situation." He adds that this takes place "within the context of faith, and with a commitment to personal and social transformation."<sup>56</sup> If what Ukpong affirms is right, then contextual reading should be considered as an approach that takes into account and bridges the gap that exists between the text and its historical background on the one side and the reader and his/her context on the other side. The bridge between text and context is important for African theologians who want to make a contribution to their world by addressing real issues that can bring social transformation in our communities. Knut Holter envisages that the future of Old Testament scholarship in Africa is to provide "tools that reflect the context of the African students."<sup>57</sup> He goes on to argue, "Since the interpretation of a text to some extent reflects also the cultural, religious, and even political and economic context of the interpreter, there is obviously a need for commentaries that reflect the African context."<sup>58</sup>

Holter's concern is being taken seriously in African scholarship that many scholars have embarked on, providing a reading which reflects African realities. However, contextual

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<sup>55</sup> Hugh, Wetmore. *Why Christians Disagree When They Interpret the Bible: Finding Unity in Our Loyalty to Scripture* (Cape Town: Struik Christian Books, 2001), 39.

<sup>56</sup> Justin Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa" in G.O. West and M.W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), 23.

<sup>57</sup> Knut Holter, "Old Testament Scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa North of the Limpopo River" in G.O. West and M.W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), 65.

<sup>58</sup> Knut Holter, "Old Testament Scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa North of the Limpopo River", 65.



reading, as it stands today in African theology, is not a unified method but a framework which guides the interpretation of the Bible. The ambiguity of defining a unified African contextual reading is due to the plurality of contexts from which scholars theologize. Under the big umbrella of African theology, scholars are preoccupied with providing theological insights to various themes that reflect the situation they find themselves in. These discussions are carried out in different circles and expressed in several theological strands, such as liberation theology, South African Black theology, inculturation theology, reconstruction theology, and feminist /African women theologies. The number of theological strands is on the increase as African scholars explore new horizons that require the engagement of the Church to provide theological insights. Appropriate hermeneutics are being applied in new areas, such as fighting against the HIV and AIDS pandemic, reading the Bible with the poor and marginalized, the place of homosexuals in the Church and providing theological insights for the development of Africa.<sup>59</sup>

This work reads the Moses narrative against a context of leadership challenges. The context of the researcher is one of many challenges that affect leadership in general. The Church in Africa is wrestling to solve issues such as the ordination of women, the place of the young generation in leading the Church, the debate in several mainline Churches about changing or adjusting structures put in place during the missionary era that have become irrelevant today. Besides these internal problems, the Church in Africa is called to engage with social and political issues, such as HIV and AIDS, poverty and wars. In the wider context, a leader of the Church in Africa today has to participate in the debate concerning the development of the continent (e.g. Globalization, New Partnership for Africa's Development [NEPAD] and Millennium Goals), and also advocate for democracy and good governance of the state. This context is brought into dialogue with

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<sup>59</sup> Theologians continue to respond to new experiential situations in Africa. G.O. West in *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) proposes a contextual Bible study that allows scholars to interact with the non-academic world, with the poor and marginalized. The Church is also called to reflect theologically on the various strategies of development proposed by theorists to eradicate poverty in Africa. The plight of HIV and AIDS has opened a new horizon in our theological reflection. Today Biblical scholars use the term 'theology of HIV and AIDS' as part of their vocabulary. Contexts of reflections are not limited in time or space.

Moses' leadership, which is also challenged by several problems. For example, the narrative describes the Hebrew slaves who left Egypt as people experiencing a constant shortage of basic needs (water and food). Being on a journey for many years without reaching the destination frustrates them, especially, that many of them are condemned to dying before they could enjoy the prosperity of the Promised Land. The Israelites also grapple with the shift from being a disparate band of slaves into a structured nation with laws and ruling bodies.

By bringing these two worlds into dialogue, the contextual reading of the Moses narrative sheds light on differences and similarities that exist between the two contexts. Our experience in this study is that the encounter between these two contexts generates a new experience of mutual illumination and modification to what the text means in relation to our pre-understanding. As the word of God, the reading of the narrative has subverted and modified the conception of leadership we brought to the Bible. On the other side, our context has opened our eyes to various aspects of the Scriptures never thought of before. We have taken into account all the points of agreement and disagreement between our context and the context of the text as they enrich our interpretation of the text. The interaction between the two contexts helps us move away from holding to a single-sided view of the narrative and broaden our understanding of various dynamics in the story. The reader will realize that the narrative is not trying to portray a perfect leadership nor spiritualize what is and remains a story of human endeavors with God's help. The weaknesses and strengths of Moses as a character in the narrative have offered a balanced reading, which allows drawing significant contributions to contemporary struggles of leadership.

#### **2.4. Dialogical Reading**

The term dialogical is used here in a very broad sense and not as a specific hermeneutical approach in order to define how we have read the Moses narrative. Therefore we consider it not as an additional methodology to our contextual reading but as a part of it. As said earlier, contextual reading is but a framework, which covers such a variety of approaches that it is important for each interpreter to define his/her own procedure. We have chosen



not to stick to the procedure of inculturation hermeneutic as defined by Ukpog, in which different elements of both the context of the reader and the context of the text are analyzed in steps and separately.<sup>60</sup> It is true that even before approaching the text we are already influenced by some of steps defined by Ukpog, such as our context, and we also have a hint of what the biblical text is roughly all about. However, we found it difficult to maintain the five steps as separate from one another. In our approach to the narrative we have incorporated Ukpog's steps in an integrative dialogical framework that engages the two contexts (reader's and text's) into full interaction. They are no longer taken as separate items, but they become part of a flow of dialogue in our hermeunitical process. We will come back to this point in more detail as we locate our hermeneutics. In this study we have adopted a way of reading which allows a real dialogue between the reader and the text that stretches beyond a simple comparison. This requires a mutual action, which embraces the reader and the text. I think this kind of relationship is at the basis of the dialogical hermeneutics as conceived by Martin Buber.<sup>61</sup> The advantage of the dialogical reading in this study is that as we progress in reading critically the narrative we find ourselves caught into a flow of questions going back and forth between our context and the text. Our own context is progressively challenged by what we discover and in return we raise more questions to be answered by the text. Although some of our questions remain unanswered, our understanding of both our own context and the text become enriched. An informed view emerges that enables the reader to apply critically the biblical message to leadership issues in today's context.

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<sup>60</sup> Justin S. Ukpog, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (June 1995), 3-14. The steps of the interpretation process are as follows: Step 1 : identifying the interpreter's specific context. Step 2: analysis of the context of interpretation in four level, phenomenological analysis, anthropological analysis, historical analysis and social analysis. Step 3: analysis of historical context of the text. Step 4: analysis of the text. Step 5: gathering together the fruits of the discussion.

<sup>61</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. Second edition, trans. By Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Schibner's Sons, 1958). According to Buber *I-Thou* relationship includes human beings with God, with other beings and with things. This mutuality or reciprocity in this relationship can be reflected in what happens in interpretation between the reader and the text. See Stevens Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin's Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992).

Given the nature of our study, which is more than an analysis of a single text but somehow a survey of part of the life of Moses as a biblical character, we need a hermeneutical tool that can be used confidently through the change of circumstances, time and events. We have found this free interaction or dialogical reading quite fruitful and suitable to accommodate any variation in the story. Each new event in the narrative finds its echo in our situation as we allow our context to dialogue with the text. It is important to try to locate this reading in African hermeneutics.

## **2. 5. Location of My Hermeneutics**

This study locates itself in the ongoing effort of African hermeneutics to participate in the wide spectrum of interpretations which are intended to shape the life of people in our society. As stated above, this study has adopted a contextual reading as a framework. The question raised by many scholars using a contextual reading concerns the starting point, in other words what comes first between the text and the reader's context. The reader's context may thus become *subject* or *object* of one's interpretation depending on what informs the interpretation. According to Justin Ukpong the context of the reader constitutes the point of departure for inculturation.

The starting point is analysis of the contemporary context against which the text is to be interpreted, and analysis of the context of the text. The text is read dynamically within the contemporary context that has been analysed. This involves entering into the text with a critical awareness about the contemporary context and allowing it to evoke in the reader appropriate reactions, responses and commitments about the context.<sup>62</sup>

For Ukpong the context is the starting point, therefore the African context forms the subject of inculturation interpretation of the Bible. Although, this study has taken into account elements of the inculturation approach, moving between the second phase (reactive-proactive) and third phase (proactive and contribution of ordinary reader) of Ukpong,<sup>63</sup> we cannot limit ourselves within inculturation. Our reading has adopted a more

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<sup>62</sup> Justin Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa", 25.

<sup>63</sup> This study has discussed the three phases of the development of biblical interpretation in Africa earlier in the introduction. Namely, reactive and apologetic—reactive-

pluralist approach as explained in this chapter. In our reading of the Moses narrative we have realized, as have many other scholars before us, that the question of the starting point is not a crucial element in the interaction between the text and the reader. My assumption is that living in Africa today after centuries of missionary work and because of my background as a person reared in a Christian family, there is overlap or influence between my African socio-cultural context and my biblical pre-understanding. The result is that when I read the Bible, I engage a continuous interaction between my context and the text. The concept of hermeneutical circle or hermeneutical spiral renders better the interplay and interaction that takes place between the text and the reader in our interpretation. Grant Osborne notes,

The hermeneutical spiral takes place not only at the level of original intended meaning, as our understanding spirals upward to the intended meaning of the passage, but also at the level of contextualization, as our application spirals upwards to a proper understanding of the significance of the passage for Christian life today.<sup>64</sup>

I agree with Bungishabaku Katho as he dismisses the starting point as being a major problem in contextual reading. He argues that,

I posit that the starting point alone, though important, should not be a big issue. And that African Biblical interpreters should rather start their interpretation by thinking and reflecting on the questions they want to address to the text, questions that can help their interpretation to be relevant for their African contexts.<sup>65</sup>

For Katho the reader should be preoccupied with questions to be answered by the text rather than the starting point. I think Katho has a point in showing that one may start anywhere provided the end result gives answers to questions raised by the reader. However, my experience in this study is that a limited set of questions does not work and

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proactive—proactive recognition of the ordinary reader. See Ukpong, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa”, 12.

<sup>64</sup> Grant R. Osborne: *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 14.

<sup>65</sup> Bungishabaku Katho, *To Know and Not to Know YHWH: Jeremiah's Understanding and its relevance for the Church in DR. Congo. PhD Thesis* (University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg 2003), 415-416.

not all of them find an answer in the text under investigation. The reader may start with some preoccupations but as the dialogue continues more questions, not even envisaged before, emerge and our horizon is enlarged beyond what we expected.

In my opinion whatever the reason that draws the reader to the Bible, he/she will later realize that the interpretive process leads to an unexpected and broader understanding. John Goldingay has the right words to express the process as he argues,

Interpretation of scripture involves letting parts of scripture that immediately speak to us be our way into grasping scripture as a whole, of which those parts are but part, our point of entry to us on the road of understanding and appropriating other aspects of scripture.<sup>66</sup>

Goldingay describes interpretation as a process that engages the reader and a portion of the Scripture into a dialogue that leads to appropriation of broader aspects. The point of entry in interpretation may be narrow but the outcome is wider. The argument is that the appropriation should go in both directions. The reader appropriates new aspects of the Scripture but also his/her own context is enriched through the interpretive process.

The mutual influence or action that occurs between the reader and the text is clearly captured by H.G. Gadamer. In his view, Gadamer sees the reader and the text as existing in two separate horizons that are brought together or in confrontation in the process of interpretation: "The encounter between the two horizons, that of the inquiring reader and that of the text, in attempt to understand the sense of the text leads to a real fusion of horizons"<sup>67</sup> Shillington expands Gadamer's concept of horizon as he argues,

The horizon of the text becomes evident when we find the text prompting questions in our mind as we read. Without the question from the horizon of the text there cannot be an answer regarding the meaning of the text. With the raising of one question that leads to another and we find

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<sup>66</sup> John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 242.

<sup>67</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward 1979), 273.

ourselves encountering the horizon of the text from within our own horizon.<sup>68</sup>

Shillington states that the way to enter into the horizon of the text is when the text prompts more and more questions in the mind of the reader, which facilitates the encounter of the two horizons. It is important to suggest that in dialogical reading, as we experienced it in this study, questions do not come only from the horizon of the text but the reader brings also his/her own questions to the text. What happens in this encounter of the two horizons is a real dialogue in which each part plays an important role. At the end there is some sort of consensus or appropriation of understanding by the reader. I think the notion of horizon reflects well the expanding world surrounding the text and the reader as they engage in dialogue. H.G. Gadamer has appropriate words to define this notion: "A horizon is not a rigid frontier, but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further."<sup>69</sup>

The complexity of the process by which a reader gets meaning out of a given text has generated many theories. Jonathan Draper proposes a tri-polar model in which appropriation constitutes the climax of the interpretive process.<sup>70</sup> The three steps of this exegesis are: Distantiation, Contextualization and Appropriation. Without discussing the model in detail the reader should briefly note the following: At the level of Distantiation the text is allowed to be different while the reader keeps distance from the text. During Contextualization the context of the reader is taken into account because of its influence

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<sup>68</sup> V. George Shillington, *Reading the Sacred Text: An Introduction to Biblical Studies* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 54.

<sup>69</sup> H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 217.

<sup>70</sup> Jonathan Draper, "Old Scores and New Notes; Where and What is Contextual Exegesis in the New south Africa" in McGlory T. Speckman and Lary T. Kaufmann, *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology: Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 148-168. Draper's model is an adaptation of a tri-polar model developed by Cristina Grenholm and Daniel Patte (eds), *Reading Israel in Romans: Legitimacy and Plausibility of Divergent Interpretations: Romans through History and Cultures* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000). Read also, J. Draper, "Reading the Bible as Conversation: A Theory and Methodology for Contextual Interpretation of the Bible in Africa" *Grace and Truth* Vol. 19 (2002/2), 12-24.



on the interpretation of a text. Draper underlines that, "Contextualization involves spending time analyzing who we are and what our location in society and history is."<sup>71</sup>

The third stage in Draper's model is Appropriation, when the contexts of both the text and the reader or the community of faith are brought to an agreement. Draper envisages that this stage should lead to changing behavior or action.<sup>72</sup> Appropriation corresponds to what Gadamer calls the "fusion of horizons."<sup>73</sup>

The important thing is that Draper is aware of the struggle of keeping these stages of interpretation separate and he acknowledges that,

It is not important whether *distantiation* or *contextual analysis* comes first, provided that each is given due weight. We could begin with the text, with the context or with the questions of the faith community relating to the formulation of its faith.<sup>74</sup>

In this study I argue that terms such as *appropriation* and *fusion* may not render fully what is the climax of the dialogical reading since they assume that the interpreter will always bring the two contexts into agreement. Our experience in reading the Moses story is that in the end the reader finds points of agreement and disagreement between the two contexts engaged in dialogue. To be able to handle areas where our context disagrees with the biblical context is, in my own opinion, the climax of a dialogical reading because it means that the analysis of both contexts has critical depth. Appropriation or fusion may be reached at the point of convergence where agreement is established between the two contexts, while the interpreter strives to understand the disagreements. The change or transformation that this new understanding brings will be an informed and responsible action because the reader is able to discern and explain both the agreements and disagreements between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader. The emphasis on how to handle elements of disagreement or dissimilarities is significant because as a community of faith we believe in the sacred text as normative. We should

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<sup>71</sup> J. A. Draper, "Reading the Bible as Conversation: A Theory and Methodology for Contextual Interpretation of the Bible in Africa" *Grace and Truth* Vol. 19 (2002/2), 16.

<sup>72</sup> Draper, "Reading the Bible as Conversation", 18.

<sup>73</sup> Draper, "Old Scores and New Notes", 152.

<sup>74</sup> Draper, "Old Scores and New Notes", 155.



therefore be able to explain why we cannot apply fully every situation from the horizon of the text to our own horizon. But even where there seems to be disagreement, the Scripture still has a message as the word of God to humanity. The outcome of our interpretation should lead to keeping in balance the appropriation of the new fused horizon and responsibly handling the disagreements. The reality is that the two horizons do not fuse completely; there are often some 'leftovers' to deal with. We should therefore be able to explain why we cannot apply hundred percent every situation from the horizon of the text to our own horizon. But even where there seems to be disagreement, the Scripture has still a message as the word of God to humanity since disagreement encourages the reader to engage critically in dialogue with the text.

Dialogical reading sometimes shakes our dominant theology as we make a new encounter with God through the medium of His word. At this point I think that I agree with Ekblad, though his audience is different from potential readers of this work. He reads the Bible with immigrants and prisoners from Latino-America. Our people are suffering from bad leadership among other misfortunes. What we share in common is that we all hope that a changing encounter may happen as we confront the Scripture. Ekblad argues,

My role involves deliberately subverting as many of the barriers to hope and empowerment as possible, while at the same time inviting life-giving interpretation that replaces the old, paralyzing theology. I seek to help people directly identify and confront the dominant negative theology.<sup>75</sup>

In order to illustrate what we are trying to communicate let us turn to the finding of our own study. After wrestling with the struggles of and challenges to Moses' leadership in the exodus narrative we realized that there are significant issues of leadership in the narrative that if taken into consideration might impact our community. On the other hand, we found that the narrative context of Moses required some choices in teamwork and punishment of contenders that, although understandable in the context of the narrative, cannot be applied in today's context. The fact is that the economy of Israel's covenant with God and the socio-political environment of the pentateuchal Moses are different

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<sup>75</sup> Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, 100.

from that of my community today. Therefore, the reader should not expect that God's dealing with people at different epochs remains the same, although He does not change in His nature. Reaching the point where the reader is able to go into the text and come out with not only what is determinative to his/her context but also what does not apply to his/her own context, should be the ultimate outcome of contextual reading. The application therefore becomes possible because the reader knows to what extent the two horizons converge or diverge. More important is the fact that by the end of the interpretation, the reader of the Bible is able to locate himself/herself in the narrative after being subverted by the encounter with the transforming power of the Scripture. There is therefore a way of remaining critical even when the various steps of contextual hermeneutical, as presented by Draper or Ukpong, are taken in a more integrative and dialogical approach, as it clearly appears in the following evaluation.

## **2.6. Evaluation of Contextual Reading**

The contextual reading in this study is not chosen by chance, because it seems to be the only appropriate tool to be used in order to unearth meaningful results from the text that address our context. People find themselves in various contexts that need to be addressed by the liberating message of the Scripture. Members of the faith community turn to the Bible for guidance and solution. Therefore, contextual reading is fundamental to those who are seeking meaning and truth for their life or community. The contextual reading holds onto the fact that there is no neutral reading. Quoting David Tracey, West affirms, "There is no innocent interpretation, no innocent interpreter, no innocent text."<sup>76</sup> If this assertion can be taken seriously then contextual reading has to be seen as a universal and perpetual process. From the early Church, the Scripture has been read and interpreted against a specific context. The reader of the Bible notes that Old Testament prophecies recorded in the gospels and in other writings of the New Testament reflect an

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<sup>76</sup> David Tracey, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987) quoted by Gerald.O.West, "Contextual Bible Study in South Africa: A Resource for Reclaiming and Regaining Land, Dignity and Identity" in G.O. West and M.W. Dube (eds.). *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*. (Leiden:E.J.Brill, 2000), 395.

interpretation done against the situation prevailing in first century Judaism and Palestine. Important movements in the history of Christianity were born as the result of a reaction to various contextual realities. For example, the Reformation is the fruit of a contextual reading of the Bible in the given context of interpreters such as Martin Luther, Calvin and others.<sup>77</sup>

African people have experienced oppression and marginalization so much so that when they engage with the Bible it is to address their situation. The only tool that can allow this engagement or dialogue is the contextual reading. West acknowledges that,

Contextual Bible study provides processes, resources and a place for the making and shaping that is a part of owning. It facilitates a more systematic and structured articulation of what is incipient and inchoate, the purpose of which is to effect transformation and change.<sup>78</sup>

What West shares with his particular groups in contextual Bible study is experienced by all those who engage in contextual reading. It is a reading that aims to bring change and transformation. In Africa, scholars and ordinary readers long to put an end to the oppression of the colonized by colonizers, the poor by the rich, women by men and the discrimination of people living with HIV and AIDS by the healthy. Even homosexuals experience oppression from heterosexuals. Out of a variety of contexts people turn to the Bible with the commitment to effecting social transformation. By saying this I am not ignoring that some people have reacted negatively to the message of the Bible or a certain interpretation of the Bible, which they accuse of being an instrument of oppression and discrimination. Nevertheless in this study I express the voice of those who still hold onto the transforming power of the Bible as the word of God.

Contextual reading is more than liberation theology for the oppressed because it is applicable to any context, although in Africa the dominant context against which the

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<sup>77</sup> For more information about the rise of the Reformation read William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979).

<sup>78</sup> G.O. West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003), 125-126.

Bible is read is that of the poor and marginalized. Apart from liberation, scholars are using contextual reading to address a variety of current issues in society. This diversity of contexts from which Africans theologize has led to a pluralist approach to the interpretation of the Bible. Jesse Mugambi has qualified the plurality of approaches that have characterized the history of Christian thought from the Early Church as "methodological crises".<sup>79</sup> According to Mugambi this crisis is reflected in the division observed among scholars who adopt different methodologies. Mugambi illustrates the division among African theologians in the following observation:

The three theological emphases—salvation, liberation and inculturation—each with its mentors and sponsors, had the effect of dissipating Africa theological creativity at the time. African theologians found themselves in one camp or another, and it was difficult for them to find a common platform for interaction.<sup>80</sup>

It may be true that the choice of one approach can constitute the way to division among scholars. However, looking beyond the division into different camps as defined by Mugambi, one can also see a positive trend in embracing the plurality of approaches as a mosaic of thoughts. I do not consider the different aspects of contextual reading as a sign of a crisis of methodology. On the contrary, they have enriched our theology with appropriate responses to situations that our continent faces. Biblical scholars are aware that when hermeneutical tools are used correctly, the different types of contextual reading may converge and deepen our understanding of the Bible, instead of becoming contradictory. We may not agree with extremist positions inside some theological strands but no one can ignore the contribution made by black theology, liberation theology, women/feminist theology, theology of development, HIV and AIDS theology to make the Bible speak in context. They challenge the classic way of biblical interpretation and draw the attention to some facets of the message that many interpreters have overlooked or misinterpreted in the past.

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<sup>79</sup> J.N.K. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publisher, 2003), 9-17.

<sup>80</sup> J.N.K. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction*, 215.

One cannot speak of contextual reading without raising some concerns about seeing our different contexts as a valid framework for interpretation and also how to curb our biases and subjectivities so that we do not read in the Bible what we want (*eisegesis*). Speaking of African Theology in this plurality of contexts, John Parrat objects, "It follows that there will be no one theology which is valid for the whole of the continent: there will be a plurality of theologies, each rooted in the same sources of the Christian faith, but each addressing itself to a different context."<sup>81</sup> Thus, the danger of contradiction and distortion of the biblical message is not totally absent within the various strands of contextual reading. The caution that one should take here is that, while enjoying the richness of reading the Bible against our different experiential situations, we should make sure that the contours of this framework are strongly established to avoid the risks of 'sliding' as David Lyon says:

So sliding in all directions? Yes, Leonard Cohen rightly discerns a sense of slippery postmodern surfaces that are so disorienting, so unsafe. My effort to recover a perspective on what has happened between biblical, sociological, and postmodern hermeneutics is not intended to render the world of interpretation any safer by offering some supposed *terra firma* rather than the ice. But neither do I think we are condemned forever to slide in all directions.<sup>82</sup>

Lyon acknowledges that the danger of sliding in all directions exists, but one should not consider it as unavoidable. The fear of sliding should not hinder people from continuing interpreting the Bible. In spite of the danger of distorting the word of God, the community of faith has always turned to the Bible for meaning and guidance in life. The antidote to sliding is the critical use of appropriate tools of hermeneutics. There are hermeneutical tools to be used that give equal weight to the horizon of the reader and the horizon of the text. In the articles mentioned above Ukpong and Draper have suggested

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<sup>81</sup> John Parrat, "Current Issues in African Theology" in John Parrat (ed.) *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1987), 148.

<sup>82</sup> David Lyon, "Sliding in All Directions? Social Hermeneutics from Suspicion to Retrieval" in Roger Lundin (ed.), *Disciplining Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective* (Leicester: Appolos, 1997), 115.



some important steps to be followed in the analysis of the context of both the text and the interpreter.<sup>83</sup>

In spite of the above pitfalls, I have chosen to use a contextual reading in this study. The fact that my reading may be filtered through my social background does not mean that everything is relative and that there is no truth in what I present. My claim is that this study has adopted a reading which is critical and theologically thorough, despite some marks of my own subjectivity. As a member of the 'community of faith' I believe that the word of God is the truth and the plurality of our readings contributes to providing a better understanding of the biblical message and a way of its application to current situations without distortion. There is a strong sense of accountability that each reading should observe in order to remain within the acceptable norms of hermeneutical inquiry and respect of the sacredness of the Scripture. Wetmore envisages this accountability in terms of a safeguard to prevent false doctrines.

When they [people] study the Bible corporately, they bring together a range of individual pre-understanding and personalities that will enrich their united understanding of what the Bible means. Each provides others with checks on extremist tendencies, curbing the possibility of developing sectarian doctrines.<sup>84</sup>

What Wetmore envisages about corporate Bible study is applicable to a pluralist interpretive method. I consider that the use of a pluralistic approach in my hermeneutics constitutes checks on what I am doing in order to avoid sliding in all directions, because these different hermeneutical tools work together in harmony in order to facilitate the dialogue between the reader and the text.

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<sup>83</sup> Ukpong, in "Reading the Bible with African eyes", 3-14 and Draper in "Old Scores and New Notes", 148-168.

<sup>84</sup> Hugh Wetmore, *Why Christian Disagree When They Interpret the Bible: Finding Unity in Our Loyalty to Scripture* (Cape Town, SA: Struik Christian Book, 2001), 48.



## **2. 7. Conclusion**

The location of my reading approach in this chapter has, I hope, marked the way for the reader of this work with beacons that it will be easy to follow. My reading is continuous, contextual and dialogical. I have chosen to read this complex narrative as a continuous story because this is the way it is understood in the community of faith and in my context especially. The contextual reading meets a need of addressing life issues in Christianity today. As light and salt of the earth the Church is called for guidance and direction in a world which is darkened by all kinds of misleading information and wrongdoing. The only way to rise up to this challenge is to read the Bible with people, to them and for them in their context. This reading has to be dialogical so that at the intersections of the two contexts may emerge truth and meaning. The truth about the word of God and how it may shape our behaviour and deeds.

The aim of our reading is not to establish a simplistic comparison between the world of the text and ours nor to fuse them into an inseparable unity, but to let critical dialogue lead us to a place where we can understand our points of agreement and disagreement. This approach incorporates and integrates the various steps of contextual reading in a dialogical process of interpretation. More than a simple discovery, this reading should result in a responsible appropriation of what is applicable to us and provide an explanation of what is left out and why. Since we are dealing with the word of an infinite God in our finite context and also a text written in a context different from today, the logical outcome of our reading should include some realities that we leave to God because they cannot suit our context. This might be what the writer of Deuteronomy would like the Israelites to understand when he argues, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29).

## CHAPTER THREE

### MOSES' LEADERSHIP

#### 3.1. Introduction

The narrative concerning Moses' leadership is constructed with several units and scenes across the Pentateuch. The characterization of Moses varies from one scene to another making his figure complex and sometimes hard to apply to a single individual. Leaving aside the controversy among scholars about the various traditions and sources of pentateuchal materials and their editorial compilation, my study intends to use the text at hand as an integral narrative in which Moses is one of the characters. This narrative approach allows me to interpret the various portraits of Moses as a process of maturation and adjustment as circumstances in which Moses find himself change in time and space. Speaking about Moses as a political leader Aaron Wildavsky recognizes, "The leadership of Moses may be illuminated by showing how it varies with different political contexts; and the variations in Mosaic leadership may be used to probe the general problems of leadership in different regimes."<sup>85</sup> Without discussing the political regimes in the life of Moses that Wildavsky defines in his book, I share his approach to leadership varying with context. The narrative shows that Moses operates in a broad range of contexts that go beyond the politic. According to the context he is in, Moses acts as mediator, liberator, lawgiver and prophet within his society.

This chapter is designed to achieve the following goals: Firstly, to give a general introduction to Moses' leadership. Secondly, to survey the characterization of Moses in various scenes in order to understand key features of his leadership. Finally, to lay a foundation for the exegetical analysis of the revolt of Korah.

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<sup>85</sup>Aaron Wildavsky, *The Nursing Father: Moses as a Political Leader* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1984), 202-203.

The abundance of materials dealing with Moses' leadership in the Pentateuch makes it impossible to cover everything in this chapter. I must select a number of episodes, enough to give an overall picture of Moses' leadership. My selection is determined by features contained in the scene able to shed light on the following analysis and enrich my understanding of Moses' leadership in order to draw lessons for my context. I survey more or less systematically Moses' journey to leadership in his early life, his call and commissioning as God's servant. A few events in the exercise of his leadership complete this survey, leaving the period of the wilderness wandering aside for the chapters ahead. In such a selection, my reader should be prepared for substantial jumps and the omission of some episodes in the Moses' story. I try, though imperfectly, to cover a basic outline of Moses' leadership for a general understanding and the details left out can be filled in by any biblical specialist. To strike the balance is a challenge and a risk I propose to carry throughout this study.

### 3.2. Background

The book of Exodus introduces the Moses narrative by describing the social and political situation that surrounded Moses' birth in Egypt. This account constitutes a background against which the subsequent events in Moses' life can be understood. The narrator opens his book with a list of Jacob's family that settled in Egypt (Ex. 1:1-5). This list establishes the link between Genesis and Exodus because of its similarity with Genesis 46:8-26. Commenting on this continuation J.P. Fokkelman argues, "Exodus links up with its predecessor in a very simple way: the opening section (1:1-5) recapitulates the names of Jacob's sons and counts the number of souls of their families, and thereby takes up the thread where it was dropped."<sup>86</sup> The name of Joseph, the man who brought the whole family to Egypt, is mentioned three times in this opening in verses 5, 6, and 8. The two

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<sup>86</sup> J. P. Fokkelman, "Exodus" in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode eds. *The Literary Guide to The Bible* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1987), 59. The number of seventy descendants of Jacob who came to Egypt is repeated in Gen. 46:27, Ex. 1:5, and Deut. 10:22, but the LXX reads seventy five as well as Acts 7: 14. Seventy may be a round figure carrying a symbolic significance as it is repeatedly used in relation to the Israelites in the Pentateuch.

names of the patriarch, Jacob and Israel, appear in verse 1 to locate the Moses' narrative within the overall story of the patriarchs and the people of Israel.

The narrator continues his description by disclosing the political climate at that moment. Verses 6 reveals that the whole generation of Joseph had passed away. This includes people of both sides, the brothers of Joseph as well as the Egyptians of his generation. The reason for this reminder is given in verse 8, "A new king came to the throne of Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph or what he had done." The ignorance about Joseph anticipates the end of the favor the Israelites had enjoyed in Egypt during the reign of various kings who knew his achievement. But there is another ingredient to the oppression given in the text. The seventy descendants of Jacob who went down to Egypt have become a multitude. "The Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them" (Ex. 1:7).<sup>87</sup> The text creates a tension around the fertility of the Israelites. The narrator uses three verbs drawn from the blessing of human beings in Genesis 1:22, 28: פָּרָה (be fruitful) רַבָּה (become many) and מָלֵא (fill).<sup>88</sup> This increase is dramatized by the use of שָׂרַץ (swarm). This term is often used in the Old Testament for the multiplication of frogs, fish or animals. It refers to human beings only in two occurrences (Gen. 9:7 and Ex. 1:7).<sup>89</sup> Therefore, the narrator presents the swarming multiplication of the sons of Israel as the fulfillment of God's promised blessing to his creation and to the patriarchs. But the multiplication of immigrants in a foreign land is not interpreted as a blessing by the Egyptian king and his people. They feel outnumbered by the prolific immigrants who fill the land and become a threat to them. Therefore, the king must take some measures to counter their proliferation.

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<sup>87</sup> It is important to notice that between the time Jacob and his family settled in Egypt (Ex. 1:1-5) and the reign of the new Pharaoh when the people had increased (1:7-8) there is a gap of some centuries. Ex. 12: 40 states that the people of Israel stayed for 430 years in Egypt.

<sup>88</sup> BDB, 828, 915, 570.

<sup>89</sup> BDB, 1056.

Exodus 1:8-22 gives in detail the counter-measures taken by the king and the motive behind them. The text explains the king's hostility towards the Israelites by his fear of seeing them becoming allies of the Egyptian's enemies and also his fear of letting them leave the country. "Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country" (Ex. 1:10).

The first measure designed to stop the birth-rate of the Israelites was to submit them to forced labor under harsh taskmasters (1:9-11). The measure fails because in spite of their exhausting labors, the Hebrew slaves continue to reproduce exceedingly (1:12-14). After this failure, Pharaoh conceives a second plan which requires midwives to kill all the male babies born to Israelite women. However, the midwives thwart the measure, alleging that Hebrew women are stronger than the Egyptians and that they deliver without the help of midwives (1:15-21). The final measure seems to involve the Egyptian people as a whole in participating in stopping the prolific rise of the Israelites by throwing all male babies into the river (1:22). The birth of Moses proves that all three measures failed. I agree with Renita Weems as she argues that,

Exodus 1:8-22 is a part of the prologue to the book (1:1- 2:22), and its latter section (1:15-22) functions as the first of the three confrontations between the Hebrew and the king of Egypt. Each alone, and the combined force of the three taken together, exposes the Pharaoh's claim to ruler as illegitimate and inane. They represent a gradual but systematic effort to demythologize the Pharaoh's reputation as divinely embodied leader. In fact, the three confrontation scenes call into question the three tenets upon which the dominant hegemony presumes to rule: divine wisdom, authority, and power.<sup>90</sup>

Weems' argument is that in this introduction the narrator seems to anticipate the confrontation to come between Pharaoh and Moses for liberation, which will question the capability of the king to carry out his decision and to succeed in his plan.

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<sup>90</sup> Renita J. Weems "The Hebrew Women Are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1" in *Semeia* 59 (1992), 25-34.

### 3.3. Early life of Moses

After giving the historical background of the narrative, the text of Exodus 2 introduces briefly the early life of Moses, the liberator of the Hebrew slaves. The focus in the exodus story seems to be more oriented towards the struggle for liberation and the journey to the Promised Land, so much so that only approximately half a chapter (2:1-17) is devoted to the rise of the hero. However the snapshots given in this account are meaningful to the understanding of Moses' involvement in God's plan for freeing the people of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. The plot comprises three major units including the birth story, Moses' visitation at the work place, followed by his exile and settlement in Midian.

#### 3.3.1. Plot

##### 3.3.1.1. Birth

After setting the social and political background, the narrative in chapter 2 shifts its focus onto the coming baby (2:1-10). All other actors in this scene remain unnamed. The father is called "a certain man of the house of Levi" and the mother "a daughter of Levi" (2:1). The text mentions, also without naming them, the baby's sister, Pharaoh, Pharaoh's daughter and her maids. The account of Moses' birth follows the policy asking all Egyptians to participate in stopping the increase of the immigrants by throwing all male babies born to Hebrew slaves into the river (1:22). The reader would expect to see the new born baby drowned in the Nile. The presence of Moses on the river Nile appears ironically as the implementation of Pharaoh's order. But Moses is carefully laid in a rush basket which floats on the Nile with the intention to save his life. This intention is well captured by the use of the Hebrew word **תִּבְיָה** for basket in this text. The other occurrence of the same word in the Old Testament is found in Genesis 6 where it means the ark Noah built to save himself and all those who were with him (his family and other beings) from the destructive power of the flood. So now we contemplate seeing the baby Moses survive from his exposure on the river. Apart from biblical cross-references, many scholars have noticed significant parallels between Moses' exposure and several legends



about heroes in the Ancient Near East.<sup>91</sup> However, unlike other Near Eastern legends that emphasise the birth of a hero, the account of Moses' birth is part of an overall story about God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and their settlement in the Promised Land. The episode takes a new turn when Pharaoh's daughter appears on the scene (2:5-10). She comes to the river to bath and discovers the basket of rushes with the baby as she wanders along the bank of the Nile. Though she recognizes that the baby is a Hebrew, she decides to keep him in disobedience to Pharaoh's command. She demonstrates the compassion and humanness we see among African women in such a situation. Reports of the genocide from Eastern Congo and Ruanda recount stories of courageous women who sacrificed their lives to protect their babies. In her article, "A Spirituality of Resistance and Transformation", Nyambura J. Njoroge expresses women's affection towards a child as she states, "We know the pain of nurturing life, through bearing it in our wombs and by hard labor, merely to see it destroyed."<sup>92</sup> The life of a baby, even a baby from a slave, is too precious for a woman to destroy it.

The sister of the baby plays a mediating role in this episode, which results in Moses being given back to his biological mother to be nursed and being paid for it. The text stipulates that Moses spends substantial time in the hands of his Hebrew mother before adoption into Pharaoh's family, as it reads "when the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son" (2:10). By his adoption Moses is entitled to become a ruler of Egypt as a potential heir of the kingdom.

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<sup>91</sup> James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 119. The most significant story is the legend of Sargon of Akkad. The tale recounts that Sargon was exposed in a basket of rushes on a river, then discovered and adopted by Akki. Later on he matured and became the leader of his people. See comments in Richard Coggins, *The Book of Exodus*, in Epworth Commentary (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2000), 9, and G. W. Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God*, 46-47.

<sup>92</sup> Nyambura J. Njoroge. "A Spirituality of Resistance and Transformation" in *Talitha Cum! Theology of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publication, 2001), 66-82. I agree with the endnote to this statement that argues that, "In Africa, one does not have to be a biological mother to shoulder the responsibility of motherhood and nurturing life."

The motif of a slave or an adopted child being raised in the royal court and later on becoming a future leader of the same community is well known in many African tales of succession. The history of the Kingdom of Kongo is a good example. Ntinu Wene, who became the Great King Mani Kongo, was a foreigner who moved into the area with the movement of migration and conquest. He succeeded in entering the ruling family through his marriage with the daughter of the chief Mani Kabunga. After he had learned how to deal with the gods and spirits of the community he became Mani Kongo.<sup>93</sup> In her book, *African Kingdoms*, Lucy Mair describes the difficulty of any ruling lineage in Africa to perpetuate its power. On several occasions the succession was done through outsiders. She cites J. L. Comaroff who worked among the Rolong, belonging to the Tswana group of South Africans, who wrote: "Many chiefs are born, and some are robed with the leopard skin."<sup>94</sup> A chief's heir has to be the son of a woman he had married after his succession. If the heir was a child, an uncle would become a substantive chief or regent and often he would not step down when the nephew came of age. This means that many who became chiefs or regents often usurped the place of a rightful heir.<sup>95</sup>

The main difference between African tales and the Sargon legend on the one hand and the Moses' story on the other hand, resides in the fact that Moses did not become a ruler of Egypt, the country of his adoption. Unlike other heroes in those legends, Moses was called to liberate a group of oppressed slaves and take them into another country.

### 3.3.1.2. *Visitation at the Workplace (2:11-15)*

The narrator is more interested in Moses' adulthood and what he is called to achieve because he links the adoption account to the incidents at the workplace by the phrase, "After Moses had grown up" (2:11). The first incident happens when Moses is paying a visit to his people at their workplace. He watches a taskmaster striking a Hebrew slave, and in his anger Moses kills the Egyptian (2:12). The incident does not raise the problem of murdering a human being and passes to the next episode without comment. The

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<sup>93</sup> Naomi Mitchison, *African Heroes* (London: The Bloodey Head, 1968), 40-41.

<sup>94</sup> Lucy Mair, *African Kingdoms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 131.

<sup>95</sup> Lucy Mair, *African Kingdoms*, 130.

second incident comes the following day (2:13) as Moses again visits the workers. He finds two Hebrew men fighting and offers his mediation to settle their dispute, but they reject it declaring that he has no legitimacy to rule over them. "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" (2:14 RSV). On this occasion, Moses realizes that his murder of an Egyptian the previous day is known publicly, as the Hebrew slaves warn him about doing the same to them. The narrator reports that Pharaoh heard about the matter and resolved to kill Moses who had become a disgrace to him (2:15). Therefore, the lack of solidarity and recognition from his fellow Hebrews and the fear for his life forced Moses to flee to a foreign country.

### *3.3.1.3. Exile in Midian*

As soon as he arrives in the land of his exile, Moses responds to another case of injustice. Rude shepherds ill-treat Jethro's daughters by refusing them access to water. In the context of the desert, to deprive somebody and his/her cattle of such a precious commodity as water is an outrageous offense. Moses reacts to the injustice by driving away the uncivil shepherds (2:16-22). The priest of Midian<sup>96</sup> who gives him a meal, accommodation and later on a wife – Zipporah, graciously rewards Moses' act of bravery. Important to notice is that the setting at the well as a place of encounter with future wives is paralleled in several stories of the patriarchs (Gen. 24, 29).

One would think that after his misadventure in Egypt and the warm welcome in Midian, Moses would enjoy living with the new family who accepted him into their innermost circle. But the name given to his son reveals Moses' feelings. "She (Zipporah) bore a son, and he called his name Gershom; for he said, 'I have been a stranger in a foreign land'" (2:22). Scholars are divided on the interpretation of "a foreign land." Some see in this appellation an allusion to Egypt while others prefer Midian.<sup>97</sup> In my opinion, the name

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<sup>96</sup> The "priest of Midian" is often called Jethro (3:1; 4:18; 18:1) but bears other names in parallel references – Hobab (Num. 10:29; Judg. 4:11) and Reuel (Ex. 2:18; Num. 10:29).

<sup>97</sup> John I Durham, "Exodus" in *World Biblical Commentary* Vol. 3 (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1987), 24. He argues that Moses is at home in Midian but has been a stranger in Egypt. The rest of the story does not agree with this interpretation. Despite his

may be an allusion to Moses status in Midian but it also reflects what his people are experiencing as foreigners in Egypt.

### 3.3.2. Moses

At this early stage of Moses' story the narrator starts building up the portrait of the future liberator of Israel. We examine below some distinctive elements of Moses' character in the journey which leads the reader from a child in a basket floating on the Nile through the upbringing in Pharaoh's house until his exile in the land of Midian. In his infancy Moses is portrayed as a Hebrew child whose fate is to be drowned in the Nile at his birth according to Pharaoh's order, but he survived by God's providence. His biological mother reared him until he grew up, which was enough time to impress his mind with his Hebrew identity. Then Moses was given to his adoptive mother, "He became her son and she named him Moses" (2:10). This adoption gives Moses the right to become a prince in Egypt and enjoy all the privileges of such a status.

An important point the narrator seems to make with Moses' sojourn in Pharaoh's palace is to demonstrate that God's agent for the liberation of his people is not an alien to leadership. The liberator of the Israelites is qualified both by his adoption into Pharaoh's family and his training as a future leader of Egypt.<sup>98</sup>

The beginning of Moses' career is not successful, he is impulsive and wants to fix things at once, but reacts carelessly with violence and precipitation. Moses is characterized as a

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marriage to a Midianite woman, a Hebrew would not feel at home in Midian. I think the name is a metaphor of the situation of the Israelites in a foreign land, as is often stipulated in the law Deut. 23:7 "Do not abhor an Egyptian, because you lived as a stranger in his land."

<sup>98</sup> The writers of the New Testament have developed further the qualification of Moses to carry out the deliverance of Israel. Acts 7: 22 pictures Moses as a man who was trained in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. But instead of using his wisdom and training to rule over Egypt, he chose to become a liberator of slaves. This is clearly stated by the writer of the book of Hebrews as he describes Moses as a man who deliberately renounced the privilege and power to which he was destined by his adoption in order to identify himself with the Hebrew slaves (Hebr. 11:24-25).

compassionate and courageous man, concerned with social injustice against the oppressed and the weak. He is quick to avenge the Hebrew slave by killing the Egyptian oppressor. He will only later realize the consequence of his act, as he has to flee for his life (2:11-15). He then unexpectedly becomes judge between two Hebrew fighters and tries to reconcile the two fellows but he is discourteously rejected by this question, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" (2:14). This raises the question of legitimacy concerning becoming a leader in society. On his arrival in Midian, Moses is described as again playing the deliverer who offers his service to rescue women harassed by ruthless shepherds (2:16-22). Apart from granting him a home in exile, Moses' first attempt at leadership is a failure. The intention is good and the cause he defends is right but the manner is not. To create a just world takes more than good will. Moses has to learn that violence and impulse are not enough to bring forth liberation. He first has to solve questions of legitimacy and authority. This means, for the success of his enterprise, Moses has to be sure in whose name he is acting as the liberator, who gives him the mandate and how do the people he is called to lead respond to his action. Can they identify themselves with Moses' action? The text demonstrates that all these questions are not sorted out when Moses attempts his first liberation act.

The ongoing war in Congo offers a similar example. In reaction to more than thirty years of oppression under the dictatorial regime of the late president Mobutu Sese Seko, several persons have attempted to restore the situation by rallying some agitators from their ethnic group. Each of them feels that he/she does not need to be elected or given a mandate by some constituency to fix things in Congo. The result is the resurgence of various rebel factions who have plunged the country into a monstrous cycle of violence and destruction that we deplore at the present. The recent elections, held on the 30<sup>th</sup> July 2006, have proven the opportunistic character of those who want to rule the country. Over 30 presidential candidates, most of them former leaders of tribal militia, ventured into a democratic election to the point of making it difficult to have somebody elected at the first round. None of them could win 50%+1 of votes as required by the electoral commission. People had to wait for a second round of elections on 29 October 2006 to



have the first democratically elected president in the Democratic Republic of Congo after 46 years of independence.

### 3.3.3. Women's Role

Women have played a very considerable role in the introduction of Moses' story and I need to analyze their involvement under a separate sub-heading. Although many stories in the Pentateuch reflect a patriarchal culture, the book of Exodus begins with a positive portrayal of women because of the important role they play in thwarting Pharaoh's decrees of stopping the Israelite proliferation. The prologue of Exodus (1:1-2:25) accredits women with the preservation of male babies of the Hebrew nation and especially of Moses, their liberator. Pharaoh undertakes a series of unsuccessful measures to deal with the Hebrew increase, but two of the three plans fail because of the disobedience of women. The success of women's disobedience reveals the vulnerability of Pharaoh. Therefore, women's courageous defiance of Pharaoh's authority set the stage to the liberation of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. The narrator gathers, in this short episode, a number of women involved in rescuing a nation threatened with destruction. The critical role is played by the midwives, the mother and the sister of the baby, and the daughter of Pharaoh. The daughters of the priest of Midian, though not included in the birth story, also play a significant role. Especially Zipporah, the wife of Moses, who intervenes to save Moses' life in the course of the narrative.

After a male dominated introduction, midwives enter the scene in verse 15 when the first measure taken by Pharaoh fails. Pharaoh has asked his people to afflict and submit the Hebrews to hard service in order to limit their growth. The plan is carried out through the task masters but the result is contrary to his expectation. "The more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied" (1:12). To intensify his plan Pharaoh charges the midwives to kill all male babies born to Hebrew women and allow females to live (1:16). The killing of male babies was intended to reduce the increase of the Hebrews. Male children were also a threat to the security of Egypt because they could merge with Egypt's enemies to fight against the country (1:10). In an African context such a fear is justifiable. A



polygamous husband in our traditional society could engender more than twenty children and have a village of his own progeny.

By naming these two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, in a text where many actors remain unnamed, the narrator draws the attention of the reader to the heroic role they play in this episode (1:15), as J. Cheryl Exum depicts it,

In a narrative which shows virtually no concern for names (Pharaoh, Pharaoh's daughter, Moses' mother and father and sister remain unidentified), the names of these two women are recorded, thus assuring that they will be remembered throughout generations for their important contribution.<sup>99</sup>

The text ironically presents midwives as persons well known by the Pharaoh and whom he could trust, as they enter into direct dialogue with him twice (1:16 -18). They appear first to receive Pharaoh's order and secondly to justify their failure. The outcome is that they deceived Pharaoh and let the Israelites multiply. The midwives allege that their failure is due to Hebrew women's capability to give birth without their help (v. 19). But the narrator tells us that they willingly thwart the measure because they fear God, who rewarded them with descendants (vv. 20-21). Renita Weems interprets the midwives attitude as follows:

The midwives do not lie, they simply do not tell the whole truth. It is the conventional weapon of the powerless, especially women in the Old Testament, against those in power: the weapon of deception where "truth" is not defined by the powerful, but becomes the priority of the underclass to interpret and shape according to their own reality. The refusal to tell the "truth" becomes tantamount to the refusal to obey. And the refusal to obey is the refusal to adopt hegemonic assertions. The refusal to obey, therefore, proves to be a most effective counter to Egyptian ideology. Because the midwives feared God, and thereby disobeyed the Pharaoh, they are rewarded by the deity. They are granted families of their own (1:21).<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, "You Shall Let Every Daughter Live: A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10" in *Semeia* 28 (1983), 63-82.

<sup>100</sup> R. J. Weems, "The Hebrew Women Are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1" *Semeia* 59 (1992), 25-34.

Weems' interpretation of the midwives action is well understood both as a feminist apology as well as a person of faith who adopts the Israelite view of events.

The announcement of the third measure, asking Egyptians to throw into the river all Israelite male babies and let females live (1:22), brings many women onto the stage. They are not named because the narrative attention focuses on one baby who becomes the central character of the narrative. But their ingenuity is crucial for the survival of the hero. Moses' mother described as "a daughter of Levi" conceives and gives birth to the boy (2:1-3). Midwives may have let the boy live. However, the mother decides to defy Pharaoh's decree by hiding her son for three months, and when the risk of discovering the baby at home grows, she crafts an 'ark' תיבה, and cautiously places it among the reeds of the Nile.

But when she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile (2:3).

There is a striking parallel between Noah who builds the ark to save humanity and Moses' mother who builds an ark to save the liberator of Israel. The father is not mentioned in all this activity carried out by the mother alone. The text portrays her as caring, resourceful and determined to protect her child. There is no indication in the text that she expects somebody to save the baby, nor that she has in mind Pharaoh's daughter's habit of bathing at the hiding place of the baby. More likely her deep concern for the baby compels her to act rather than passively leaving things to fate. A writer in the New Testament describes her as acting by faith (Hebr. 11:23). Even after the discovery of the basket by Pharaoh's daughter, the mother of Moses keeps the baby for nursing and is, humorously, paid for what she desires the most to do (v. 9). But more important may be the teachings she impresses in the child about his Israelite identity and the fate of his people, which is not mentioned but is manifested when Moses pays a visit to the workplace. African women writers underscore the important role that mothers play to shape lives, as a tool in their endeavor to recover the fullness of their humanity. Mercy Oduyoye has the right words to express a mother's role:

It is recognized that the survival of the next generation is not limited to the availability of mother's milk. Mothers not only feed, but also protect the young. All the proverbial observations about hens and chickens also hold for the human community. The welfare of children takes precedence over everything else in a woman's life, nothing else is as important.<sup>101</sup>

The sister of the baby appears as by surprise in the text (v. 4) to establish a link between the biological mother (daughter of Levi) and the adoptive mother (daughter of Pharaoh). The marriage and the conception account in verses 1 and 2 give the impression that Moses is the firstborn. But the narrator has built suspense, only introducing his sister at this turning point. She is described as watching over the baby. "His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him" (v. 4). The sister boldly approaches the princess and proposes to find a nurse from the Hebrew women for the baby (v. 7-8). Her quick intuition to persuade the princess to take a nurse in order to link the two women who together save the life of Moses deserves to be acknowledged. Two decisive actions on her behalf, to watch over the baby and provide a nurse to the baby, determine Moses' future. Later on the name of the sister is revealed as Miriam, the prophetess (Ex. 15:20).

Though together with Aaron they later contested the supremacy of Moses (Num. 12), Miriam is counted among the leaders of the people and prophets along with Moses and Aaron. "I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you also, Aaron and Miriam" (Micah 6:4).

The arrival of Pharaoh's daughter and her maids to bathe in the Nile (v.5-6) determines the course of the story. She is described as taking personal initiatives, as the mother and sister have done. She is the one who sees the basket and orders her maids to pick it up. She opens the basket and sees the baby crying and has compassion on him. Though she recognizes that the baby is a Hebrew, she disobeys the order of putting him to death. Martin Noth notices, "In contrast to her brutal father she takes pity on the boy although fully realizing that he is a Hebrew."<sup>102</sup> She accepts the proposal of the sister and lets the

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<sup>101</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 60.

<sup>102</sup> Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press Ltd.; 1962), 26.

baby go with the nursing mother whom she grants a salary. When they bring back the boy, she adopts the child and names him. It seems that she does not consult her father in whatever she does with the boy (vv.8-10). The narrator says, "He (Moses) became her son" (v. 10). This adoption is full of meaning in the life of the future liberator. It secures his life because he is no longer under the threat of being killed. He can grow up under his adopted identity and enjoy the right of being a prince of Egypt. Consequently, Pharaoh's daughter contributes to the liberation story by saving the life of Moses from the children's genocide.

The daughters of the priest of Midian enter the scene as passive receivers of Moses' service. He rescues them from the oppression of ruthless shepherds (2:15-22). But the encounter of Moses with these women at the well turns to his benefit. One should remember that Moses is a runaway Egyptian in search of a home. Reuel's daughters speak positively of Moses to their father, so much so that he is called to share the intimacy of their house. One of the daughters becomes his wife. I will come back later to this union when speaking of kinship. To offer a home and a wife to a refugee is not a little thing. As an African, more so being a Congolese who knows what it means to be a refugee in a foreign country, I understand the value of these women's action. Instead of letting a refugee wander in the countryside or seek a shelter under a tree, if somebody helps one find a meal, accommodation and a wife does the greatest thing that can happen to such a person.

Zipporah, Moses' wife, is credited with another exploit later in the narrative (4:24-26).

The text says that God was about to kill Moses because his son was uncircumcised when he came back from Midian. The narrator confirms that it is Zipporah and not Moses who performed the circumcision on her son. God approves Zipporah's act and saves Moses' life. "So the Lord let him alone" (v. 26). In African contexts, the act of Zipporah is one of outstanding bravery for a woman. To defy all taboos and the sacredness surrounding the rite of male circumcision in order to save a husband's life cannot be left unnoticed in any African community.

There is an assertion in French that *Ce que la femme veut, Dieu veut*, meaning 'what a woman wants, God wants.' Although this assertion may not be always true, but it seems to fit the account given in the prologue of Exodus. I agree with Exum as she argues that,

Exodus 1:8-20 presents the interpreter with powerful themes to draw on women as defiers of oppression, women as givers of life, women as wise and resourceful in situations where a discerning mind and keen practical judgment are essential for a propitious outcome (the midwives's response to Pharaoh, 1:19; the sister's suggestion to Pharaoh's daughter, 2:7). But this is only the beginning.<sup>103</sup>

Without the significant role played by women to frustrate all the evil plans of Pharaoh, there would be no Moses, therefore no Exodus. The midwives choose to obey God instead of implementing the genocide on Hebrew male babies. The mother of Moses skillfully hides her baby in disobedience to Pharaoh's command in order to save her offspring. The sister of Moses accepts to endure the sun of Egypt watching over her brother and by a sudden intuition makes a proposal to Pharaoh's daughter which saves Moses' life. Pharaoh's daughter prefers to act by compassion rather than complying with her father's command. All these women candidly defy Pharaoh and discredit his authority and hegemony. This prologue seems to draw the intention of the Hebrew audience to the fact that obedience to the Hebrew God is better than allegiance to Pharaoh. It also seeks to persuade them to adopt a courageous attitude in confronting the king of Egypt. He is not invincible since women have challenged his power and defeated him. This prologue anticipates the outcome of the confrontation between Pharaoh and the Hebrews, represented by Moses and Aaron.

### **3.4. Moses at Horeb**

#### **3.4.1. Plot**

The last part of chapter 2 constitutes a link between the early life of Moses and his commissioning and sets the stage for God's intervention for liberation.

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<sup>103</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, "You Shall Let Every Daughter Live: A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10" in *Semeia* 28 (1983), 82.



During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them (2:23-25).

The text reveals that many days have elapsed since Moses fled to Midian, meanwhile the king of Egypt has died.<sup>104</sup> Consequently, the life of Moses was no longer in danger in Egypt because the king who condemned him is dead. It is safe to return to Egypt. Another important element in this account is the involvement of God in the suffering of the people of Israel. The oppression of the Israelites continues despite the death of the king of Egypt, and their cry has reached God. The God of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is described as a God who hears, remembers, sees and knows, attributes that compel him to act in salvation. His intervention is to be understood in the context of the promise given to the patriarchs. The text also prepares the reader for a recurring motif in the Old Testament in God's dealing with his people: The people suffer (often for their sin) – they cry to God – God hears their cry – He acts in salvation (usually through a human liberator).<sup>105</sup>

The setting for the actual event that runs through chapters two and three is Horeb, the mountain of God in the wilderness of Sinai (3:1). This designation has raised some debates among biblical scholars who wonder whether the mountain was already hallowed before Moses stepped onto it or whether the narrator has used this name to mean that *Horeb* was destined to become *Sinai* the 'holy mountain'.<sup>106</sup> The narrator likely anticipates God's appearance on this mountain. Horeb is a place where important events occur in Moses' story. He meets Jethro his father in law at this place (Ex. 18). He receives the law and seals the covenant at Horeb (Ex. 19; 24). He will also meet God several times on this mountain during their stay in the region. The wilderness motif also

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<sup>104</sup> There is some discussion among scholars on the identity of the Pharaoh of the oppression, whether Seti 1 or Rameses II. In his commentary Henton Davies suggests Rameses II, who had a long reign of more than sixty years. G. H. Davies, *Exodus* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1967), 67.

<sup>105</sup> This paradigm is observed during the time of judges and in prophetic books.

<sup>106</sup> Richard Coggins, *The Book of Exodus*, 15.



carries a meaningful significance in the relationship between God and his people. The wilderness stands as the place of testing but also a learning experience. Hosea describes the wilderness as a place for courtship: "Therefore I am going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her" (2:14).<sup>107</sup>

The dialogue between God and Moses takes place in a context of theophany. Moses is busy in his habitual occupation as a shepherd when the angel of the Lord appears to him (3:2). The encounter is described as a strange phenomenon worthy to arouse the attention of any reader. A burning bush that is not consumed attracts Moses' curiosity. All the elements of this vision, flame, bush, angel, and the sacredness of the place are designed to indicate the distinctiveness of the God Moses meets on Mount Horeb. This theophany is actually followed by the commission to Moses to lead the oppressed Israelites out of Egypt. The episode of the burning bush is of great importance to understanding the role of Moses in the liberation of Israel. It is important to notice how the narrator characterizes the two major actors in this episode – God and Moses.

#### 3.4.2. God

The narrator chooses a self-disclosure style in the dialogue between God and Moses; using first person sentences: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" (3:6). This presentation is linked with the list of Jacob's descendents in the prologue of Exodus (1:1-5) to stress the continuity of the patriarchal story and their God. The God who appears to Moses is not a new one but the same God

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<sup>107</sup> The wilderness motif bears both positive and negative connotations. Hosea 2: 17 and Jer. 2:2 describe the wilderness as a period of Israel's faithfulness to God as compared to a time of wooing. But Ezekiel 20:10 ff. depicts the wilderness as a period of rebellion and failure for Israel. Many New Testament commentators interpret the wilderness as a place of testing and learning. In his book *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), R.T.France argues that "Israel, God's son, had lessons to learn in the wilderness before the entry to the Promised Land; so too has Jesus, God's son, before his mission begins in Galilee (p.208). For more discussion see George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), 13-17.

who has been with his forefathers as mentioned here. The text discloses God's motive in coming at this moment into the history of his people in these words:

The Lord said, I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt, I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their sufferings. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey...And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them (3:7-9).

God is answering the cry of his people and his intention is to redeem them from the bondage of the Egyptians and give them a new land of prosperity. This same intention is repeated in verses 16-17 of the same chapter. How will this liberation be executed? The text shows that God himself will enact the liberation using first person sentences in his address. The following verses introduce more detail into God's address with regards to the agent to perform the deliverance.

So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt. But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain" (3:10-12).

It is obvious that according to this text Moses is the one to perform the deliverance on the behalf of the Lord. God's address seems to contain a juxtaposition of two different accounts. Some scholars have attributed the difference of formulation to two distinct literary sources. Without dismissing the pertinence of source criticism in this episode, I agree with the opinion of those who think that God is the author of the deliverance but uses human agents to carry out his enterprise in a prophetic or apostolic commission. Alan Cole argues that, "There is no contradiction between God's announced intention of working in person and His sending Moses. God normally works through the willing obedience of His servants, accomplishing His will."<sup>108</sup> Further analysis of the narrative

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<sup>108</sup> Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* (London, The Tyndale Press, 1973), 68.

will show how God's initiative and human agent obedience work together in the accomplishment of the deliverance.

The narrator uses the discussion which follows Moses' reluctance to take the commission to shed light on the portrait of God in this episode. God is so determined to deliver His people that he is ready to give all the assurance Moses needs for the task. He promises Moses His presence (3:12) and reveals His own name: "I am who I am or I will be who I will be" (3:14). This appellation is constructed from the root *היה* as an expansion of the name YHWH that appears in verse 14 and 15. The main meaning of this name seems to enforce the promise of God's presence with Moses given in verse 12. The explanation of the meaning of the revealed name, "I am Who I am" (v.14) raises heated discussion among commentators. The formula appears as a play of the verb "to be" *היה*, most likely to enforce the presence and actuality of the God who is there whenever the people need him. In verse 15, the name *יהוה* (YHWH) may be taken as the short form of the above formula. There is no need here to enter into a full discussion on the origin of the name Yahweh and Mosaic Yahwism which divides biblical scholars up to the present.<sup>109</sup>

God endows Moses with the power to perform miracles (Ex. 4:1-9). His staff becomes instrumental in the accomplishment of the signs. The rod and the power of performing miracles have the role of establishing Moses' authority before the people of Israel as well as before Pharaoh to whom God sends him. The rod of a king as a symbol for the power of the throne is a very common metaphor in all African traditions. Mobutu Sese Seko, the former president of Congo, would not appear in public without his rod, which people alleged had magic power.

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<sup>109</sup>Exodus 4 is a key text for source criticism which uses the variation of God's appellations to distinguish various sources in the Pentateuch (JEDP). Important points on YHWH can be found in J. Philip Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus*, in *New Century Bible* (London: Oliphants, 1977), 75-81. See also Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary*, OTL (London, SCM Press Ltd., 1974), 61-64.

God also appoints Aaron to be the mouth-piece of Moses to overcome his handicap of speech (4:10-17). The reader should notice how a brother of Moses is brought out of the blue in the narrative, in the same way as Moses' sister appeared unexpectedly in the account about watching over the baby on the River Nile (Ex. 2:4). Nothing has been said before about Moses having a brother until God's question reveals it, "Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite?" (v.14). God who created the mouth and is able to make a person dumb or deaf, or seeing, or blind has chosen to use an interpreter for Moses.

The dialogue that God holds with Moses stands as a teaching approach in which Moses asks questions and God responds and convinces the student. God is described as the initiator of the liberation. The one who appoints leaders to perform the deliverance on God's behalf, but also as God who does not give up His mission because of the excuses of human beings. What God has decided He brings to its fulfillment.

### 3.4.3. Moses

The text introduces Moses as the shepherd tending his father-in-law's flock in the region of Mount Horeb when he saw the burning bush (3:1). The reader expects some changes in Moses' attitude as he shifts from being a prince of Egypt to a shepherd in the wilderness. Moses is curious to observe the bush which is not consumed by the fire, when God asks him to remove his sandals because he has stepped on a holy place (3:5). The speech which follows is just a reminder of what Moses knows about the suffering of his people. Moses discloses his feelings when he hears that he is to be the agent to perform the deliverance: "So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt" (3:10). He objects to the commission saying he feels inadequate. The Exodus narrative (Ex. 3 & 4) expands on Moses' reluctance to God's call. Moses does not joyfully accept his commissioning as one would expect of a man who earlier, on impulse, killed an Egyptian taskmaster as a sign of his identification with his people. He presents his objections in four questions against carrying out God's assignment. All his objections bear a reminder of his previous failure to redeem the Hebrew slaves from Egypt.

The first question is, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? (3:11). It seems that his first failure has destroyed his self-confidence. More than an expression of humility, this question reveals the deep distrust of himself, which does not let him act as the liberator unless it is overcome. God answers to this need by assuring him of His presence, "I will be with you". The emphatic "I" **אֲנִי** of Moses is contrasted by another emphatic "I" **אֲנִי** of God,<sup>110</sup> as to show that what matters is who is with or behind Moses. Yahweh promises that Moses and his people would come back to this same mountain and worship Yahweh, as an assurance of their deliverance (3:12).

The second question deals with the name of the God who sends Moses. The narrator puts the inquiry of God's name as a concern of the people. Moses does not request the name for himself but as an answer to the people's question, "What is his name? What shall I say to them?" (3:13b). The text seems to link the authenticity of Moses' commission to the revelation of the divine name. Philip Hyatt argues that, "A name indicated the nature and character of its bearer. To pronounce the name of a deity meant to call upon his power."<sup>111</sup> The question of God's name in this text has raised a vivid controversy and a wide range of interpretations in Old Testament scholarship that goes beyond the scope of this study.

The difficulty of the text lies in the connection of the divine name and the legitimatization of Moses' commission. The reader should remember that earlier Moses was rejected by Hebrew slaves as they asked him, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" (2:14). Therefore, the revelation of the divine name offers an opportunity to Moses to approach the people with the claim of being an envoy of the God of their fathers.

The third objection of Moses deals with the people's lack of trust, "They will not believe me or listen to my voice" (4:1). This question is a direct reminder of how he was rejected earlier (3:14). Hebrew slaves may do the same even after his Horeb experience. God

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<sup>110</sup> John I. Dhuram, "Exodus," 33.

<sup>111</sup> J. Philip Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus*, New Century Bible (London: Oliphants, 1991), 75.



endows Moses with the power to perform miracles (4:1-9) to be used in his confrontation with Pharaoh, more so to cause the Israelites to trust in Moses. He receives three signs and rehearses two on the site – his staff turned into a snake and back again, and his hand is struck with leprosy and then healed. The presence of the staff in the hands of Moses should serve as a reminder of his commissioning to the task and also to the extraordinary signs that accompanied his encounter with Yahweh at Horeb. In the course of the narrative Moses' staff becomes instrumental in the performance of signs to confront Pharaoh's power and bring about deliverance. Also this staff and its power of performing miracles for the benefit of the Israelites during their journey plays the role of establishing Moses' authority and legitimacy before the people of Israel. The third sign of turning water into blood will be performed when he returns to Egypt. The performance of signs provide confidence and the required credentials to Moses to carry out his commission. By introducing the use of supernatural powers, the narrator anticipates the plagues episode in chapters 7-11 and other miraculous interventions in the wilderness.

The last objection of Moses concerns his ability to speak. "I am not eloquent" (4:10). Moses assumes that the gift of eloquence is important to carry out his mission of persuading Pharaoh, so much so that he is not satisfied by God's answer. God, the creator of a human's mouth affirms that He is able to teach a person how to speak. Moses seems to be deeply frustrated by his lack of eloquence that he opposes God with a flat refusal, "Please Lord, send anybody you want to send" (4:13). God addresses this refusal with wrath but also with a practical proposal. Aaron, who is an excellent speaker, shall be Moses' spokesman (4:14-17).<sup>112</sup> To convince Moses, God elevates him to be like God to Aaron who shall speak on his behalf. "He shall speak for you to the people; and he shall be a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God" (4:17). Whatever interpretation can be given to this verse, the fact is that there is no parallel in the Hebrew Bible where a human is described in these terms. Moses appears as a person who needs a teammate in order to accept the task. It is possible that a teammate would constitute the support he needed for the task and also to overcome the low esteem he had after leaving Pharaoh's

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<sup>112</sup> See G. H. Davis, *Exodus*, 75.



palace. The proposal of making Aaron his associate ends Moses' arguments so much so that finally he accepts to return to Egypt after consulting Jethro (4:18).

The Horeb episode portrays Moses in a different image from his early life in Egypt. From an impulsive activist for justice, Moses becomes a reluctant and prudent person. Moses is no longer eager to lead the liberation of his fellow slave Hebrews but opposes God's call with various excuses to escape leadership. The change of attitude can be explained by the failure of his first attempt to deliver the Hebrew slaves and also by the shift in his life from a prince of Egypt to a shepherd in Midian. In his maturation, Moses has learned to take into consideration what it entails before he is ready to take on God's mission. I find most apt the way Flavius Josephus describes Moses' feelings when he objects against his commissioning:

But I am still in doubt how I, who am a private man, and one of no abilities, should either persuade my own countrymen to leave the country they now inhabit, and follow me to a land whither I lead them; or, if they should be persuaded, how can I force Pharaoh to permit them to depart, since they augment their own wealth and prosperity by labours and works they put upon them!<sup>113</sup>

Furthermore, Moses' attitude at the burning bush reveals humility, in contrast to the apparent impetuosity of the past. He has probably lost his self-confidence as he withdraws from the royal palace. Therefore God has to use all persuasive means to convince Moses to take upon himself the task. Moses' acceptance to return to Egypt shows that he now feels equipped to do the job. He is assured of God's presence and has the revelation of God's name. His staff is endowed with supernatural powers and Aaron shall be his spokesman before the people of Israel and before Pharaoh. By describing what Moses has gained in this encounter with Yahweh at the burning bush, the narrator presents Moses' reluctance as a positive act and not a sign of rebellion.

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<sup>113</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. by William. Whiston (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1981), 59. Many scholars recognize the writings of Josephus worthy to be consulted as extra-biblical materials on the history of Judaism and his understanding of Jewish traditions.

In his reading of Exodus 3:1-15, Gunther Wittenberg establishes parallels between Moses, Gideon and Jeremiah, confirming that hesitation to carry out God's assignment is a common feature in the Old Testament. He argues that,

Moses, Gideon and Jeremiah were called by God to do great things for him, but they all felt totally inadequate. The tasks which they were asked to perform seemed to be beyond their own capabilities. Moses had to confront Pharaoh and lead the small group of the Hebrew slaves out of captivity. Gideon had to liberate the Israelites from Midianite oppression with only three hundred men. Jeremiah had to prophesy not only against his own peoples but against the Babylonians as well. He had to become a prophet to the nations. But despite their human weakness and inadequacies God used them in work.<sup>114</sup>

The point is that human inadequacy is not a barrier for God to use an individual in His work. In this episode God insists and argues until Moses yields his resistance. Moses' resistance is also an exercise of his free will to accept or refuse the assignment. Chapter 4 of Exodus ends with the return of Moses to Egypt and prepares the reader to see Moses implement his commission by confronting Pharaoh.

### **3.5. Moses Confronts Pharaoh**

#### **3.5.1. Plot**

The end of the chapter (4:27-31) sets the stage for confrontation. Moses meets Aaron in the wilderness on his way back to Egypt and tells him everything about his encounter with God, including the signs. Upon arrival, Moses and Aaron consult with the elders of the people and in their meeting Aaron takes the lead as spokesman.<sup>115</sup> He speaks and performs the signs that God gave to Moses. The meeting results in rallying the people behind Moses and Aaron for liberation. "And the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped" (4:31). To convince the people and get their support

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<sup>114</sup> Gunther H. Wittenberg, *I have Heard the Cry of MPeople: A Study Guide to Exodus 1-15* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993), 28-29.

<sup>115</sup> To consult with Aaron and the elders is a major change in Moses' attitude compared to his previous militant and activist way of defending the oppressed before his sojourn in Midian. He shows that he has learned a lot during his exile, as we shall demonstrate later.

was crucial for the success of the assignment, since God warned Moses that Pharaoh would not easily let the people leave. The statement that "YHWH hardens the heart of Pharaoh", repeated several times in the narrative (4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 11:10; 14:4, 8), as compared to other texts stating that "the heart of Pharaoh was hard" (7:14; 8:19, 9:7) or "Pharaoh hardened his own heart" (8:15, 32; 9:34), introduces a pertinent theological debate on God's nature. The difficulty lies in the fact that if the hardening comes from God, then the whole account of plagues becomes a contradiction. How can God harden the heart of Pharaoh and at the same time decide to punish him with plagues for the hardness of his heart? There should be a way of interpreting this assertion, which makes Pharaoh responsible for his actions instead of being a victim of God's decision. The discussion revolves around human freedom and God's sovereignty as scholars diverge on God's part in Pharaoh's behavior.<sup>116</sup> For Brevard Childs, "Hardening was the vocabulary used by biblical writers to describe the resistance which prevented the signs from achieving their assigned task."<sup>117</sup> In my opinion, the narrator leads the reader to understand that God is in control of the situation and decides on the course of events. Nothing can stop God accomplish His will. But the scope of our study does not allow us to carry further such discussions.

The account of the confrontation with Pharaoh comprises several scenes characterized by a display of power. Starting with a simple appeal to release the people in chapter 5, which fails, the story continues with the plagues (chs. 7-12) that result in the killing of the Egyptian first born and the release of the Israelites. The ultimate victory comes at the bank of the Red Sea with songs of praises when Pharaoh and his army sink into the sea (chs. 14-15).

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<sup>116</sup> For more discussion on this issue, see David J.A. Clines, "God in the Pentateuch: Reading against the Grain" in *Interested Parties: The ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (JOSTS Series, 205; Gender, Culture, Theory, 1; Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 187-211. Also David M. Gunn, "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart: Plot, Character and Theology in Exodus 1-14", in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature* (ed. David J.A. Clines, David M. Gunn and Alan J. Hauser; JSOTS Series, 19; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 49-66.

<sup>117</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1974), 174.

### 3.5.2. Moses

The first encounter with Pharaoh (ch. 5) occurs probably in the royal court. Moses and Aaron present themselves as God's messengers using the prophetic formula, "Thus says the Lord" (5:1). It is worth noting that from now on Aaron is associated with Moses in all appearances before Pharaoh and before the people as the spokesman. The content of Moses' appeal is that the people are to hold a feast in the wilderness. Though this version of the message is contained in the commission (3:18), the main reason for leaving Egypt is the liberation from oppression. Moses and Aaron present strategically a call to worship their God as the reason for leaving Egypt. It appears to be a less offending pretext even though Pharaoh takes no heed of it. The narrator uses the refusal of Pharaoh to acknowledge the Hebrew God, "Who is the Lord, that I should heed his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord" (4:2), to explain God's involvement in the fight for freedom. J.P.Hyatt says: "The Pharaoh was himself considered by the Egyptians to be a deity, and he professes to know nothing of the God of the Hebrews."<sup>118</sup> This view is shared by Wittenberg as he adds, "It was an insult for anyone to dare to question the authority of Pharaoh in the name of another God. If Pharaoh was God, how could anyone claim that there was any other God besides him?"<sup>119</sup> The reader is thus prepared to see God overtly engaged in challenging Pharaoh's power by plagues, as developed below. Pharaoh interprets Moses' request as a distraction to divert his labor force from work. "Why do you take people away from their work? Get to your burdens!" (5:4). Pharaoh assumes that Moses and Aaron want to use religion to distract people from their work. J. David Pleins uses the expression "labour agitator" to describe Moses' demand in the account of the conflict between Moses and Pharaoh.<sup>120</sup>

The outcome of this first confrontation with Pharaoh is dramatic for the Israelites. Pharaoh refuses to let them go, but furthermore he hardens the conditions of forced labor. The workers have to fulfill their required quota of bricks without receiving the straw (vv. 9-14). The Hebrew foremen plead with Pharaoh to reduce the workload but he refuses.

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<sup>118</sup> J.P.Hyatt, *Exodus*, 90.

<sup>119</sup> G. H. Wittenberg, *I have Heard the Cry of my People*, 34.

<sup>120</sup> J.David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible*, 157.

Therefore they lay the blame on Moses as their oppression worsens. Moses complains before Yahweh,

O Lord, why have you brought trouble upon this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued your people at all (Ex. 5:22-23).

In his response God renews his commission to Moses and promises to use power to overcome Pharaoh's stubborn resistance and bring about the liberation of the Israelites (ch. 6). The narrator uses the allusion to power to introduce the reader to the performance of signs in the plagues episode (chs. 7-12). The genealogy bracketed in this chapter (6:14-28) gives details on the families of Aaron and Moses. This genealogy is designed to single out and attest Moses and Aaron in their special position in the leadership of the people. The interruption brought in by the genealogy centered on Moses and Aaron draws the attention of the reader to these two persons, as the main historical figures of the liberation. From now on Moses and Aaron would dominate the scene of the history of Israel during the exodus. It also underscores the Levitical hegemony as it becomes noticeable in the course of the narrative.

In the next scene Moses and Aaron appear ten times before Pharaoh performing signs and inflicting punishment on the people of Egypt. The emphasis during this confrontation is put on the power encounter between Yahweh and Pharaoh, as the latter, through his magicians, tries to duplicate some of the signs. He is not impressed by the first set of miracles until his magicians recognize, "This is the finger of God" (8:20). The recognition of God's hand is not enough to dissuade Pharaoh from holding the people of Israel in bondage. The conflict between Yahweh and Pharaoh continues with its recurring paradigm: again and again Moses receives instruction from God and then he commissions Aaron for implementation of the announcement. The rod of Moses is instrumental in the performing of signs. The rod symbolizes power in the hands of the holder. This power is shared between Moses and Aaron as the staff has to pass from Moses' hands to Aaron's so often that the narrator calls it, without any differentiation, both Aaron's staff as well as



Moses' staff. The staff becomes the unifying factor of Moses' and Aaron's collaboration as they are both used by God to materialize the redemption of Israel. After each plague Pharaoh promises to release the people of Israel, but when Moses intercedes for the removal of the plague he hardens his heart.

The last scene starts with the announcement of the tenth plague (11:1), which causes the death of a first-born in each Egyptian household. The flow of the narrative is interrupted by the insertion of the Passover account (12:1-27) to provide a special character to the event. The disaster caused by the tenth plague compels Pharaoh to ask the Israelites to leave Egypt. But shortly after their departure Pharaoh's obduracy resurfaces. He changes his mind about releasing Hebrew slaves and decides to pursue them. His pursuit brings the liberation account to its climax in chapter 14 with the death of Pharaoh and his army. Liberation is celebrated on the banks of the sea with songs of praises – songs of Moses and Miriam (15:1-21).

The point here is that Moses' leadership as he confronts Pharaoh can be interpreted as a play of cooperation and accommodation within a complex structure. Moses is the main character of the narrative, but he receives orders and instructions from God, which he passes through Aaron down to the elders and to the people in a kind of theocratic political system (power descending from God).<sup>121</sup> Yet, on occasions he has to consult and let Aaron or the elders be at the frontline while he himself pulls back as a passive leader. The narrator reports that Moses and Aaron consult the elders at every crucial moment without defining the extent of their authority (3: 16, 18; 4: 29; 12:21; 17:5-6; 18:12; 19:7; 24:1, 9, 11). He sets here a good example of empowering a teammate as he allows Aaron to feel important to the success of their mission.

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<sup>121</sup> In our analysis of Korah's revolt we will explore in detail Moses' political system of leadership, mainly in relationship to God and others assistants.



### **3.6. Moses and Jethro's Visit**

#### **3.6.1. Plot**

The jump we propose to make here from the celebration of the liberation at the sea (ch. 15) to the encounter with Jethro (ch. 18) is in accord with our goal in this chapter. As stated earlier, this chapter is not designed to give a full account of the Exodus narrative but to highlight some key features of Moses' leadership which will enhance our understanding of the exegetical analysis of the revolt of Korah.

The narrator locates Jethro's visit at a moment when things seem to be going well with Moses and the Israelites. The people have won their final victory over Pharaoh and his army (chs. 14 and 15), they are fed with manna and quail in the wilderness (ch. 16), they have water from the rock and have defeated the Amalekites (ch. 17). The text of Exodus 18 appears as an account of a family reunion as Jethro brings Moses' wife and children. The narrator introduces new elements in this scene. So far the reader was aware of Moses having one son (2:22) and the return to Egypt with all his family (4:20). The reader is now informed of a second son of Moses and that the family was sent back to Jethro in the course of the earlier episodes. The name of the second son is Eliezer, which means 'God is my help' suggesting Moses' own experience in Egypt. A close reading of the chapter shows that the return of Moses' family plays a secondary role in this account, but the narrative focuses on Moses' consultation with Jethro. The meeting between Moses and Jethro takes place at the mountain of God (18:5), establishing the link with the burning bush (3:1) and the giving of the Torah from chapter 19 onward. Jethro is introduced as priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses, therefore somebody who deserves honor and respect in my African context. The narrator emphasizes the greatness of Jethro over Moses by showing that Moses has to go out to meet him on his way and bow in reverence before him (18:7). The scene seems to remind the reader about how Moses met Yahweh at the same place in chapter 3 and had to remove his sandals and hide his face in reverence to God. Moses reports to Jethro, as to a superior, everything God has done to the people. Moreover, Jethro summons Moses and all his leadership team (Aaron and the council of elders) for a meal and a time of sacrifice in the presence of the Lord (18:8-12).

The dominant figure of Jethro in the religious ceremony that takes place and his familiarity with the God of the Israelites has led some scholars to attribute the origin of the worship of Yahweh to Midianites. Although there is a close link of marriage between Moses and the Midianites and that there are some similarities in religious practice between the two tribes, the theory of borrowing Yahweh worship from the Midianites is not fully agreed upon. Lester Meyer states clearly the dividing point among scholars in these words:

It is not clear from all this how Jethro's relationship to Yahweh is to be understood. Is Yahweh the God whom Jethro has been serving, as priest of Midian, so that he is here pictured as simply coming to deeper understanding of this God's purpose and activity? Or is Jethro here changing his allegiance and becoming a convert to Yahweh the God of Israel?<sup>122</sup>

The fact that Meyer himself does not answer the question shows how speculative and delicate it is to decide on the Midianite origin of Yahweh from what is recorded in this narrative. Without dismissing the pertinence of the question, I think that the text draws our attention to Jethro as a wise man, able and trustworthy to advise Moses in his leadership.

The emphasis of the text shifts in the second part (18:13-27) to the model of organization Jethro suggests to Moses. In this text the father-in-law proposes a model of organization which sets the principle of delegating authority to assistants. Apparently the system described above including Moses, Aaron and the council of elders, had worked well during the fight for liberation. But the narrative shows that there was a need of restructuring the system in order to meet all the needs of the people now that they were

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<sup>122</sup> Lester Meyer, *The Message of Exodus: A Theological Commentary*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), 109. Richard Coggins, *Exodus*, 71, thinks that it is unwise to put too much weight on the Midianite theory. Ronald E. Clements, *Exodus* in *The Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge: University Press, 1972) argues that there is a probability of borrowing certain religious features from the Midianites, but there is no reason to suppose that the more distinctive features of Israel's religion derived from the Midianites (p.107). On the burnt offering, Alan Cole, *Exodus*, 139, remarks that there was no priesthood as such in Israel, the function was held by the elder of the clan. In this case, Jethro in his senior relationship with Moses was qualified to lead the worship.

no longer under Egyptian laws. Jethro uses the time-consuming factor of Moses' task to address the issue of power delegation. He suggests a pattern of organization based on an administrative division of work that is found even in modern societies.

### 3.6.2. Moses

The narrator purposely sets his scene on God's mountain (18:5) where Moses met God earlier, so as to remind the reader that we have come to a new commissioning. This time Moses has to learn not from Yahweh but from Jethro. Jethro is portrayed as a wise man and an expert in administration. The image of Moses in this episode is not that of a liberator of great profile. He appears as an imprudent leader who needs to be taught by Jethro. The narrator portrays Moses as follows: Firstly, Moses is not aware of endangering his health by unduly burdening himself with the full load of judicial matters. He needs someone to remind him of the consequences of his action: "You and these people who come to you will only wear yourself out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone" (18:18). Secondly, he does not know about delegating authority to competent assistants and establishing an administrative division of work: "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?" (18:14). Thirdly, in his justification, Moses does not give convincing arguments on why he alone should deal with all the matters, as if to settle minor things among people one needs a prophet. "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and laws" (18:15-16).

This portrayal of Moses enhances the image of Jethro, the teacher whose advice sets an example of good governance. It continues to inspire modern theories on leadership.

But select capable men from all the people – men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain – and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain and all these people will go satisfied (18: 21, 23).

This theory has the merit of preventing leaders from experiencing burnout and also it empowers subordinates to deal with their responsibilities at each level. My experience as one of the Church leaders in Congo under the dictatorial regime of Mobutu, our former president, shows that Jethro's advice is a suitable reminder within the Church as well as to political leaders. A leader should learn to entrust capable deputies with significant responsibilities instead of concentrating all authority upon oneself. Many theories on leadership stress the importance of teamwork building as essential to all organizations.

The 'Lone Ranger' has been replaced by the staff of "ER," the popular drama about hospital emergency room, as the fictional hero/heroine of our day. The Lone Ranger has also been replaced by teams in most effective and enduring organizations. Most significant work in today's world is done in creative teams because projects are too large and complex for one person to do well on his or her own.<sup>123</sup>

Moses reacts as a good student, he receives the lesson and puts it into practice. "Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said" (18: 24). His humility in this text is an outstanding model to many charismatic Church leaders in Congo who are proud of their revelation and will not listen to anybody. Though Moses speaks with God, he humbly accepts and implements the wise counsel of Jethro as if it were from Yahweh. It is important to recognize God's sovereignty in using any means to address his people. Moses shows that he was a teachable leader.

A critical reading of this account raises question on why such advice comes from Jethro and not God? Why does Moses have to learn it now after living with Jethro for years and being in a leadership position for a while? My suggestion is that this text should be interpreted as an ongoing apprenticeship of leadership for Moses. In fact good leadership should be conceived as a life-long process of maturing. The means to maturity includes supervision, feedback and critique by senior leaders who have experience and expertise to mentor the younger. Jethro in this episode is described as having those qualities to coach his son-in-law. It is important also that Jethro is an outsider to the people of Israel,

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<sup>123</sup> Charles J. Schwahn and William G. Spady, *Total Leaders: Applying the Best Future-Focused Change Strategies to Education* (Lanham, Ma: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 117.

and so perhaps well placed to uncover the abuse of leadership that Moses' followers are not aware of or reluctant to denounce. Jethro's critique helps Moses to get a better understanding of himself and his leadership and empowers him to exercise positive and constructive patterns of leadership. It does not matter that Jethro is not a Hebrew, though, as we have suggested, he may be a worshipper of Yahweh. God can use anybody to communicate his will to human beings. Brevard S. Child argues that, "Jethro's advice was deemed expedient at that moment in Israel's history and, therefore, from God."<sup>124</sup>

Moses' openness and humility in this text is an outstanding model to many charismatic Church leaders in Congo who are proud of their revelation and would not listen to anybody. My experience as one of the Church leaders in Congo under the dictatorial regime of Mobutu, and now in our confusing transition, puts me in the position of affirming that Moses' attitude towards Jethro's advice is recommendable to leaders both in the Church as well as in politics. Leaders need to submit to positive critique from outsiders who have discernment and expertise in order to improve their leadership. I should, however, argue that though Jethro's advice is noteworthy, it requires some caution. According to Jethro, Moses is in charge of assessing and appointing judges. This privilege of appointing assistants alone can become too much power in the hand of one individual. In my analysis of the revolt of Korah I will verify the veracity of this hypothesis.

### 3.6.3. Moses' Kinship

The Jethro's visit episode offers an opportunity to examine Moses' kinship and its role in his leadership. In the introduction, I mentioned that family reunion could be one of the themes of the text, although the focus is put on the interaction between Moses and Jethro. The narrator pays careful attention to describe familial bounds wherever they appear in the narrative. This emphasis reveals how the family is at the center of interactions in the narrative as stated below:

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<sup>38</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary*. OTS (London: SCM Press, 1974), 336.



Family-centeredness then is a complex cultural phenomenon which receives expression at every level and in all times of society as reflected in the Bible and which provides the foundation for the society itself. This explains why family-centeredness is part of the core value of Mediterranean society.<sup>125</sup>

Kinship stands as the main pillar in Moses' life and society. In the prologue of the book of Exodus, the text presents a list of the sons of Jacob who settled in Egypt to locate the Moses story in Israel (ch. 1). The narrative pursues its enumeration by introducing the father and mother, both from the tribe of Levi, son of Jacob (2:1-2). Furthermore we discover the elder sister watching over the baby (2:8), who will, together with the mother, be instrumental for the survival of the baby.<sup>126</sup>

The narrator discloses more and more kin members as the reader progresses with the text. Adoption by Pharaoh's daughter (2: 5-10) establishes the link between Moses and the Egyptian royal family. Also during his exile in Midian, Moses extends his kinship links to the Midianites by getting married to a daughter of the land (ch.3). In the episode of the burning bush, the narrator discloses the existence of an older brother to Moses, Aaron (4:14). He is appointed as assistant to Moses.

Chapter 18 puts special stress on Moses' kinship. The text constantly repeats the appellation 'father-in-law' alone or added to Jethro twelve times in the passage. Only in two occurrences (vv. 9 and 10) does the name Jethro stand by itself. This kinship link is emphasized to explain the liberty with which Jethro deals with Moses and the Israelites. It is important to notice that the narrator chooses to describe Jethro under his kin relationship with Moses to the point of overlooking his status as an alien. Jethro's identity as a Midianite is mentioned only once in the introduction (18:1). The story mentions also Zipporah, Moses' wife, and her two sons whose names are explained in relation to Moses' experience (18:3).

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<sup>125</sup> Mark McVann, "Family-Centeredness" in *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning: A Handbook*. John J. Pilch and Bruce Malina eds. (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson Publishers, 1993), 70-73.

<sup>126</sup> See the section on Women's roles above.

The text mentions also Aaron, Moses' brother, who is associated with the elders who are summoned for a meal with Jethro. In Exodus 24: 9, Aaron and his two sons are among the elders who meet God on his mountain for the covenant. They will later on be given the permanent priesthood in Israel.

Kinship plays a significant role in Moses' story. His leadership seems to be grounded on his family structure. Aaron and his sons on the one hand and Miriam on the other hand constitute a support system for Moses' authority. Moses' siblings control the religious (priesthood) and political power among the people (in the council of elders). The system seems to be popular in many traditional societies. One should remember that Africa was divided into several kingdoms from the North to the South, whose power is held within royal families. However, the supremacy of Moses' family does not remain unnoticed by the people. Some malcontent, as we shall see it, will arise in protest against him.

Sometimes, associated with kinship is the notion of honor and shame in the Israelite society, widely developed by scholars using social sciences in biblical interpretation.<sup>127</sup> To analyze the concept of honor and shame in the life of Moses may constitute a full essay and lead us astray from the goal of our study. But one should notice, in brief, that Moses' kinship has some relationship with honor and shame. Jerome H. Neyrey affirms that "Honor comes to someone either by *ascription* by another (birth, adoption, appointment) or by one's own *achievement*."<sup>128</sup> The narrator describes him as a descendant of Levi, son of Leah, a legitimate wife of Jacob. His birth into the tribe of Levi gives him honor because some sons of Jacob were born of maidservants. However his adoption into Pharaoh's family and his marriage to the daughter of the priest of Midian can demonstrate both honor and shame depending on what side one stands. As an outsider, the fact that Moses is born from Hebrew slaves, becomes a prince of Egypt by

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<sup>127</sup> For more discussion on 'honor and shame', see Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993); J.H. Neyrey ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) and J. G. Peristiany (ed.), *Honor and Shame: The values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966).

<sup>128</sup> J. Neyrey, "Despising the Shame of the Cross: Honor and Shame in the Johannine Passion Narrative" in *Semeia* 68 (1996), 113-137.

adoption and a son-in-law of Jethro, the priest of Midian, demonstrates that he gains honor in both societies, Egypt and Midian. But on the Hebrew side, Moses as a Hebrew who crosses boundaries to become an Egyptian or to mix in marriage with Midianites, can be labeled as shame. David Arthur deSilva has an appropriate comment as he writes, "Honor and shame become powerful tools for social engineering, for maintaining group boundaries, values, and commitments in a world of competing cultures and arenas in which to gain recognition."<sup>129</sup>

The revolt of Miriam and Aaron against Moses' authority in Numbers 12 is a good illustration of how the Israelites considered Moses' marriage with Zipporah the Midianite (Cushite in the text) as a shameful act. The revolt of Korah, as we shall demonstrate later, is also directed at the predominance of Moses' kinship in his leadership. The major trend in politics today tends to discourage all systems of leadership based on familial ties. It is even labeled as dysfunctional in a modern world where tribalism and racism are considered as vices in the society. In D.R.Congo we have known tribal genocide based on tribal links and many Churches have been divided because of laying one's authority upon kinship links. People are seeking a system of leadership which is flexible enough to accommodate people without racial, tribal, familial or religious barriers.

### **3.7. Moses and the Law**

#### **3.7.1. Plot**

The narrator sets the stage at Sinai for the political and religious organization of the Hebrew slaves who left Egypt. The first step was launched, as discussed earlier, by Jethro in Exodus chapter 18. He instigated a system of administration based on the delegation of authority to capable rulers. Jethro's model was designed to relieve Moses of a burdensome load of dealing alone with every trivial matter (Ex. 18:17-23). This mode also introduces an internal structuring of the tribal community. Hierarchical

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<sup>129</sup> David Arthur deSilva, *Deposing Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 143.

administrators over tens, hundreds and thousands are superimposed on the patriarchal council of elders, heads of families and clans. The giving of the law at Sinai is narratively a step further in the community-building endeavor. The theophany that accompanies this event seems familiar to Moses who previously encountered Yahweh in the same region when he was commissioned to be the liberator of the Israelites (Ex. 3). But for the people it was a terrifying experience never to be forgotten as they drew near the mountain covered with fire and smoke (Ex. 19). It is said, "Everyone in the camp trembled" (Ex. 19:16).

The text presents the giving of the law as the fulfillment of God's purpose of freeing the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. He wanted to create out of these slaves a nation that belongs to Him as stated in Exodus 19:3-6.

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession, although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

The above statement describes God's deliverance as the creative center of Israel's becoming a community of faith. The divine initiative in deliverance draws the people into a special relationship with Yahweh described in significant terms such as "my possession", "kingdom of priests" and "holy nation." The rescue from bondage was to be sealed by a covenant between Yahweh and freed slaves so that they could become God's people. The covenant initiated by God contained the conditions under which an agreement was to be sealed between God and His people. The people approved and bound themselves to live according to the covenant, "The people all responded, 'we will do everything the Lord has said'" (Ex. 19:8; 24:3). The covenant was also ratified through the blood sprinkled on the book of the covenant, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Ex. 24:8). John Bright observes,

According to the Bible, Israel responded to Yahweh's favor by entering into covenant with him to be his people and to live in accordance with his commandments. In other words, it was through covenant that Israel was constituted as Yahweh's people.<sup>130</sup>

The tradition of Israel links together the exodus and Sinai as the basis of her historical experience of the formation of God's people. The notion of community in Israel develops from the experience of release from Egyptian oppression. They are totally dependent on Yahweh who promises to continue showing them His favor as long as they remain obedient to the stipulations of the covenant. Bright has appropriate words to depict the relationship between God and Israel through the covenant:

Yahweh did not come to Israel in Egypt as a maintainer of status quo, but as a God who called his people from nothingness into a new future and into hope. And the covenant, though demanding strictest obedience to its stipulations on pain of rejection, carried also explicit assurance that, its obligations met, the overLord's favor would be endlessly continued.<sup>131</sup>

The new future that God promised to his people if they met the requirements of the law would make their living in the Promised Land better than in Egypt. God's favor to Israel was expressed primarily in terms of material blessings. They were promised to be fruitful and multiply, to have abundant produce from the land, their cattle and livestock were to increase and they would become a great nation on earth (Lev. 26:1-13; Deut. 28:1-14). Concurrently with material promises, the people were to enjoy God's presence in their midst (Ex. 25:8). Obedience to God's law was the key to their identity as God's people and to their prosperity in the Promised Land.

The institution of the law is such a complex plot in the exodus narrative that we have decided to consider separately some major components of the event and their influence upon Moses' leadership in the wilderness. These include the spectacle of lawgiving, the adjustment of leadership, the introduction of the priesthood and the service in the tabernacle and the interruption brought in by the incident of the Golden Calf.

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<sup>130</sup> John Bright, *A History of Israel*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: SCM Press, 1980), 149.

<sup>131</sup> John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 157.



### 3.7.1.1. Lawgiving

In order to function appropriately as a nation, the community needed more than a system of governance provided by Jethro's model. God provides laws for good governance of the people. At Sinai Moses receives from Yahweh a set of laws to regulate legal and cultic matters. C.G. Kruse explains the role of God's laws in these terms:

These laws were to govern the Israelites' relationship to God, with one another, and with the people living around them. The law regulated the cult by which they approached God and by which forgiveness for their sins could be obtained.<sup>132</sup>

What Kruse calls forgiveness of sin should be understood, in the context of ancient Hebrews, as the atonement through sacrifices in order to re-establish broken relationship with God. God's laws are given to shape ritually and legally the new community born out of Egyptian bondage. They define the framework of relationship within which the nation will grow even beyond the wilderness, because God's laws shall be carried out even after settlement in the Promised Land. It should be noticed that Israel was not the only people to have a system of laws in the region. Some similarities between Israelite laws and other law codes in the Near Eastern region are extensively documented. However, many scholars admit that Israelite approach to law is unique and different from that of neighboring communities. On the uniqueness of Israel's approach, David Pleins affirms,

While similar subjects are covered in the pentateuchal law codes, a comparison between legal materials and Mesopotamian laws must not mislead the interpreter. Biblical law is not reducible to a narrowly constructed civil law. Biblical law, unlike other Near Eastern codes, regularly blends ritual and social obligations. Neither the Ten Commandments, the Covenant Code, the Priestly texts, nor the Deuteronomic Code try hermetically to seal off the one sort of law from the other.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Colin G. Kruse, "Law" in T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S Romer (eds.), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 629-636.

<sup>133</sup> J.David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 43-44. Pleins cites several codes of the Ancient Near East including Ur-Nammu (c. 2100 BCE), Lipit-Ishar (c. 1934-1924 BCE), Eshnuma (c. 1850 BCE), the Middle Assyrian Laws (prior to 1100 BCE) and the Neo-Babylonian Laws (c. 700 BCE), 42-44.

Pleins finds the uniqueness of Israel's approach in the fact that there is no demarcation between laws concerning the religious rite (purity, sacrifice, holiness, vows) and social laws devoted to community life (family, property, inheritance, refuge and the poor). In Israel social legislations are intertwined with liturgical programs. This intermixture of social laws and liturgical regulations determines the important role that the body called to administer the law (the priesthood) will have to play in Israel's society. The giving of the law introduces a change in the prevailing administration of justice in the nation under formation in order to accommodate new institutions. We shall now turn to this modification

#### *3.7.1.2. Adjustment of Leadership*

Prior to the giving of the law, Jethro has initiated a judicial system whereby judges were established at various divisions of the community ranging from tens to thousands. The narrator attests that the system was already operational, "They served as judges for the people at all the times, the difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves" (Ex. 18:26). One would expect that the law given at Sinai was going to empower this body of judges with tools in order to carry out their task successfully. To be entrusted with enforcing God's law also would enhance the power of this judicial body to control the social and religious life of Israel. But the introduction of law at Sinai and the erection of a sanctuary for God's dwelling opt for the creation of another body, which will have a closer relationship with God. Apparently, the whole process of organizing Israel administratively is modified by the introduction of the law at Sinai. One is left with speculations on the reason why the former structure is not mentioned here. The assumption may be that the judicial system suggested by Jethro is definitively settled and does not need any further change at this stage, or it has been abandoned after Jethro's departure. Whatever may be the reason, this omission requires some explanation.

One probable explanation is that the structure proposed by Jethro was designed to meet a particular situation and not to establish a permanent judicial system. The system became obsolete once that particular situation found solution. This view is advocated by Brevard Childs as he argues,

The advice of Jethro is presented as if it arose from a completely accidental situation. 'On the next morning Jethro happened to see Moses sitting....' The advice which Jethro offered was directed to a particular historical situation within the life of Israel... Ancient Israel did not fall into the theological trap of polarizing the accidental and the eternal. Jethro's advice was deemed expedient at that moment in Israel's history and, therefore, from God.<sup>134</sup>

Childs shows that the system of justice proposed by Jethro fitted a certain period in the history of Israel, therefore it was soon abandoned. According to Childs the presence of Jethro's temporal system would compete with the eternal structure brought in by the law at Sinai. The problem with the above argument is that it does not take into consideration the well grounded motivation behind Jethro's advice. The former practice in which Moses held the supreme authority and would alone decide the fate of the whole nation was bad. Jethro condemned the procedure because it was burdensome for Moses and leading to the exhaustion of both Moses and the people. The judicial system of Jethro was such a relief that it would be hard to abandon it so quickly. Moses and the people could later acknowledge the goodness of Jethro's organization.

And you answered me and said, "The thing which you have said to do is good. So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and appointed them heads over you, leaders of thousands, and hundreds, of fifties and of tens, and officers for your tribes" (Deut. 1:14-15).

George Pixley gives a variant argument. He claims that Jethro's system of justice was an un-successful ancient attempt at a system which would be later established by Jehoshaphat and would come into force during the monarchical period. Its mention at this stage in time is therefore premature and anachronistic.<sup>135</sup> Pixley's thesis that this judicial system was in force during the monarchical period does not rule out the possibility that the system might have been established during the exodus period. It raises only the question of the disconnection between the Sinai account and the exodus narrative. Many scholars

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<sup>134</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 335-36.

<sup>135</sup> George V. Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 116.

would explain the loose connection between the exodus and the events at Sinai by advocating two separate traditions only secondarily brought together. Despite pertinent arguments concerning the separation of the traditions of exodus and Sinai by scholars such as von Rad, Alt and Noth, there is no agreement among scholars concerning this separation. Their thesis has been opposed and reviewed along the history in subsequent scholarly debates.<sup>136</sup> The scope of this study will not allow us to embark on this very important ongoing controversy.

The explanation, to which this thesis concurs, is that the giving of the law at Sinai did not dissolve or invalidate the judicial system instituted by Jethro. According to the narrative, the judges were among the heads of the tribes and members of the council of the elders.

How can I alone bear the load and burden of you and your strife? Choose wise and discerning men from your tribes, and I will appoint them as your heads. And you answered and said, 'The thing you have said to do is good.' So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and appointed them heads over you, leaders of thousands, and hundreds, of fifties, and of tens, and officers for your tribes (Deut. 1:12-15)

The position of these elders in the community and the confidence put in them by their constituency indicate that the institution could not be unwillingly discontinued. In instances the pentateuchal narrative refers to the seventy or elders in general as a very active judging body. Their influence and power, though small at the beginning, increased in the course of the history of Israel and they became an important jurisdiction during the monarchy (Num. 11:16, 24; Deut. 19; 21; 22; 25; 27). The elders who ruled at the gate of the town could settle all trials and disputes of a town, even impose the death penalty if the case incurred such a sentence (Deut. 21:18-21).<sup>137</sup> Many scholars admit that the seventy elders who accompanied Moses and Aaron on Mount Sinai to meet the Lord (Ex. 24:1),

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<sup>136</sup> For more discussions on Exodus and Sinai, read Ernest W. Nicholson, *Exodus and Sinai in History and Tradition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973) also Arthur Weiser, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975), 69-135.

<sup>137</sup> The case of Boaz as the kinsman of Naomi (Ruth 4) and the sentence to death of Naboth (1 Kings 21:8-13) provide an example of the working of the elders' jurisdiction. For a comprehensive description of 'Elders' see Günther Bornkamm, "πρεσβυτερος" in TDNT, IV (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), 651-683.

and later received a share of the spirit which was on Moses (Num. 11:25), were members of the team entrusted with judicial power according to Jethro's advice.<sup>138</sup>

My argument is that narratively the judicial system established by Jethro was not abandoned after his departure since it was imbedded in the existing and legitimate body of the elders which was highly esteemed by the people. The problem resides in the extent of their authority in handling people's matters in the course of time. It seems that at this early stage of its formation the group had very limited competency in settling people's disputes. It is said that they dealt with minor disputes referring the harder ones to Moses (Ex. 18:26). In their commentary Keil and Delitzsch argue,

The difference between the harder or greater matters and the smaller matters consisted in this: questions which there were no definite law to decide were great or hard; whereas, on the other hand, those which could easily be decided from the existing laws or general principles of equity were simple or small.<sup>139</sup>

The distinction between minor and major matters by Keil and Delitzsch can be understood in the context prior to the giving of the law, because the law of Moses had regulations about social and religious life of Israel. The major difference, in my opinion, might be that questions that required God's consultation were left in the hands of Moses, who had the sole privilege of seeing God (Ex. 18:19), whereas the elders could handle daily disputes. The issue is that at Sinai God decided to dwell among His people and establish a broader relationship with them. His presence and the nature of God's holiness required a mediatorial activity, which introduced a change in the organization of Israel's

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<sup>138</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its life and Institutions* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978), 152-55. De Vaux affirms that elders have played an important role among three jurisdictions that existed in Israel: the communal jurisdiction of the elders, the jurisdiction of the king and that of the priest" p. 152. For more discussion on the role of elders in the Exodus see E.W. Nicholson "The Interpretation of Ex. XXIV. 9-11," in *Vetus Testamentum* 24 (1974), 77-79; "The Antiquity of the Tradition in Ex. XXIV. 9-11," in *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975), 69-79; and "The origin of the Tradition in Ex. XXIV. 9-11," in *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (1976), 148-160.

<sup>139</sup> C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, "The Second Book of Moses: Exodus" in *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes: The Pentateuch*. Vol.1 (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 87-88.



society. Since Moses could not continue to be the only one to appear before the Lord in the tabernacle, he needed another body to stand as people's representative before God. There was therefore a need for a priestly jurisdiction to mediate between God and His people. At this point the reader of the Bible is left with a number of un-answered questions. Why did Moses not elevate the existing judicial body of elders to priesthood instead of creating a new institution? Was it wise to invest in one body, the priesthood, the judicial power and headship of families? These questions demand a deep investigation which goes beyond the scope of our narrative approach. Let us consider the institution of the priesthood and its place in the new social structure after Sinai.

### *3.7.1.3. Introduction of the Priesthood*

The reader of the pentateuchal narrative, as discussed earlier, is aware of how the narrator builds up his plot by making some interruptions in the flow of the narrative to instill new elements in the story. At Sinai the narrator sets a stage which shows that the giving of the law marks a new beginning. Moses' meeting with God on the mountain (Ex. 19:1-3) interrupts the account of Jethro's visit (Ex. 18). During this meeting Moses is told that God will make a covenant with his people (Ex. 19:5) and that He will come down to communicate it personally to them (Ex. 19:9). People are asked to prepare themselves for this encounter and observe some precautionary measures to avoid dying by being exposed to God's holiness. The striking fact in this account is the mention for the first time of "priests" as a separate body among the people.

And also let the priests who come near the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them...Go down and come up again, you and Aaron with you; but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest He break forth upon them (Ex. 19:22, 24).

In his comment concerning this verse Willem Gispen admits,

I do not know what to do with this verse, and am inclined to consider it as a later addition, since at that time there were still no priests, while the command to consecrate themselves does not fit here.<sup>140</sup>

It is true that the abrupt mention of the term "priests" which has never been used before with regard to the people who left Egypt seems strange. Many scholars struggle to interpret the use of this term at this point in the narrative. Gispén cites the Dutch Authorized Version, which assumes that this verse refers to the firstborn who served as priests in the families before the consecration of the family of the Levites. He also mentions Calvin who assumes that Israel, like other pagan nations, had priests who were not the firstborn.<sup>141</sup> Whatever may be the interpretation of this verse, the narrator, in my view, is introducing us to a new institution which emerges with the giving of the law.

The narrative records that the people were terrified by the manifestation that accompanied the pronouncement of the covenant, so much so that after hearing the Ten Commandments they asked Moses to mediate between them and God because they could no longer bear his presence (20:19). Moses, therefore, continued to receive the rest of the laws and communicated them to the people (Ex. 21-23). The danger of this request is that it would prompt Moses to become the only mediator with Yahweh as the people wished. This new role of Moses in the mediation of the law creates some tension in the narrative as compared to what happened during Jethro's visit. The temptation is great between delegating the power to others and being the sole mediator between God and His people. The difficulty of this interpretation in our context is that in Africa we are used to rulers with absolute power both in the Church and over the nations, who refuse to share power or retire because they pretend to have a divine mandate to lead the community. Hopefully, the above reading does not stand across the whole text. Despite the fear of the people to appear before God, Moses is asked to be accompanied by Aaron and his family and the seventy elders on the mountain as they ratified the covenant and shared a meal before God (Ex. 24:1). The seventy likely included the leaders chosen on Jethro's advice.

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<sup>140</sup> W.H. Gispén, "Exodus." Bible Student's Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 184.

<sup>141</sup> W.H. Gispén, *Exodus*, 184.

The naming of Aaron's family, who should accompany the seventy in the above meeting with God, marks another shift in the narrative (Ex. 24:1, 10). Nadab and Abihu are called by their names while the elders remain anonymous. Their naming in this group draws the focus of the reader to a particular group of leaders, even though their presence at this stage plays no significant role in the narrative. The following scene will disclose the mystery behind Aaron's family.

#### *3.7.1.4. Tabernacle and Priesthood*

After the meal in which the elders and Aaron's family participate (24:12-18), Moses is summoned by God to receive additional regulations while the group which accompanied him return to the camp. Each summons on the mountain introduces subsequent revelation. During this new meeting Moses is told to ask the people of Israel to build a dwelling place for the holy God, a sanctuary.

Then have them make a sanctuary for me and I will dwell among them (Ex. 25:8). Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the Lord their God who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am the Lord their God (Ex. 29:45-46).

F.B. Meyer observes that,

Thus it was ordained that this larger tent should be pitched among them, only differing from their own in its proportions and materials; but standing on the same level sand, struck and pitched at the same hour with theirs, and enduring the same vicissitudes of weather and travel. Did not this say, as plainly as words could, that the tabernacle of God was with men, and that He was willing to dwell with them and become their God? Did it not teach that Jehovah had become a pilgrim with the pilgrim host; no longer a God afar off, but a sharer in their national fortunes?<sup>142</sup>

The presence of God in the midst of His people brings a tremendous change in the prevailing leadership. God wants to be present among His people as their king and supreme judge establishing thus a theocratic regime among His people. On the one hand,

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<sup>142</sup> F.B.Meyer, *Moses: The Servant of God* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1960), 140.

people can now enjoy the presence of God in the camp and relate to him on a daily basis. But on the other hand, His holiness and sacredness impose restrictions to approaching Him. People were warned from the start that they should not approach or touch the mountain under penalty of death. "Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death" (Ex.19:12b). Now that the tabernacle is pitched in the camp, the danger of touching the sacred became real. The extreme holiness of God was a dreadful danger to the Israelites.

The Ark of the Covenant is often imagined as a uniquely hazardous device, liable to bring death on everyone who approached it regardless of whether their intentions were innocent or malign. In fact, it seems to be only one part of a system by which the immensity of divine power could be controlled through ritual means.<sup>143</sup>

The tabernacle and its strict requirements of holiness to those who are called to approach Yahweh were not designed to deprive the people from being in relationship with God, but provision is made that a large group can mediate with God on behalf of the people. The account of the building of the tabernacle provides a mediatorial body in Aaron and his family to stand between the people and Yahweh, "Then bring near to yourself Aaron your brother, and his sons with him from among the sons of Israel to minister as priests to Me—Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithmar, Aaron's sons" (Ex. 28:1). This text shows that priests are brought near to Moses to serve Yahweh and to stand in His holy place. Later, a wider representation of Levites will be given some duties with regard to the tabernacle, but Aaron's family will keep its prominence as priests.

The location of the ministry of priests in the sacred place where other leaders, such as judges and heads of families do not have access, introduces a new picture in the existing scheme of leadership among the people of Israel. Aaron and his narrower lineage within the tribe of Levi are appointed to constitute exclusively the new institution. The access to the holy place and God's altar remains the specifically priestly privilege. Because of their exposure to God's presence, they should be submitted to strict requirements of behavior

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<sup>143</sup> Roderick Grierson and Stuart Munro-Hay, *The Ark of the Covenant* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1999), 45.

and clothing (Ex. 28-29). The duties assigned to this newly constituted institution are specific and different from those carried out by other bodies in Israel. Peter J. Leithart notices,

Priests guarded boundaries of holiness as much by teaching Torah as by serving as custodians of the literal gates of the sanctuary. Even when the priests moved out of the holy precincts among the people, they were engaged in 'house-keeping'. In short, the sanctuary and pastoral dimensions of priestly ministry are mutually interpreting and this because sanctuary and people are different forms of Yahweh's house.<sup>144</sup>

Leithart explains that the duties of the priests were not limited to the physical house of God. The people of Israel were a human sanctuary of Yahweh; therefore the pastoral ministry of the priest has to be considered as attendance upon Yahweh. Their involvement in the social life of the people, even serving as court officials, was intended to maintain and encourage holiness among the people. John Davis describes among the responsibilities of the priests the following:

They were to appraise things that were dedicated to the sanctuary. It was their sacred responsibility to instruct the people of Israel in the law and to act as high court of appeals in any difficult case. In times of war they had responsibilities to speak to the soldiers and even provide information for the battle.<sup>145</sup>

Priests were not the only organ operating among the people, thus one should expect some overlaps in duties and even clashes of responsibility. Without stretching beyond the limit of this study, we can affirm from the history of Israel that the priesthood, despite the existence of power struggle, has coexisted with other institutions such as kingship, judgeship and prophets. Each institution could operate within its attribution without excluding one another.

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<sup>144</sup> Peter J. Leithart, "Attendants of Yahweh's House: Priesthood in the Old Testament" *JSOT*, 85 (September 1999), 22 [3-24].

<sup>145</sup> John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Study in Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), 272.



The above description of the priests' responsibility leads consequently to the establishment of this group over any other institution in the exodus narrative. The administrators and elders who were not allowed to approach God in this theocratic regime would henceforth play a secondary role as leaders in Israel. One should not ignore the fact that Moses himself was a Levite and priest. He held even more religious power than the high priest because of being closer to God than all of them. In fact he was appointed from the beginning of the narrative to act on behalf of God while Aaron would be his mouthpiece (Ex. 4:16). It becomes therefore predictable that the newly instituted priesthood will not enjoy unchallenged such a unique privilege above all other leading bodies in Israel. The revolt of Korah to be developed in the following chapters sets an example of a power struggle among leaders.

#### *3.7.1.5. The Golden Calf*

The narrator sandwiches this incident between the instructions concerning the tabernacle and priesthood to show some weaknesses in the Israelites' leadership. In spite of all the precautions taken by Moses to fill the leadership vacuum during his absence, things did not work well for the people. The text states that since Moses knew that his stay on the mountain would be long, "forty days and forty nights" (Ex. 24:18b), he appointed Aaron and Hur as interim leaders (Ex. 24: 14). Hur, whose qualities of leadership had been recognized earlier during the war against Amalek, working as a team to uphold Moses' hands (Ex. 17: 8-16), was probably among the judges instituted by Jethro. He was appointed to share the top leadership while Moses was away. Somehow their presence did not fill the gap left by the absence of Moses and after a while the people became impatient.

Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him" (Ex. 32:1).

This incident stands as a test of the teamwork of Moses' appointees to carry out leadership responsibility during his absence. The irony is evident from the text. While

Moses was receiving instruction to use the people's wealth for a sanctuary and consecrate priests, Aaron, the high priest to be, takes that wealth to fashion an idol. The involvement of Aaron in this apostasy is remarkable. He has been close to Moses in the whole process of liberation and participated in ratification of the covenant by sprinkling the blood and eating in the presence of the Lord (Ex. 24:1-11). Yet, he is the first to break the covenant under the pressure of the people and to declare the idol, "This is your God, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (Ex. 32:4).

If Aaron is not able to defend the covenant and rise to the task of acting head of Israel, one should not blame other leaders such as Hur and the council of the elders who had thus far been kept under the shadow of Moses and Aaron. Moses expressed his disappointment and anger by breaking the tablets containing the laws (Ex. 32:19) and by holding Aaron responsible for the downfall. "What did this people do to you, that you have brought such a great sin upon them? (Ex. 32:21). The rest of the story turns into homicide in which three thousand Israelites perished (Ex. 32:28). The Levites executed the homicide, probably with Aaron at their head. They might have used this occasion to validate their election as the newly instituted priesthood, even though they did not raise their voices to resist the apostasy. This killing could perhaps have been averted if responsible and competent leaders, able to exercise power when he was absent, surrounded Moses.

This incident reveals the fragility of the leadership in place at this point of the Moses narrative. It seems that, apart from Moses, nobody has caught the vision of what God intends to do with Israel. The whole enterprise is doomed to crumble if Moses disappears. The reader has to wait until the end of the narrative for a capable successor to Moses. This story reminds us of what is happening in my country DR Congo. After the fall of Mobutu's regime, the country was plunged into civil war, from which it is struggling to come out, because the dictatorial regime did not put in place clear mechanisms of succession and prepare other people for leadership. The example can be found in many other African countries and even Churches. We need to turn our focus now on how Moses is portrayed in the Sinai account.

### 3.7.2. Moses

The narrator portrays Moses in the episode of law giving at Sinai as a mediator of God's ordinances. The initiative comes from God (Ex. 19:3ff) and the first plan was to gather the people at the foot of Mount Sinai so that God himself may address them and communicate the covenant. George Coats expresses in appropriate words the role played by Moses in law giving:

The law is God's word. And divine authority underwrites its position among the people. But it is Moses with shining face who communicates the law to the people. And that double edge, so clearly expressed by the Deuteronomist and the Chronicler, characterizes the Moses image as lawgiver from the earliest levels of the narrative tradition.<sup>146</sup>

Coats underscores how the role of Moses in lawgiving shifts from communicator of God's law to lawgiver. According to the narrative, this shift came about because the people were not capable of enduring the terrifying presence of the Lord, so that they preferred to relate to Yahweh through the mediation of Moses.

When the people saw the thunder and lighting and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die" (Ex. 20:18-19).

This request influenced Moses' leadership in two ways. Firstly, it enhanced Moses' position, moving from the mediator of the law to the lawgiver. People had to rely on his communication in order to hear God's ordinance. His absence therefore created a void in the community that would lead to chaos as in the case of the Golden Calf mentioned above (Ex. 32-33). Secondly, this exclusive right given to Moses to communicate with God became a danger of concentrating too much power in the hands of one person, as we shall see in the course of this study. This could lead to the cult of personality or make Moses an autocrat. Should he become greedy and stubborn, the whole community would suffer the dictatorship we are experiencing in many African Churches and nations. Given

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<sup>146</sup> George Coats, *"Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God"* JSOT Supplement 57 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 143.

that there was a risk of reverting to the authoritarian way of ruling denounced by Jethro (Ex. 18), one could wonder why Moses did not resist this request. It may be that Moses was happy to exercise full authority without sharing, therefore the people's proposal met his personal aspiration. In my opinion, the later institution of the priesthood, as an organ of mediation between God and the people, should be considered as Moses' way of resisting the authoritarian leadership by sharing the spiritual leadership with priests. We will explore further Moses' leadership in this unique position in the next chapters.

The incident of the Golden Calf portrays another aspect of Moses' leadership. We see in this episode Moses in control and nobody else. Two major problems arise in this portrayal of Moses. Firstly, everyone wants to see Moses, the man of God, as he is the only one who has the power and authority. Though he has appointed Aaron and Hur to fill the gap during his absence (Ex. 24:14), people do not trust them as being able to lead the flock. Their request is therefore, if Moses is not here, make us another god to lead the community (Ex. 32:1). The fact is that Moses has embodied God's image so that in the sight of the Israelites only another God can replace him and not a human being. It becomes hard to maintain organizational structure within this culture of leadership. The subordinates will never enjoy shared responsibilities because the boss is so powerful. This may explain why the structure established by Jethro seems to be overlooked. Like Aaron and Hur, they may be present, but people prefer to see Moses, who knows everything. Both Moses and the people needed to learn in the course of the narrative the culture of the delegation of power. The following principle of leadership highlighted by the narrative is very important:

A leader cannot solve all problems himself and must learn to trust subordinates with delegated responsibilities. Everyone must see delegation as an opportunity to function as a body. Note that: – Delegation encourages confidence. It encourages teamwork, trust and loyalty. – The leader's ambition, expectation, and desires should be to achieve the organizational goals. He should respect the individual's worth and dignity by following the individual to contribute their ideas through his delegation.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> George Janvier and Bitrus Thaba, *Understanding Leadership: An African Christian Model* (Kaduna, Nigeria: Baraka Press and Publishers, 1997), 74.

Secondly, the Golden Calf reveals that the people and all other leaders had not caught the vision of the exodus. The exodus seems to be Moses' and his God's business. As soon as Moses disappears, Aaron and the whole nation are ready to worship idols and even to go back to Egypt, as it had been expressed many times when they faced hardship during the journey. Apart from Joshua, who accompanied Moses in his meeting with God on the mountain (Ex. 24:12), Aaron and his family, as well as all the elders, did not oppose the idea of worshipping the Golden Calf. Moses was probably in the process of mentoring Joshua but imparting the vision was the big issue. Either the mechanism of imparting the vision was lacking or people were slow to catch God's vision. Tom Marshall underlines the significance for a leader to impart the vision:

Leaders must work at building identification between themselves and their people in relation to the goal so that to the people it becomes not the leader's goal but their own. It is only when the goal becomes corporately owned that it can survive the death or departure of the leader or leaders who called it into being in the first place.<sup>148</sup>

Imparting the vision is an important issue in leadership succession. If, for example, Moses should have died on the mountain, the liberation of the Israelites would have crumbled at Sinai. Later on we know that Moses passed on the leadership to Joshua successfully but at this stage of the narrative things were not good. In Africa, difficulties that occur when there is change in political or religious leadership arise mostly because those in power do not impart to their successors a vision. The change of power results in that either the community starts pursuing a different vision or that it splits; and in extreme cases the organization vanishes. Being an irreplaceable leader is not the only aspect that the reader gets from the Golden Calf episode.

During the Golden Calf incident Moses is also portrayed as a committed intercessor. Moses went even further in his plea to the point of laying down his life for the Israelites. "But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written" (Ex. 32:32). In the course of the exodus narrative, Moses is often seen playing

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<sup>148</sup> Tom Marshall, *Understanding Leadership: Fresh Perspectives on the Essentials of New Testament Leadership* (Chichester, UK: Sovereign World, 1991), 40



the role of intercessor because the people of Israel broke their covenant several times by sinning against Yahweh in the wilderness. But Moses was always there to beg for God's mercy and forgiveness.

More than a simple intercessor, Moses is also portrayed positively in another event associated with the giving of the law – the institution of the priesthood. Moses acts with selflessness in depriving his own sons of the priesthood by appointing Aaron and his lineage to this permanent office. According to the stipulations of the law this prestigious office was established to last forever. Its significance became even greater during the settlement and in the temple of Jerusalem when a complex system of worship took place. Although Aaron was his biological brother, this choice remains significant for a leader who is ready to value others. In Africa, this choice may raise a number of questions because we live in a society plagued with ethnicity, tribalism and racism. We will come back to this point later after analyzing the revolts.

On a negative note in this section on the lawgiving, the narrator shows where Moses' anger could lead. Not only did he break the stone tablets from Yahweh (Ex. 32:19) but he also ordered homicide (Ex.32:27) and made the community drink heavy metal from the powder of the Golden Calf poured into water (Ex. 32:20). We are not sure if the plague which occurred later is the result of drinking polluted water. This anger is not a positive character for a leader and God seemed not to approve Moses' reaction. The fact is that later on when he needed another copy of the law, he had himself to cut other tables and write on them instead of receiving ready-made tablets (34:1, 27). The significance of a negative note in this episode is that it shows the balance that the narrative makes between the weaknesses and strengths of the man of God. This study will come back to Moses' character in detail later.

### 3.7.3 Conclusion

Moses' leadership is shaped by several events and the challenges he faces in his career. In this episode (the giving of the law), Moses has the unique privilege of mediating God's law to the people. He communicates the terms of the covenant and its stipulations. He has

the privilege of speaking face to face with the Lord until his face becomes shining with God's glory. He participates with God in recording the law on stone tablets. However, his leadership in lawgiving offers a very complex picture. Sometimes he acts alone as he communicates with God. He is asked by the people to speak with God on their behalf because they are afraid to face God's holiness. In this case one could portray him as a lone ranger, reverting in what Jethro has warned him to avoid. On the other side, Moses is also portrayed as a leader working in a team in several instances. Although on some specific occasions he may appear alone before the Lord, Aaron is often associated with him in meetings (Ex. 19:24). He consults with the elders whenever the life of the community is concerned (Ex. 19:7), and sometimes the presence of the elders becomes significant, as during the ratification of the covenant (Ex. 24). When he is required to establish the priesthood, he prefers to uplift his brother Aaron's family instead of his own.

Moses at Sinai is the hero who achieves the social structuring of the Hebrew slaves by communicating cultic and legal regulations to govern the community. He is used by God to set apart Aaron and his sons to a prestigious position as priests of Yahweh. He provides all the required details for a magnificent dwelling of God in order to allow his people to enjoy God's presence in their midst. He is a committed intercessor who regularly seeks to meet God.

Despite this heroic image of Moses portrayed in the Sinai account, he remains a human being who owes his success to God's mercy. In his weaknesses Moses loses his temper as he watches the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf. He breaks the precious stone tablets containing God's law, he makes people drink water polluted with debris of heavy metals and he orders the homicide of his people. He is a man who at times can be a channel of God's blessings to his people and other times he may bring doom. This study has to deal with this complex image of Moses' leadership who, with a mixture of strengths and weaknesses, stands as an icon of God's servants among the community of faith.

### **3.8. Moses and the End of His Life**

Our survey makes a big jump ahead by dealing with the end of Moses' leadership at this point. The reason is that important characteristics of Moses' leadership between the giving of the law and Moses' death in Moab will be covered in our exegetical analysis. These include mainly the wilderness journey. This period is characterized by complaints and revolts as the people face hardship during their journey. Their anger and frustration are directed toward Moses and God and should be perceived as a challenge to Moses' leadership. Therefore, our analysis of passages concerning people's rebellion will cover the important aspects of these revolts and how Moses dealt with them.

This jump also overlooks the long explanation of legal materials contained in the Torah and their implementation in the narrative running from Exodus 19 to Numbers 10. Despite the great significance of these legal materials in the organization and the acquisition of the identity of the people of Israel, this survey covers only a few elements that enhance the understanding of our study. Firstly, because several aspects of Moses' leadership portrayed in these materials are present in the section we are going to deal with in depth. Secondly, because of the significance of the Torah, considered as the core of the Hebrew religion, its analysis in depth can lead us beyond the scope of this study.

#### **3.8.1. Plot**

The end of Moses' career repeats some recurring features already described in this survey. Moses ends his mission on Mount Nebo in the desert of Moab in the presence of the Lord (Deut. 34), recalling his commissioning in the desert of Sinai when God appeared to him at Horeb (Ex. 3). Moab is not only the end of Moses' leadership, but a new beginning for the people of Israel. At Sinai the people entered into covenant with God under the leadership of Moses and now at Moab they renew the covenant which will lead them into the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. The end of Moses' life is constituted by four main activities—the renewal of the covenant (Deut. 31), the song of Moses (ch. 32), the blessings (ch. 33), Moses' death and Joshua taking over (ch.34). The renewal of the covenant consists in remembering God's law, words of encouragement to Joshua and

to the people, commissioning Joshua and finally warning against idolatry. The song is given as an easy way to remember this last exhortation. P.C. Craigie says that, "The song functions as a part of the witness to the renewal of the covenant; when the Israelites sang it, they would bear witness to their understanding and agreement to the full terms and implications of the covenant."<sup>149</sup> The blessings carry not only good wishes but also the preferences of the dying father. This is obvious in the relatively lengthy blessing of Levi who is given the priestly role in Israelite society (Deut. 33:8-11). In this last episode the narrator pictures Moses giving a blessing before his death as the father of his people in the line of other patriarchs, such as Isaac and Jacob (cf. Gen 27:7; 49:1; 50:16). Moses' blessings demonstrate his knowledge of the people he has led for so long. He is not only the patriarch but also the prophet par excellence capable of predicting the distant future and seeing what the people might have become once settled in the Promised Land.<sup>150</sup> The liberator of Israel ends his life as a man who has learned and matured in leadership, as shown in the following analysis.

### 3.8.2. Moses

The narrative in Deuteronomy recalls the end of Moses' leadership with a mixture of feelings. On the one hand, Moses has to hand over the leadership to Joshua because he is not permitted to cross the river Jordan as a consequence of his failure.

On that same day the Lord told Moses, "Go up into the Abarim Range, to Mount Nebo in Moab, across from Jericho, and view Canaan, the land I am giving the Israelites as their own possession. There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people. This is because both of you broke faith with me at the waters of Meriba Kadesh in the desert of Zin and because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites. Therefore, you will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel" (Deut. 32:48-52).

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<sup>149</sup> P.C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. R.K. Harrison, Gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 373.

<sup>150</sup> J.A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy; An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 306.

This view of the end of Moses' leadership suggests the failure of a leader who is unable to reach his goal. Moses regrets this and blames the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel as the cause of his exclusion from the Promised Land. "Because of you the Lord became angry with me also and said, you shall not enter it [the land], either" (Deut. 1:37).

On the other hand, the text describes Moses as a fulfilled man who has led his people and now that he is old (120 years) he has to hand over to the younger generation. He has mentored a successor and is now happy to let him take over the task. His farewell speech is full of last warnings and blessings. Being buried by Yahweh himself honors Moses.

He (Moses) said, "I am now a hundred and twenty years old, and I can no longer move about as I please; and the Lord has told me that I may not cross the Jordan. The Lord your God will cross over at your head and destroy these nations before your advance, and you shall occupy their lands; and, as he directed, Joshua will lead you across." Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, "Be strong, be resolute; for it is you who are to lead this people into the land which the Lord swore to give their forefathers, and you are to bring them into possession of it" (Deut. 31:1-3, 7 NEB).

There are divergent interpretations to explain the variations within Moses' death account in the above quote. On the one hand, Moses is denied entry into the Promised Land because he and Aaron were unfaithful to God at Meriba. Therefore, Moses has to die before crossing the Jordan. On the other hand, Moses is now very old and has reached the time of his death. A number of scholars of the Old Testament, as we said earlier, attribute these variations in Moses' death account to the existence of different sources in the compilation of the book. In his book, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, Robert Polzin attributes these variations to the change of discourses within the book. He holds that differences in the book of Deuteronomy generate from the presence of three narrative voices within the book: Moses, God, and the narrator. He concludes that at the end of the book the Deuteronomic narrator becomes the only voice, the prophet, silencing Moses



and God.<sup>151</sup> Polzin's comment is that the opposing ideological positions are merely compositional devices of the author supporting his point of view. He sees the narrator's voice advocating that the death of Moses in Moab is due neither to his personal failure, nor to his old age but according to the word of the Lord (34:5). This interpretation raises some problems about whose voice is decisive in biblical narrative? We will not engage in this debate lest we shift away from the scope of this study.

My argument is that the two views have to be taken into account. The view of Moses' failure to enter the Promised Land as God's verdict reflects his humanity. As a human being, Moses is limited in time and space. This view is shared by some biblical scholars such as Dennis T. Olson who argues for human failure. He interprets the death of Moses as the result of "The human limitation to hold together and comprehend the full mystery of God's ways."<sup>152</sup> Despite all the privileges he holds before God and his achievements as the liberator of the people, Moses remains a human being prone to mistakes and shortcomings. Unlike other heroes of the Near Eastern legends, Moses did not become a god.<sup>153</sup>

The narrator also has good reasons to describe Moses as a successful leader who needs to be replaced by new leadership because he has reached his limit. If the figure of 120 years old in the text above is taken literally, then Moses has lived up to his expectation, working with God in his weakness but persistently for the good of his people. I think that the narrator has the last tribute right as he concludes the Pentateuch by these words:

There has never yet risen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face; remember all the signs and portents which the Lord sent

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<sup>151</sup> Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist. A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History: Part One. Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 25-72.

<sup>152</sup> Dennis T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 157-171.

<sup>153</sup> I think here of stories such as Enuma Elish, Gilgamesh, Athrahasis where gods or goddesses are associated with heroic figures. See for more Victor H. Matthews & Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories From the Ancient Near East* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 3-81.

him to show in Egypt to Pharaoh and all his servants and the whole land; remember the strong hand of Moses and the terrible deeds which he did in the sight of all Israel (Deut. 34:10-12 NEB).

Moses has the merit of mentoring ahead of time a successor, a quality that many leaders both in the Church and in politics lack. During the reign of Mobutu in my country, for example, whoever was suspected of coveting his seat was killed. Thus, he could not prepare his succession. The situation in the Church is the same. I remember that when my former bishop retired in August 2003, there was no clear indication of who should succeed him. Several among his colleagues fought for the seat because no one had been mentored for succession. By stressing Moses' mentoring action I am not taking sides with mentor-protégé succession method as against the democratic election practiced today by several institutions and societies in which potential leaders are given equal chance to occupy leadership position. The critical analysis of Moses' leadership in the revolt account will allow this study to discuss this issue later.

The greatness of Moses resides in his achievement. He is remembered as a person who has dreamt of liberating his fellow Hebrews from slavery and saw his dream and hope becoming reality. He is also one of the great leaders who have left behind them a legacy to be remembered. The law of Moses and his songs have been passed down from one generation to another, shaping the culture and belief of the Israelites, and today Jews and Christians still ground their faith on them. Olson has a good summary of Moses' achievement as he writes:

But as a servant of God, Moses has been a vehicle for redemptive, healing and saving actions that will open the future for the sake of others. Human gifts and achievements are affirmed even as the inevitability of limits and failures is acknowledged. Life and death, sacrifice and tragedy, heroic accomplishments and deeds, unfulfilled hopes and dreams – these are the ultimate components of the realistic mixture of human struggle and divine purpose that make this last scene in Deuteronomy one of the most moving in all of Scripture.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup>D.T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, 170.

This statement of Olson captures correctly what we can obtain from Moses at the end of his leadership and life. He was a mortal human but a person that God used in a marvelous way to achieve the salvation of the people of Israel.

### **3.9. Summary**

The survey of the episodes I have selected above in the pentateuchal narrative shows that Moses is a complex character. Moses is born Hebrew, brought up as an Egyptian and married to a Midianite, which makes his identity composite. In his early life Moses is described as a compassionate man, defender of social justice but violent and impulsive. During his encounter with God at Horeb, he confesses his inadequacy, lack of eloquence and low self esteem. He needs God's persuasive actions to accept the commission of being the liberator of the people. Before Pharaoh, Moses appears as God's representative, endowed with great power, capable of performing wonders and signs but also a man who relies on Aaron his mouth-piece and sometimes on the elders for support. Moses, the great liberator who displays mighty deeds, able to demystify the power of Pharaoh and shatter his army, has to sit at Jethro's feet to learn administrative organization. Moses acts as liberator, founder of religion, priest, prophet and judge. However, he is vulnerable, weak and limited. He is condemned not to enter Canaan because of some disobedient episodes in his career but finishes life as a victorious hero. He blesses each tribe at his patriarchal farewell; he organizes a glorious handing over to his protégé and leaves this earth in theophany on the mountain away from any human sight.

What can we learn from the complexity of this character in the Pentateuch? My assumption is the apparent juxtaposition of two different portraits of Moses, one heroic and powerful and another weak and feeble, constituting one unique character. The various pictures can be considered as pieces of a mozaic to be put together for a full understanding of Moses' leadership. The tension we observe in Moses' character is the same tension that exists between human weakness and God's unlimited power. Moses is called to reconcile, in his ministry, these two poles. He is subject, as are all human beings, to limitations and weaknesses, but at the same time he performs supernatural

wonders and signs from God. Therefore to carry out his assignment, Moses should not be a static character but a dynamic leader who progressively learns from his weaknesses. He is not God but remains a servant of God. He is not exempt from sin but in his relationship with God can achieve great things. We have not yet covered the full range of Moses' character; therefore it is premature to draw the final conclusion on Moses' characterization. The study of the revolt of Korah will disclose other facets of Moses' leadership in order to shape my understanding of him and help me apply the findings in the context of my Church and nation.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE REVOLT OF KORAH AND HIS COMPANY**

#### **4.1. Introduction**

After giving an overview of the life of Moses and his leadership during the exodus in chapter three we are now going to examine in detail the challenges to his leadership as he faced opposition and rebellions. As stated in the introduction of this study, we have chosen the episode known as "the revolt of Korah" in the book of Numbers 16 and 17 to illustrate the struggles for leadership in the exodus narrative. This looks like a large jump in the exodus narrative but our choice is motivated by a number of significant reasons. Firstly, we have here a combination of many revolts in one literary unit, which gives a wider spectrum of what kind of struggles Moses met in his leadership. Secondly, unlike other incidences where most of the murmurings and complaints were generated by the hardship and lack of food or water in the wilderness, this is the only passage in which a series of revolts are knitted together to express the dissatisfaction of the community concerning the leadership of Moses and Aaron. In Numbers 13-14 the people propose to choose another leader, not because they had something against Moses but because they were afraid to enter the Promised Land because of the presence of giants, reported by the spies. Therefore they needed another person who could take them back to Egypt because they knew that Moses would not accept the proposal. Thus, the study of this passage is crucial in shedding light on the dynamic of revolts against leadership and ways used by Moses to deal with them. The lessons drawn from this passage may help the reader make useful application to contemporary contests of leadership.

Any student of Numbers will recognize that the book is narratively located in the period between the arrival in the desert of Sinai and the entering of Canaan. The sequence of events recorded in the book indicates a continuous move towards the objective of the exodus, occupation of the Promised Land. Terence Fretheim acknowledges that, "The



flow of time through the Pentateuch is generally coherent, but very uneven."<sup>155</sup> The contextual and dialogical approach adopted in this study takes into account the coherence of the story as well as the unevenness of some episodes, as is reflected in our analysis throughout the work. Following the flow of the narrative, as suggested by Fretheim, the book of Numbers records a few revolts prior to Korah's account. After the section on the preparation to engage in the journey from Sinai (Num. 1-10), the narrator mentions in chapter 11 two incidents of murmurings because of the hardship of the trip (11:1-3) and lack of food (11:4ff). In chapter 12 Aaron and Miriam criticize Moses because of his Cushite woman, and in chapters 13-14, the discouraging report of the spies causes the refusal to continue the journey to the Promised Land. Though in each of these incidents Moses' leadership is challenged, this is nothing compared to what is recorded in Korah's account, as far as Moses and Aaron's position in the community is concerned.

The text known as the revolt of Korah (Num. 16-17) is in fact a dramatic narrative including three movements of rebellion that challenge Moses' leadership. The first movement of rebellion is instigated by Korah, who speaks for the Levites and gains the support of 250 among the leaders of Israel. The Reubenites Dathan and Abiram lead the second movement which backs Korah's protest. The third movement appears as a riot of the whole congregation against the sentence to death of their leaders. They express publicly their disapproval of the killing of those who opposed Moses' leadership. These three rebellions lead to God's punishment by fire, earthquake and plague.

This chapter sets out the structure of the entire section, including all three rebellions. This study deals with each revolt separately in order to understand its distinctive message since their motives and the kind of punishment they elicit differ. Apart from the introduction to the different rebellions, the main focus of this chapter is the analysis of the revolt of Korah and his company whose motive seems to be predominantly religious. The other revolts will be dealt with in chapters four and five.

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<sup>155</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch* (IBT; Nashville:Abingdon Press, 1996), 30.

The claim of Korah and his company reflects the struggle for religious power that exists among the people of Israel. Though the target of their grumbling is primarily directed towards Aaron's special position in the priesthood, Moses considers their attack as a challenge to his leadership. He feels therefore compelled to explain and defend the existing institutions in order to deal with leadership-tensions within the congregation. The narrative about Korah's grievance provides a clarification on the position of priesthood among the Levites as well as the separation of the Levites from the rest of the congregation. My concern in this study is to discern the factors that lie behind leadership contests and ways of dealing with rebellion against leadership. George Coats raises an important point for the analysis of Israel's rebellion.

Our purpose is not to raise questions about the historical accuracy of the motif; i.e., we shall not ask whether the people actually murmured during the wilderness period. Rather, we shall be concerned to discover how and why successive generations of Israelites remembered their fathers in the wilderness as murmurers.<sup>156</sup>

This study is designed to take the analysis of the revolt motif beyond Coats' concern. Using contextual hermeneutics we do not limit ourselves to discovering how and why the people murmured but we engage this text into dialogue with our African context in order to address leadership crises in our society. In his comment about this African hermeneutic process Emmanuel Martey writes, "Africans want to appropriate the riches of African insights into the human condition and the divine life, so as to enrich and enhance Christian life and thought."<sup>157</sup> We admit that there cannot be a dialogue between the biblical context and the social world of the researcher until a critical reading of the text and exegesis of significant Hebrew words shed light on the context of the narrative. As explained in chapter two, our reading is designed to take into consideration the complexity of both the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader in order to uncover the points of agreement and disagreement for responsible application.

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<sup>156</sup> George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), 17.

<sup>157</sup> Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 55.

This chapter opens by setting the text in its literary context. The structure of the passage will help the reader distinguish between the three rebellions that the narrator combines together into a complex and continuous story. Important verses that carry a meaningful significance to the understanding of the passage are translated from Hebrew and key words are thoroughly analyzed. Our interpretation is governed by the study of important features of the narrative approach such as setting, plot and characters, which enter into dialogue with the researcher's context. A summary of each chapter provides the reader with major highlights and findings.

#### 4.2. Literary Context

To establish the historical context of the book of Numbers requires participating in the argument of reconstructing and dating the various materials of the Pentateuch. Biblical scholars are divided over putting into a historical context the various materials (legal stipulations, rituals, stories and census lists) of the book of Numbers. Some scholars support George B. Gray's argument that the book has no historical reliability because of its late compilation, while others try to locate the book in a given period of the Jewish history.<sup>158</sup> As we have stated earlier in this study, the discussion about the historicity of the pentateuchal narrative remains an ongoing debate to such an extent that one cannot foresee any agreement among scholars in the near future.

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<sup>158</sup> See G.B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1903), xlii - xlvii. Many Old Testament scholars agree with Gray as he argues that, "Much that is here related of the age of Moses can be demonstrated to be unhistorical; much more is of such a nature that it can, with far greater probability, be explained as unhistorical than as historical" (xlii). R. N. Whybray in *The Making of the Pentateuch*, JSOT Supplement Series 33 (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1987), 240, views the whole narrative in the Pentateuch as fiction. G. J. Wenham in *Numbers. Old Testament Guide* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 81-90, gives some archaeological evidences to support J. Milgrom's view that parts of Numbers are pre-monarchical works, but he remains less assertive in his conclusion as he writes, "My hope is that the above summary of the evidence will allow readers of this guide to identify their assumptions or presuppositions and then make up their own minds" (p.90). Whereas R. Brown acknowledges that, despite some material of later editors, Moses was capable of composing, collecting and editing most of the Pentateuch. *The Message of Numbers* (BST; Leicester: Inter Varsty Press, 2002), 19.

My own approach here is that a close analysis of the literary context of Numbers is key to positing and understanding the various events described in the book within the flow of the pentateuchal narrative. The book of Numbers seems to be a continuation of the Exodus narratives from the encampment in the Sinai region where the people entered into covenant with Yahweh. It connects the desert of Sinai to the desert of Moab where Joshua takes over the leadership for the conquest of the Promised Land. This connection with the rest of the Pentateuch is attested by the repetition of some events which are described in other books. For example, the book of Exodus ends with the completion of the tabernacle, "Then Moses set up the courtyard around the tabernacle and the altar and put the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard. And Moses finished the work" (Ex. 40:33). This event is repeated after the census and legal matters that introduce the book of Numbers. "When Moses finished setting up the tabernacle, he anointed it and consecrated it and all its furnishings. He also anointed and consecrated the altar and all its utensils" (Num. 7:1). There are also similarities between several legal stipulations recorded in Leviticus as well as in Numbers.

The account of Numbers opens a new episode in the Exodus narrative because it marks out the end of a long sojourn in the desert of Sinai. Exodus 19 locates the arrival in the Sinai desert in the third month after leaving Egypt (Ex. 19:1) and Numbers reports that the people left the desert of Sinai on the twentieth of the second month of the second year (Num. 10:11-13). Without raising the discussion about the historical accuracy of the numerous dated events in the book, this study considers them as markers in the flow of the Exodus narrative. The story takes the reader through the wilderness wandering until Israel's arrival in the region of Moab as they prepare to cross the Jordan to the Promised Land. The desert of Moab across the Jordan constitutes a link between the book of Numbers (36:13) and Deuteronomy (1:1). The story of Joshua's succession is reported towards the end of both Numbers and Deuteronomy.

### 4.3. Structure

#### 4.3.1. Overall Structure

The controversy over the book of Numbers emanates not only from its historicity, but more so from its textual structure. The broad variety of its literature has led many scholars to conclude, like Martin Noth, that the book lacks unity and that it is difficult to see any pattern in its construction.<sup>159</sup> But among those who believe in the existence of a certain overall unity in Numbers, Mary Douglas champions qualifying the book as "a literary masterpiece." She argues that, "The opposite view will be proposed here: that the book has been carefully constructed and that the many repetitions and jumps of context are not accidental."<sup>160</sup>

The classical structure of Numbers is based upon geographic locations mentioned in the book, mainly Sinai, Kadesh and Moab. The tripartite division of the book reflects the three major stages of the journey in Numbers, from Sinai (1:1 - 10:11), through the wilderness, with Kadesh as the main site (10:12 - 21:9) to the desert of Moab (21:10 - 36:13).<sup>161</sup> D. T. Olson proposes another structure based on the two censuses dividing the book in two sections. The first census introduces the old generation that died in the wilderness because of their rebellion against God (chs. 1-25). The second census marks the start of the new generation that will inherit the Promised Land (chs. 26-36).<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 1.

<sup>160</sup> Mary Douglas, *In the Wilderness*. JSOT Supplement Series 158 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 39, 83.

<sup>161</sup> D. T. Olson in *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch*. BJS 71 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), notes that out of the 48 commentaries he surveyed 33 divide the book into three major sections. However, they differ as to where the sections begin or end, with a major disagreement on the end of the second division. Some scholars have suggested bridging passages connecting section one to two and section two to three modifying the division of the book to five sections. See G. Wenham, *Numbers*, 13-25 and R. Brown, *The Message of Numbers*, 16-17.

<sup>162</sup> D. T. Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New*, 83.



Mary Douglas<sup>163</sup> proposes a more complex division of the book by analyzing the literary style of the book. She observes that the book is constructed with two genres, narrative and legal sections, alternating throughout the whole book. Using these criteria she singles out seven blocks of stories interrupted by six blocks of law, making thirteen sections in all. Douglas argues that law sections have no plot, nor dialogue or interaction, which she qualifies as being 'timeless.'<sup>164</sup> She suggests a ring structure by pairing law sections as well as story sections.<sup>165</sup> The structure proposed by Douglas is so complex that many scholars find it incoherent. Wenham questions the ring structure set by Douglas as he notes, "Her determination to find a ring structure has overridden a common-sense genre classification."<sup>166</sup>

My argument is that the various structures defined here above do not exclude each other. Despite the lack of consensus upon a convincing structure, each one of them addresses a specific pattern of the book. Although we have chosen to use another overall structure, we will still try to locate our text in relation to some of the above classic divisions because of some contributions they make in positioning geographically or chronologically certain events. In this study we have decided to use Sailhamer's structure, which divides the book of Numbers into two halves. Unlike Olson, whose two halves are based on the two censuses in the book separating the old generation that died in the wilderness and the new generation that entered the Promised Land, Sailhamer's dividing point is chapter 14, which describes the reaction of the people upon the discouraging report of the spies. He says,

Within this larger time frame, the primary dividing point of the book is Number 14:45, the account of the destruction and defeat of disobedient Israel in the hill country of the Amalekites. Thus the book has two main divisions, chapters 1-14 and 15-36, falling on either side of the account of Israel's failure to believe God.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> M. Douglas, *In the Wilderness*, 102-126.

<sup>164</sup> Douglas, *In the Wilderness*, 119.

<sup>165</sup> M. Douglas, *In the Wilderness*, 119.

<sup>166</sup> G. Wenham, *Numbers*, 23.

<sup>167</sup> John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch As Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 370.

I concur with this division because of its bearing on the text of our investigation. The condemnation to death of those who rebelled in chap. 14 affected the behaviour of the people of Israel for the rest of their journey. I think that the revolt against Moses' leadership in Korah's account is the expression of the frustration that the people felt after the disobedience in chapter 14. Never before this incident in the narrative had the people expressed overtly their disappointment about the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Though I agree with Sailhamer on chapter 14 as the dividing point, I am not convinced that 14:45 is the key verse on which one can lay the division. The people who were killed in v. 45 tried to react against God's verdict that because they had refused to take the land, none of them would enter Canaan. In their panic some decided to go ahead without God's approval and conquer the country; unfortunately they fell into the hands of their enemies. My suggestion would be verses 20-23, which condemn the people for not entering the Promised Land, as the dividing point.

Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times, not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.

Given that we are reading the story as a continuous narrative, we presume that people's behavior in the second part of the book of Numbers, according to Sailhamer's division, is influenced by what happened in this section. Other scholars, such as Wenham, acknowledge the continuity of the pentateuchal narrative, at least in the book of Numbers. He argues, "Numbers runs on as a continuous narrative, so that it is not clear exactly how it should be divided."<sup>168</sup>

#### 4.3.2. The Structure of Numbers 16 - 17

As said earlier, this study follows the structure proposed by Sailhamer, which considers Chapter 14 as the dividing point. Sailhamer analyzes the book of Numbers in relation to

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<sup>168</sup> Gordon Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament*. Vol.1. The Pentateuch (London: SPCK, 2003), 103.

what happened before and after the sentence to death of those who refused to enter Canaan through the road from the South. The revolt of Korah falls in the second half of Sailhamer's division. This means after the disobedience and God's judgment of chapter 14. We will therefore examine the text bearing in mind that we are dealing with a people under condemnation. This episode can also be located with regard to the structure proposed by other authors. In Olson's division, as discussed earlier, this text falls also under the section called 'the old generation' (chs. 1-25), meaning that characters acting in this passage belong to the generation of those who would perish during the wilderness journey. On a tripartite division, the text falls under the second geographical location – the wilderness wandering or Kadesh (chs. 10:11-21).<sup>169</sup> This second section is characterized by murmuring and rebellion. In his comment about this period William Fretheim says,

The disjunction between this section and the opening (and closing) chapters is remarkable: obedience to God's command turns to rebellion; trust becomes mistrust; the holy is profaned; order becomes disorder; the future of the people of God is threatened.<sup>170</sup>

The narrative section (chs. 16-17) about the triple rebellion is located between two blocks of law as noted above by Douglas: Law sections 15:1-41 and 18:1- 19:22. The shift from one block to another is easily recognizable by the change of the literary genre. However, the internal division of this section and the structuring of its composition are not clear. The narrator describes without distinction the three events, passing from one story to another in a mixed narrative, so much so that it becomes hard to the reader to dissociate them. An attempt of separating the three stories gives the following structure:

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<sup>169</sup> As we said earlier, scholars are broadly divided over where to place the limitation between the second and third section of a tripartite outline.

<sup>170</sup> T. E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch*, 140. See also William Neils, "Numbers" in *William Neil's one Volume Bible Commentary* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973) as he argues that, "The narrative reflects, no doubt accurately, an atmosphere of discontent against the authority of Moses, and more than one occasion of open rebellion" (p. 121).

#### Ch. 15: Law

#### Ch. 16 - 17 Narrative

##### a) The Revolt of Korah

16:1-11.

16:16-24.

16:36-40, (17:1-5 BHS)

##### b) The Revolt of Dathan and Abiram

16:1 (partly).

16:12-15.

16:25, 27b.

16: 28-31, 34.

##### c) Revolt of the congregation

16:41-50 (17: 6-15 BHS)

17:1- 13 (17:16-28 BHS)<sup>171</sup>

#### Ch. 18 - 19: Law

The narrative shows that several events in this account occur simultaneously, which explains why the narrator decides to weave together several stories of rebellion. However, a number of biblical scholars explain this complexity by the work of a late editor who strives to make a continuous story out of two or more stories pertaining to separate traditions (or sources).<sup>172</sup> But it is not strange to see modern novels written in a similar style in which many characters intervene in separate episodes. This study will not launch into a discussion about different traditions, but will analyze the story in its present form as a continuous and complex narrative. In this chapter I deal with the first revolt concerning Korah and his company. The revolt of Korah is described in Num. 16:1-11, 14-24 and 35. Our analysis goes along with the following structure:

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<sup>171</sup> Translation will be done section by section in order to follow closely the analysis of each portion. We use divisions of English Bible and put into brackets the equivalent in the Hebrew Bible (BHS) where there is a difference for the sake of our readers who cannot read Hebrew.

<sup>172</sup> John Sturdy attributes the complexity of this structure to a mixing of several stories as he comments that, "the final editor has drawn together the different threads in such a way as to produce a readable continuous story; but it has awkward transitions which reveal that it is a compilation" *The Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 115.

- 16:1-2            - Exposition.
- v.3                - Charges against Moses and Aaron.
- vv. 5-11          - Moses' defense.
- vv. 16-24, 35    - Korah's trial and God's verdict.

#### 4.4. Exposition

##### 4.4.1. Translation<sup>173</sup>

1. *And Korah, the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and Datham and Abiram, the sons of Eliab and On, the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took (men)*
2. *And they rose up before Moses and men among the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty, princes of the congregation, called to the assembly, men of renown.*
3. *They gathered together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, "It is too much for you. The whole congregation are holy, each one of them and Yahweh is in their midst, why should you lift yourselves above the congregation of Yahweh?"*

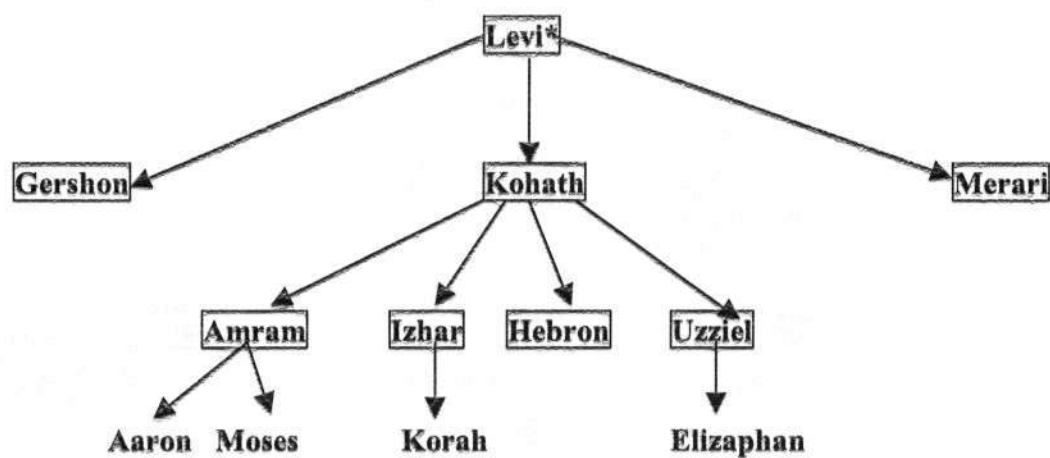
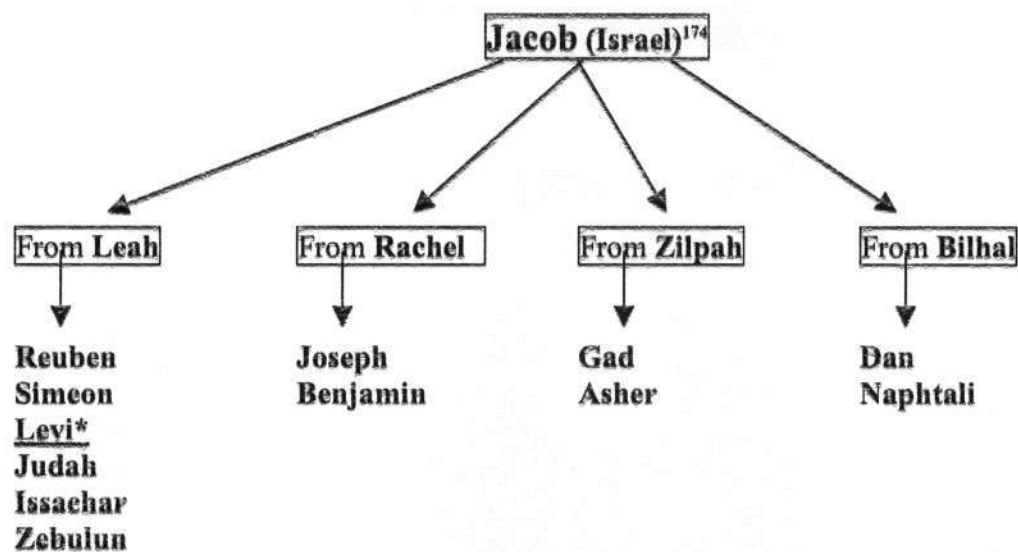
##### 4.4.2. Analysis

The narrator does not give the setting nor indicate the time this event took place as in other accounts recorded in this book. His focus is put on the actors in this scene. The name of Korah is mentioned first and repeated ten times in this passage to underscore his prominent role in the revolt. The chart here below can help the reader to understand kinship relationships between the various actors mentioned in the section we are examining.

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<sup>173</sup> The numbering of verses in this section follows the English Bible to help readers who are not familiar with Hebrew texts (BHS). Corresponding Hebrew verses will be indicated in brackets where it is necessary.





The text describes Korah as "the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi." These ancestors of Korah are listed in the genealogy of Moses and Aaron we met earlier in Exodus 6:18 as shown in the chart above. Izhar is presented as the brother of Amram, the ancestor of Moses and Aaron. Kohath is the head of the Kohathite clan to which belong Moses and Aaron in the tribe of Levi. Thus Korah is a cousin of Moses and Aaron.

<sup>174</sup> Daughters are not recorded in this chart following the Hebrew genealogy.

One should remember that in the introduction of the book of Numbers chapters 3 and 4 describe the status and duties of the Levites. Important to notice is that the clan of the Kohathites are assigned to work in the sanctuary. Some Kohathites, namely Aaron and his sons, are elevated to the priesthood with special privileges of higher holiness and closer access to Yahweh's presence. The allusion to this genealogy in this account may be understood as a clue serving, as we shall see later, to locate the rebellion around the priesthood and also to reveal the discontent of the rest of the Levites because of the exaltation of Aaron and his sons.

Associated with Korah are two hundred and fifty leaders of the people of Israel. They are described as *נְשִׂימֵי עֵדָה* "princes of the congregation." The term *נְשִׂימֵי*, from the Hebrew root *נָשַׁן* meaning "to lift up, raise, elevate, exalt," occurs 126 times in the Old Testament with 60 of them being in the book of Numbers. It generally designates a tribal leader or chief of the clan or is used as a title of a respected man.<sup>175</sup> Korah's collaborators are also known as "people called to assembly or meeting" whom Raymond Brown translates as "appointed members of the council."<sup>176</sup>

The expression *אֲנָשִׁים שְׁמוֹת* "men of name or repute, fame," defines the social position of Korah's supporters. Similar expressions are used in Genesis 4:4, 1 Chronicles 5:24 and 7:30. The support that Korah receives from these leaders tends to extend his claim beyond a Levite's cause. According to the writer of Numbers 27:3, the group is not exclusively constituted by Levites. In the mentioned text, the daughters of Zelophehad, a Manassite, claim the inheritance of their dead father by affirming that, though their father died in the wilderness, he was not among the company of Korah. The fact that people from other tribes joined Korah in this revolt shows that the case was serious. The problem they wanted to address must have touched many people, to the point of deciding to come together and confront Moses and Aaron.

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<sup>175</sup> Herbert Niehr, "נְשִׂימֵי" in *TDOT*, vol. X, pp. 44-53.

<sup>176</sup> R. Brown, *Numbers*, 142.

What we will need to explore in the analysis of the text is the support of ordinary people of this group. One would expect that if two hundred and fifty members of the assembly, from different tribes, come together there should be a common concern which affects the whole congregation. The revolt of the congregation that follows the killing of these leaders would suggest the identification of the people with their leaders, but we need to wait until we reach that point to see if this rebellion expresses the voice of the people at the grassroot level. Nonetheless, given that Korah and the 250 men are not ordinary laypersons in the congregation indicates that the problem at this point is primarily the struggle for power among the leadership.

The presence of Korah at the head of the rebellion brings the revolt even closer to the inner circle of Moses. According to the genealogical chart given at the beginning of this section one can see that Korah is a close cousin of Moses and Aaron. One could understand if the claim came from the other two sons of Levi, Gershon and Merari, who had lesser responsibilities. But the Kohatites as a whole (including Korah, Moses, Aaron and his sons) occupied a special position in the sacrificial system of Israel (Num. 3:14-37). This revolt reminds the reader of an earlier internal revolt when Miriam and Aaron challenged Moses because of his marrying a Cushite wife and also his exceptional relationship with God (Num. 12). Moses and Aaron faced the problem of mistrust within their tribe, as many leaders today experience rejection from close collaborators or members of the family. Let us turn to the text to know what they are accused of.

#### **4.5. Charges Against Moses and Aaron**

##### **4.5.1. Translation**

*It is too much for you!*

*The whole congregation are holy, each one of them*

*and Yahweh is in their midst.*

*Why should you lift yourselves above the congregation of Yahweh? (16:3).*

#### 4.5.2. Analysis

I suggest that a close examination of the immediate literary context of this passage can help us understand the dynamic behind the accusation. The reader of the book of Numbers may notice that the introduction of the book devotes two chapters to describe the tasks of the Levites, with a special emphasis on the supremacy of Aaron and his sons over other Levites. Another thing to notice in chapters 13 and 14 is the role played by Moses and Aaron in the spies' story. Moses and Aaron declared God's judgment against the people who accepted the spies' discouraging report, which had caused bitter complaints and revolt against Yahweh. The ten spies are struck down and the rest of the people, aged twenty years and above, are condemned to a slow death in the desert, except for Caleb and Joshua. Moses and Aaron are to report God's decision to the people (14:26ff). Chapter 15 gives miscellaneous laws in relation to various offerings and unintentional sins. The priest is to make atonement for unintentional sin and let the intentional sinner be cut off from his people. An incident related to this law is reported towards the end of the chapter (15:32-36) of a man who breaks the Sabbath. Moses and Aaron sentenced him to death by stoning according to God's command. Chapter 15 closes with an order to put a blue tassel on the garment as a reminder of obedience and holiness. This tassel is used in this text to claim the holiness of the whole congregation as stated below. After this section on rebellions, the narrative in chapter 18 gives additional legal material to strengthen the institution of priesthood by defining the duties of the priests and the offerings due to them.

It is probable that the role played by Moses and Aaron, as God's spokesmen and the ones called to pronounce divine judgments, condemning to death many people, might have raised hatred and jealousy among the Levites. Korah and his company would have realized that the above events and subsequent laws recorded in chapter 18 had enhanced the power of Moses and the priesthood. The question is whether Moses and Aaron took advantage of their position to hold excessive power over the people or were they acting on God's command. The analysis of charges laid against Moses and Aaron by the accusers will give us a hint about the cause of the rebellion of Korah and his company.

Depending on the rendering of the Hebrew expression רַב־לָכֶם<sup>177</sup> "It is too much for you" the accusers presume that Moses and Aaron have gone beyond the limit of their authority. It supposes that the accusers would accept their leadership to some extent, but now they have crossed the boundaries. It is not clear from the text that such an agreed limit of power was set before and made known to the whole congregation. The immediate context does not show any act of Moses or Aaron that stirs up the revolt. However, "too much power" could be an allusion to the concentration of power in Amram's family. We read that apart from Amram's sons, Moses and Aaron, who led the liberation from Egypt, his daughter Miriam was called a prophetess (Ex. 15:20), though we do not know the extent of her authority in the community. Therefore, Korah and his company might have considered the permanent priesthood given to Aaron and his descendents as an additional power put in the hands of a family which already controlled the congregation. One has to consider the whole accusation to try to figure out what Moses and Aaron are accused of.

Korah and his company built on their accusation by claiming a communal holiness and the presence of Yahweh amongst his people. "All the congregation is holy ... and God is in our midst." This statement carries some obvious realities known by the people. The presence of Yahweh in their midst is underscored by various mighty deeds of God during their liberation from Egypt and all along their journey. On their arrival in the region of Sinai and upon the recommendations that Moses received on the mountain of Sinai, God's presence was materialized by the tabernacle, which is also called the Tent of Presence (Ex. 39-40). The people of Israel knew that the tabernacle pitched in the middle of the camp with the pillar of cloud covering it symbolized the presence of Yahweh.

The Lord spoke to Moses and said: Make me a sanctuary, and I will dwell among them...

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<sup>177</sup> I translate it as "Too much for you", the NIV reads "You have gone too far", the NEB has "You take too much upon yourselves" and Gray, *Numbers*, 197, renders the term by "Enough."



Thus Moses completed the work, and the cloud covered the Tent of the Presence, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. Moses was unable to enter the Tent of the Presence, because the cloud had settled on it and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle...

For the cloud of the Lord hovered over the Tabernacle by day, and there was fire in the cloud by night, and the Israelites could see it at every stage of their journey (Ex. 25:1, 8; 40:34-35, 38).

On this presence Walter Brueggemann argues that,

The tabernacle is made into a suitable and appropriate place for Yahweh's visible presence by the practice of a beauty commensurate with Yahweh's character. It is possible to host the holiness of Yahweh, and in this tradition the purpose of life is communion with Yahweh, a genuine, real, and palpable presence.<sup>178</sup>

The accusers seem to associate God's presence with equal holiness of the whole community. "All the congregation are holy.. each one of them." The argument implies that if God is in our midst, and each one of us is holy, why should Moses and Aaron pretend to being superior to others or to having a special position to command the rest? The allusion to a holy people is maybe derived from the text that proceeds it in chapter 15. As said earlier, chapter 15 closes with God's command to all Israelites to wear a blue tassel on the corner of their garment. This tassel is a sign of their holiness and obedience to His commandments. Equal holiness implies equal right to serve before Yahweh, therefore Moses and Aaron should not limit the priesthood to a specific group or family. Has not God called Israel to be a kingdom of Priests? "You shall be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation" (Ex. 19:6).

Korah's argument introduces the theme of the universal priesthood of all the faithful, which is developed by Isaiah (Isa. 61:6) and adopted and contextualized by the writers of the New Testament – applied to all believers in the Church of Christ (1Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10). W. Gunther Plaut quotes Buber as he says,

The question Korah asked poses an insoluble contradiction: for holiness can never be fully realized within history, yet the people are to act as if it

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<sup>178</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 426.

can be or even as if it has been realized. This is the biblical way of dealing with a divine impasse and it became the normative way of Jewish tradition.<sup>179</sup>

It is true that the claim of communal holiness was slippery ground for Korah's argument because even the blue tassel of holiness that Korah and his company likely wore in obedience to the order of Numbers 15: 38 was enjoined with some conditions. "This token is to ensure that you remember all my commands and obey them, and keep yourselves holy, consecrated to your God" (Num. 15:40). Moreover, Korah was not in a position to count on the obedience to all God's commandments for the whole congregation. He is aware that their journey in the wilderness has been characterized by murmuring and rebellion, which is contrary to obedience and holiness. But Korah pushes his argument beyond that of communal holiness.

Korah's argument reaches its climax when he questions Moses and Aaron's legitimacy. "Why should you lift yourselves over the congregation of Yahweh?" The claim alleges that Moses and Aaron set themselves up as leaders of the people without any mandate. This problem was raised at the beginning of Moses' leadership when he tried to settle disputes among his Hebrew fellows. "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?" (Ex. 2:14). The question of the accusers seems to ignore the long journey, as developed in our previous chapter, which led Moses and Aaron to their present position. After Moses and Aaron had performed all kinds of signs and miracles before Pharaoh and in favor of the Israelites, one would conclude that the whole community would know that God appointed them to leadership. There should be no doubt that Korah, the cousin of Moses and Aaron and one of the elders and also his company of members of the assembly, knew God's appointment of Moses and Aaron to leadership.

One possible interpretation of this accusation is to suggest that Moses and Aaron had usurped the authority over the people of Yahweh in order to establish a dictatorship regime. In that case their allegation can be easily dismissed because people knew how

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<sup>179</sup> W. Gunther Plaut, "Korah : Rebellion and Divine Wrath" in *Torah: A Modern Commentary* [www.myjewishlearning.com/texts](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts) 01/11/2004.

reluctant Moses was to the call to leadership, as we have shown earlier. The more pertinent interpretation of this claim is to suggest that Korah and his company rejected the traditional form of authority where the people are not involved in choosing their leaders. This may be the understanding of Korah's assertion that "the whole congregation are holy, each one of them." This statement can be stated otherwise, namely, since we are all holy, anyone of us can lead because we have equal right to leadership. Why should then some individuals or some families become permanent leaders of the community? Allusion may be made here to the permanent priesthood of Aaron and his sons. The *Interpreter's Bible* seems to understand Korah's preoccupation as a quest for a democratic regime.

Today we glory in their two main contentions, viz., ecclesial and political democracy as over against autocracy in both realms. In what then did the crime of Korah and his associates consists? Was it not that they failed to see that their timing was wrong? ...Though it is true, as has been said, "There is nothing so powerful as an idea whose time has come," we dare not forget the constructive power of an idea lies largely in its timing. There is an equally destructive power in an idea whose time has not come.<sup>180</sup>

The *Interpreter's Bible* considers that the claim for democracy is out of its timing in the Hebrew traditional society. However, this should not be taken as if the ideas of the struggle for leadership are new concepts in the history of humanity. Biblical accounts describe the strife between Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Jeroboam and Rehoboam among others, as rooted in the contestation of leadership.

Nevertheless, it is true that during Moses' period the dominant political regimes worldwide were led by kings or chiefs who were supposed to have been established by or to have relationship with some divine beings. In his study of the second millennium B.C., Brian Colless states,

In Egypt the Pharaoh was an incarnate god; in Israel the king was the eternal God Yahweh. It needs to be added that in the Israelite case, after a

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<sup>180</sup> John Marsh, "The Book of Numbers" in *The Interpreter's Bible*. Vol. 2 p. 137-308. (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1953), 222.

few centuries of absolute theocracy (the period of Moses, Joshua, and the judges), the God-king Yahweh began to govern through an earthly king (Saul, then David and his dynasty) in the Mesopotamia manner, with considerable borrowing from the Egyptian and Canaanite styles.<sup>181</sup>

The main problem with the popular democracy alluded to in Korah's argument resides in the mode of 'election' of traditional leaders. Colless points to the main discrepancy in our democratic elections as he asserts,

Here the basic motif or role appears to be 'election'; yet not so much election of the king by his people as election of his people or vassals by the king. If there is an election to choose the king, it will be the gods who hold it.<sup>182</sup>

The assumption that chiefs or kings are chosen by God was not limited to the Near Eastern world; even in African Kingdoms tales tend to relate kingship with Deities or spirits' election. Therefore the community is called to respect the sacral power invested upon the Chief to ensure the perennial continuity of the royal family. What Harold Nicolson notices in Egypt can be extended to most African Kingdoms.

In Egypt, and under other theocratic systems, the Pharaoh and his family were regarded as supernatural and as representing some divine incarnation. We have seen what elaborate myths and fictions were contrived by Roman Emperors to preserve the principle of continuity and the almost magic element of legitimacy. The magic aspect of monarchy became enshrined in the formula 'The Divine Right of Kings' and was associated with the Old Testament dogmas regarding 'The Lord's Anointed'.<sup>183</sup>

We will come later to the claim for a type of leadership suggested by the *Interpreter's Bible* among the leadership issues raised by Korah's revolt. But it is important to note that not everybody interprets Korah's revolt as a call to popular democracy. Jewish

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<sup>181</sup> Brian Colless, "Ancient Afro-Asian Kingship" in Ian W. Mabbet, *Patterns of Kinships and Authority in Traditional Asia* (Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985), 131.

<sup>182</sup> Brian Colless, "Ancient Afro-Asian Kinship", 138.

<sup>183</sup> Harold Nicolson, *Kings, Courts and Monarchy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962), 167.

traditions attribute the cause of the conflict to the struggle for the headship among the Kohatites instead of discord over the priesthood.

The chief cause of Korah's revolt was, according to the Rabbis, the nomination of Elizaphan, son of Uzziel, as a prince over the Kohatites (Num. iii. 30), Korah arguing thus: "Kohath had four sons [Ex. Vi. 18]. The two sons of Amram, Kohath's eldest son, took for themselves the kingdom and the priesthood. Now, as I am the son of Kohath's second son, I ought to be made prince over the Kohatites, whereas Moses gave that office to Elizaphan, the son of Kohath's youngest son."<sup>184</sup>

The above interpretation assumes that Korah accepts Aaron's priesthood. But it shifts the contention from Aaron and the priesthood to a mere conflict of headship between Korah and Elizaphan. If this argument is taken seriously then only Moses, in his position of nominating agent, should sit on the bench of the accused, since Aaron has nothing to do with assigning positions to people. The biblical account does not support the view which excludes Aaron's position from this conflict. The Rabbis' interpretation raises another problem as it also attributes the kingdom and the priesthood to the sons of Amram. Since Aaron is the chief priest, the assumption is that Moses holds the supreme authority of a king. J.R. Porter in his essay mentions that Moses is pictured as the Israelite King, especially the Davidic monarch of the pre-exilic period. "The conception of Moses as, above all, the king is not new; it is found in Philo, for whom the other three functions of Moses are really all parts of his kingly office."<sup>185</sup> But the claim of Moses' kingship is not clearly documented in the pentateuchal narrative. It is even too bold to call him a king. Porter advocates that monarchy as institution came into being later after the period of Moses according to Hebrew traditions; therefore it is anachronistic to use the term king when describing the office occupied by Moses in the narrative.<sup>186</sup> I share the same caution with Porter. In fact the Levites are seldom associated with the kingship in Israel during the pre and post-exilic period.

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<sup>184</sup> Jewish Encyclopedia "Korah" from <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?>

<sup>185</sup> J.R.Porter, *Moses and Monarchy: A Study in the Biblical Tradition of Moses* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 8-9.

<sup>186</sup> J.R.Porter, *Moses and Monarchy*, 28.



The analysis of the above charges against Moses and Aaron does not give the real motive that led Korah and his group to challenge Moses' leadership. More insights will be gathered from Moses' interpretation of the revolt as he answers the above charges.

#### 4.6. Moses' Defense

##### 4.6.1. Translation

4. *And when Moses heard it, he fell upon his face.*
5. *And he spoke to Korah and to all his company saying, "In the morning Yahweh will show who is His, and who is holy, and He will cause him to draw near Him; the one He will choose He will cause him to draw near Him.*
6. *Do this, take your censers, Korah and his company;*
7. *Put fire in them, and put incense in them before Yahweh tomorrow, and it shall be the man whom Yahweh chooses shall be the holy one. It is too much for you sons of Levi.*
8. *Then Moses said to Korah, hear now, you sons of Levi;*
9. *Is it a small thing for you that Yahweh has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the service in the tabernacle of Yahweh and to stand before the congregation to minister to them?*
10. *And that he has brought you near Him and all your brethren the sons of Levi with you? And you seek the priesthood also?*
11. *It is against Yahweh that you and your company have gathered together. Who is Aaron that you should murmur against him?*

##### 4.6.2. Analysis

The first reaction of Moses is to fall upon his face (v. 4). This is a common gesture of Moses in the pentateuchal narrative, but it does not carry the same meaning on every occasion. Sometime the gesture is accompanied by a prayer of intercession in favor of the people. N.H. Snaith argues,

Moses was not interceding with God. It was because he felt himself helpless. This was the fourth time the people had offended, and on each previous occasion Moses had interceded for them (Exod. 32.11; Num. 11.2, 14.13).<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> N.H. Snaith, *Leviticus and Numbers*. New Century Bible (London:Nelson, 1967), 256.



Moses seems to be much disappointed by the revolt of Korah and other princes of the people because these are the collaborators from whom he expects support and encouragement. This time instead of intercession Moses resolves to settle the matter with the accusers.

What transpires from his defense is that Moses does not contest the issue of the people's holiness. He finds that it is not his duty to prove who is holy or not. Yahweh alone can establish who meets the standards of holiness to approach Him; therefore it is up to Yahweh to decide on that matter. The emphasis is laid on God's choice and election. Moses refers the trial to God's arbitration, "God will show, God will choose" (v. 5). The discord seems to revolve around the source of legitimacy. It appears as if Moses holds on to God's appointment while his contenders ask for the people's election. Moses wants to convince Korah and his company that the priesthood depends on God's choice.

The matter is still a contention even today concerning the election and the mandate of some leaders in the Church. Prophets and patriarchs who received a divine vision to start the Church lead many African Independent Churches. However, in times of crisis questions are raised about who chooses the leaders of Independent Churches? What can people do when God's chosen leaders misbehave or abuse their power? We will come to considering this question further in this chapter.

Moses underscores, "The one He will choose, He will cause him to come near" (v. 5). Elliott Binns argues that "to come near" suggests the service of the altar.<sup>188</sup> The service of the altar includes offering incense and holding all the holy materials of the ark, which other Kohathites, except Aaron and his sons, were forbidden to touch.

After Aaron and his sons have finished covering the holy furnishings and all the holy articles, and when the camp is ready to move, the Kohathites are to come to do the carrying. But they do not touch the holy things or they will die (Num. 4:15).

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<sup>188</sup> Elliott Binns, *The Book of Numbers* (London: Methuen & Co., 1927), 110.

Moses proposes a test to designate who shall come near to Yahweh. He asks Korah and his followers: "You must take censers" (v.6). But offering incense is a very risky exercise for anybody. Two sons of Aaron perished in this exercise earlier because they burnt incense in an unlawful manner (Lev. 10:1-3). This incident of the death of Aaron's sons, which occurred earlier in the narrative, is referred to in Numbers with a clear warning to avert death among the Kohathites.

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron and said; you must not let the families of Kohath be extirpated, and lost to the tribe of Levi. If they are to live and not die when they approach the most holy things, this is what you must do: Aaron and his sons shall come and set each man to his appointed task and to his load, and the Kohathites themselves shall not enter to cast even a passing glance on the sanctuary, on pain of death (4:17-20 NEB).

Apparently Korah and his group are not opposed to taking the challenge and having their holiness tested in this exercise. However, they are given a day maybe to think over their decision and withdraw in case they are not ready to perform the exercise. "Tomorrow put fire and incense in them (censers) before the Lord" (v. 7). The point is to prove whether the Aaronic priesthood is from Yahweh or from Moses as a way to favor Aaron and his sons. Through the test God would establish the right withheld from Korah and his company to access the priesthood.

Moses considers all these accusations as coming from the Levites, or at least the Levites as being the instigators, to the point of referring to the whole group: "It is too much for you sons of Levi or You have gone too far, sons of Levi" (v. 7). The accusers said that Moses and Aaron had gone too far, now Moses argues that they are the ones who have gone too far. They have gone beyond their boundaries. Moses accuses them of despising the functions that God has assigned to them as Levites, and that now they are coveting also to take the high priesthood. Moses makes it clear that this is not a lay movement against the leadership, but rather a problem of rivalry amongst the sacerdotal group.

The Levites are reminded that their privilege to serve God in His temple is not a little thing. "Yahweh has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself, to do the service in the tabernacle of Yahweh" (v. 9). Moses' argument is that the

Levites should not underestimate being separated from the rest of the Israelites to occupy this special position (8:14). To seek also the high priesthood is going beyond the Levites' responsibility and an act of rebellion against Yahweh who instituted the office and appointed Aaron and his sons in this exclusive manner. This argument raises the problem of the tension between being contented with one's position and the need for promotion. Korah is a Levite in charge of some functions in the religious system of Israel. He works under the responsibility of priests (Aaron and his sons). Should he seek for promotion to become a high priest one day? The assumption is that he has to remain in his position forever.

Moses' argument is that each party should be satisfied with its present status. The division of labor at that time required that each group remain confined in a fixed position. The reality of human nature is that each person dreams of climbing the ladder of social status one day to a higher position. The appeal becomes even greater as one approaches the top. The temptation for any deputy chairperson or deputy president to occupy the seat of his superior is stronger than that of a person down at the bottom of the ladder. What makes the difference is the means one uses to take that high position. Some people would prefer going through established mechanisms of promotion while revolutionists prefer using violence. I am not opposing these two ways of accessing authority because of the complexity of the contexts people live in, which may justify the use of one or other of these methods. We have seen in Africa situations in which revolution was the only way to break the status quo and allow the oppressed to recover their dignity and decide on their destiny.

In the case under consideration, Korah and his company seem to choose the revolutionist approach. There may be two ways of interpreting their approach. First, it may be that they believe that these divisions of duties came from Moses, therefore if they put him under pressure he could change the structure and allow other leaders to be elevated to the position of high priests. Second, they might have known that it was God's decision but through their revolt Korah and his company could push Moses, in his role of Mediator, to obtain from God the revision of His decision in order to please those leaders who were

excluded from the priesthood. The narrative shows that neither Moses nor Yahweh was ready to change the institutions they had established for Israel. This refusal will lead, as we shall see it in the analysis below, to the violent repression of the revolt.

In my opinion, what is described in this episode should not be interpreted as God's eternal principle for labor division. This is a particular case, appropriate for this event and not to be generalized throughout the narrative. We know that, besides some hereditary status such as the Aaronic priesthood and Davidic kingship, the Israelites were to seek the best for their life as God's blessing to the entire nation. "The LORD will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the LORD your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom" (Deut. 28:13). This could even include promotion at work. But this elevation or increase should be done with God's accompaniment.<sup>189</sup> Even in our time when we are trying to banish all kinds of discrimination, we know that there will always be some boundaries concerning what we can or cannot do, which we accept without feeling excluded. This study is trying to understand the prevailing circumstances that prompted Korah's revolt in order perhaps to learn from them how to deal with similar situations in our context.

"Who is Aaron that you should murmur against him?" (v.11). By asking this question Moses shows that he is not the primary target of Korah's revolt. The revolt seems to be directed towards the Aaronic priesthood and its appointment. In fact Moses himself and his sons are not part of the Aaronic priesthood. Though his position may include some attributes of priesthood, he is greater than a priest. He is above all the institutions because Yahweh asked him to act like God, while Aaron is considered as his spokesman, his prophet (Ex. 4:16). Though attacking Aaron is an indirect way of challenging his own

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<sup>189</sup> In the New Testament there is clear indication of God's will for the members of His Church to go higher in their work and ministry. We have texts such as 1 Timothy 3:1, "This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work", and 1 Corinthians 12:31, "But earnestly desire the best gifts", which can be interpreted as a call to strive for a higher position in life.

leadership, Moses chooses to dissociate himself from the priesthood and play the role of a third-party between Aaron and Korah. This might be Moses' strategy to enable him to interact with the group of Korah and win their confidence in what he has to propose. In his comments on the role of a third party in conflict resolution Edward de Bono argues:

A prime role for the third party is to provide alternatives additional to those so far provided. The third party may use his or her own creativity in order to design further alternatives or may subcontract this thinking to a resource team.<sup>190</sup>

Moses in his role of third party proposes to the two parties in conflict to submit themselves to a test before the Lord, which will show who is holy to take the priesthood. However the reality is that one cannot attack an institution generated by the law (here priesthood) without touching Moses and God in their role as lawgivers.<sup>191</sup>

"Who is Aaron that you should murmur against him?" This question may also mean that Aaron is not responsible for whatever organization is present in the community. Moses was told by God to appoint individuals and families in different capacities among the people (Num. 3-4). In other words, Aaron should be considered as an innocent worker fulfilling the duties assigned to his family. The pentateuchal narrative describes how Aaron was called as assistant to Moses and later on to the priesthood (Ex. 4:14-16; 28:1). Moses here wants to tell Korah that the distinction between priests and Levites is by Yahweh's ordinance, therefore whoever does not agree with this distinction challenges Yahweh's decree. This presentation is designed to prove Aaron's innocence, but the contenders are not convinced and agree to go through the test.

In our days the argument of God's appointment has to be taken with some caution. Leaders genuinely called to ministry by God can use this argument to establish their legitimacy. Even in that case a leader should not forsake his responsibility for and accountability to other members of the community because of God's appointment.

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<sup>190</sup> Edward de Bono, *Conflicts: A Better Way to Resolve Them* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 132.

<sup>191</sup> We have discussed this point fully in chapter three under "Moses and the Law."



Unfortunately, many abuses of power have been covered both in the Church and in some African traditional societies by those who have sacral authority because nobody should challenge God/ the spirit's elect leaders. The revolt of Korah will help us to explore the extent of accountability and legitimacy of a traditional or sacred authority in our society.

#### **4.7. Korah's Trial and God's Verdict**

The flow of the narrative is often interrupted, as is shown in the above structure of the passage, by the presence of many narratives woven together in this section. After Moses' defense, the narrator shifts to Dathan and Abiram's revolt. Now he comes back to Korah's account in 16:16-24 and 16:35-40 (16:35 - 17:5 BHS).

##### **4.7.1. Translation.**

16. *And Moses said to Korah, be there, you and your company, before the Lord, you and they, and Aaron, tomorrow.*
17. *Take each one of you his censer, and put incense upon it, and bring everyone of you before the Lord his censer, two hundred and fifty censers, you also and Aaron, each his censer.*
18. *So each man took his censer, and they put fire in them and put fire upon them, and they stood at the entrance of the tent of meeting.*
19. *And Korah assembled all the congregation against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation.*
20. *And the Lord said to Moses and to Aaron saying:*
21. *"Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment."*
22. *And they fell on their face, and said, "O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, when one man sins, will you be angry with the whole congregation?"*
23. *And the Lord said to Moses saying:*
24. *"Say to the congregation, Get away from around the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram."*
- .....
35. *And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense.*

##### **4.7.2. Analysis**

The narrator in this passage elaborates on how God would designate the chosen priests. Moses summons Korah and his company as well as Aaron to take censers and make an



offering to God, which is one of the duties of a priest. Korah and his company seem to agree with the test, and even want it to be in public. Korah invites the whole congregation to witness the trial against Moses and Aaron.

When Korah had gathered all his followers in opposition to them (Moses and Aaron) at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation (v.19b).

The writer establishes a link between God's manifestation in glory and the vindication of His chosen leaders. The appearance of God's glory whenever Moses is threatened becomes a recurrent feature in the Book of Numbers:

But the whole assembly talked about stoning them (Moses and Aaron). Then the glory of the Lord appeared at the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites (14:10).

The narrator records God's appearance to vindicate Moses on several occasions. These include: when Miriam and Aaron revolted against Moses' supremacy (12:5); in the story of the spies when people threatened to stone Moses and Aaron (14:10); in the case of Korah and his company which we are studying now (16:19); and finally in the revolt of the assembly that follows Korah's punishment to be developed later (16:42). In each of these occurrences, God's glory is associated with the punishment of Moses' opponents. Brown considers God's glory in these instances as a way of reflecting the ugly side of rebellion.

The bright light of his shekinah presence was seen by everyone gathered there, and its radiant outshining made these rebellious malcontents all the more sinful. Sin is seen for the ugly thing it is when God reveals his glory.<sup>192</sup>

The glory of Yahweh appears frequently in the pentateuchal narrative to manifest the divine presence. The Israelites saw this glory for the first time on Mount Sinai when God gave the law (Ex. 24: 16ff), but later on it became frequent at the tabernacle (34:29-35,

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<sup>192</sup> R. Brown, *Numbers*, 147.

Lev. 9:23, Num. 16:19, 42). This manifestation is always associated with a pillar of cloud, as when Aaron and Moses rebelled against Moses (ch. 12), or fire, so frightening that on many occasions the people, and sometimes Moses himself, were afraid to approach the divine presence. The fear to draw near God's glory is understandable because it exposes human sinful nature in contrast with God's holiness.

We have discussed how in the book of Numbers God's manifestation in glory is linked to the protection or the vindication of His servants, namely Moses and Aaron (14:10, 16:19, 42). This specific use of the glory of Yahweh in relation to the punishment of rebels can be justified by recurrent rebellions in the book of Numbers that challenge God's chosen leaders and threaten to thwart His plan of liberation.

In verses 20-22, Yahweh enjoins Moses and Aaron to separate themselves from the rest of the people so that He may destroy them. This is not the first time that Yahweh threatens to decimate the people (14:11-19), but repeatedly Moses intercedes urging Yahweh to forgive them. The presence of the crowd at the place of trial on the invitation of Korah causes them to share the same fate. Their acceptance of Korah's invitation is considered as overtly siding with the insurrectionists and therefore worthy of punishment. This is why God asks Moses and Aaron to move away from the rest of the congregation. One should take seriously the advice given by Floyd McClung as he warns:

Be careful about taking sides in an issue. It is immature to feel that we have to take sides on every issue. We must not allow friends or others to pressure us into something we don't feel is right. God may want us to remain neutral and help promote reconciliation.<sup>193</sup>

Instead of running away from the congregation Moses and Aaron fall on their faces on hearing God's intention. The gesture of falling on their faces is repeated here (16:22), but unlike previously (16:4), Moses and Aaron are not expressing their hopelessness but interceding in favor of the people. Their prayer in favor of the people has the effect of averting God's wrath. To intercede for the people and spare them God's destruction is a

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<sup>193</sup> Floyd McClung, *Learning to Love People You Don't Like* (Seattle: YWAM Publishing, 1992), 103.

consistent and positive feature of Moses' leadership portrayed in the Pentateuch. The prayer that follows underscores two significant theological issues.

The first issue is the appellation "The God of the spirits of all flesh" (v. 22a). Moses uses this appellation only twice to address Yahweh, here and in 27:16, when he asks Yahweh to provide a competent successor who will lead the people after his death. The significance of this phrase in the mouth of Moses is that He moves from a tribal God (God of Israel) to a universal God. Gray argues that, "Yahweh is to him far more than the God of Israel; He is the one and only author of all human life, and, as its author, capable of destroying it."<sup>194</sup> Gray thinks that this phrase betrays the advanced theological point of P.

In my opinion the concept of the God who gives life to all living creatures, though scarcely used in the Pentateuch, is present from the accounts of creation in Genesis. The same idea is expressed differently in various Psalms and other passages such as Job 12:10 and Ecclesiastes 12:7.

The second theological issue raised in Moses' prayer is the question, *Will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?* (v. 22b). Moses pleads for individual responsibility of guilt, as opposed to a collective one. The accounts of plagues in Egypt and several other texts suggest a collective punishment of the whole community because of the sin of one person or a few amongst them (Lev. 10:6; Jos. 22:8). Here Moses asks God to consider different degrees of guilt in order to spare the innocent. The phrase "When only one man sins" makes allusion to Korah as the instigator who is leading the community astray. Moses and Aaron intercede that God may distinguish between the leaders of the revolt and the led. The plea is done in the form of a question so that God may judge if it is fair to destroy the innocent with the wicked one.

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<sup>194</sup> Gray, *Numbers*, 203. E. Binns, *The Book of Numbers*, 113 observes that "the phrase is very common in the post-biblical literature, occurring in *Enoch* alone more than 100 times."

Although Korah and the people he called to witness his trial seem to show solidarity in wrongdoing, Moses knows that God is able to establish individual responsibility instead of inflicting a collective punishment. Moses' prayer is intended to avoid such a collective responsibility of guilt. God's answer to Moses' prayer confirms the statement that "the soul who sins is the one who will die" (Ezek. 18:2, 20). In fact, the book of Ezekiel champions the defense of individual responsibility (Ezek. 18 & 33).

Yahweh asks Moses to tell the people to move away from the contenders lest they are subjected to the same fate (v. 23). God's order is to isolate the tent of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.<sup>195</sup> The fact that people agree to separate themselves from Korah and his company shows that they are not ready to die for this cause. The root cause seems to be the struggle for position among discontented leaders; therefore the lay people have nothing to win in rallying behind the contenders.

I would argue that to dissociate the instigators from the congregation in order to spare the latter from God's wrath is a great achievement on Moses' part. My experience with the absolutist regime of the late president Mobutu shows that when the position of the leader is at stake the ruler acts emotionally by inflicting collective punishment. In the process of the consolidation of Mobutu's power in Congo coercive measures were used towards his opponents including some members of their ethnic groups or clans. In his report on Mobutu's regime, Thomas Callaghy notices:

The new political context activated ethnic particularism on varying and often shifting levels rather than uniting groups in a challenge against a despised central regime. For example, once the Mulele uprising was generally viewed as a basically Mbunda and Pende movement, it became encapsulated, and the ANC troops were able to isolate and control it without difficulty.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> A textual critique is raised concerning the use of מִשְׁכָּן "tent" in singular for Korah, Dathan and Abiram. The singular form of this word is used only for the dwelling of Yahweh. Since these three Korah, dathan and Abiram were heads of the family who could not share the same house, some commentators prefer to translate it by "the district" of Korah, Abiram and Dathan. For more discussion see Gray, *Numbers*, 204.

<sup>196</sup> Thomas M. Callaghy, *The state-Society Struggle: Zaire in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 157. ANC stands for *Armée Nationale*

What is not said in the above report is how members of these two ethnic groups, Mbunda and Pende, were severely tormented and killed because of their tribal ties with Pierre Mulele. Numerous examples of collective punishments have been recorded during the long reign of terror in the Democratic Republic of Congo. A better illustration is given by the phenomenon of genocide and its counteraction in the Great Lakes region, Rwanda, Burundi and Congo, where collective responsibility is applied to various ethnic groups. Innocent rural populations are decimated because of their political elite involved in the struggle for leadership.<sup>197</sup>

God here responds and gives his verdict by destroying Korah's congregation: "And the fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense" (v. 35). Their fate resembles that of Nadab and Abihu who were consumed by the fire from the tabernacle while offering incense (Lev. 10:2). From this point on Korah is no longer associated with his followers, his fate is linked with the other two chief rebels, Abiram and Dathan, as we shall see from their story in the next chapter.

The image of a consuming fire is often associated with the God of Israel in various texts of the Bible. The Israelites knew that fire was the outward evidence of God's presence on Mount Sinai, when He gave them the Law (Ex. 19:18), and over the tabernacle (Ex. 40:38). The two sons of Aaron were consumed by fire from Yahweh (Lev. 10:2). The prophet Elijah proposes the fire as a test to distinguish between Yahweh and false gods. "The god who answers by fire — he is God" (1 Kgs. 18:24). The narrator may have used the image of fire to affirm that this punishment comes from Yahweh and not from Moses. This affirmation is important in anticipation of the people's discontent as they accuse

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*Congolese* (Congolese National Army). Pierre Mulele was publicly executed in 1968 when he fell into a trap set by Mobutu as they called him from his exile in Brazzaville to receive amnesty in Kinshasa.

<sup>197</sup> Important information about genocide in the region can be gathered from Linda Melvern, *Conspiracy to Murder: The Rwandan Genocide* (London: Verso, 2004), and Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999).



Moses and Aaron of killing their leaders. In his comment on this incident Brown gives one possible interpretation of God's judgment as he argues:

We need to develop the difficult art of letting sin die within us instead of sending it forward on its destructive mission. We cannot possibly do that in our strength; the indwelling Holy Spirit is given so that we can put to death potentially lethal thoughts. Without his slaying power, sick thoughts can develop into dominating ambitions and malicious deeds, ruining others.<sup>198</sup>

Brown spiritualizes the Korah account by personalizing 'sin' as the one to be destroyed. The application becomes easy because the destruction of sinful thoughts does not imply necessarily the death of the sinner. It should even be encouraged as a commendable action to slay the power of sin in each individual. The matter becomes more complicated when we deal with 'blood and flesh' human beings. For a community of faith like ancient Israel, the God of the spirits of all humankind has no limit in His execution of punishment through His divine power. Life comes from Him and He can take it at any time and when it pleases Him without being questioned. It is said that "during the wilderness period Divinity was in no mood to be challenged, and when He was, both heaven and earth were deployed to administer the punishment."<sup>199</sup> However, things are different when a human judge issues a death sentence in his pronouncement of judgment towards another human being or group of persons. Horst Dietrich Preuss observes:

The Old Testament often thinks differently from the contemporary world, and the modern way of conceiving things is not always conducive to ancient Israel's manner of thinking. The effect of an evil deed and the ruin called forth against the wrongdoer through YHWH's activity are often closely connected...However, one may ask whether the execution of the death sentence is not a new deed that sets YHWH's will in motion and then is carried out by human beings? Does this also involve a sphere that continues to have effect?<sup>200</sup>

The question is: Can what was done to Korah and his company be carried out by human beings to set in motion God's will? When the execution of the death penalty is carried out

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<sup>198</sup> Brown, *Numbers*, 144-45.

<sup>199</sup> Biblical Personalities: Korah. <http://www.emanuelnyc.org/bulletin/arch>.

<sup>200</sup> H. Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*. Vol.1. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 184-85.

by human beings it becomes a very contestable matter because of the subjectivity of human judgment. People are often divided about how much pain somebody should undergo when he has offended the society. Is life imprisonment a fair alternative to the death sentence? People who have been offended or may have lost a dear one find that life imprisonment is not a fair judgment because, for some reasons (amnesty or a big national event), a criminal may be released. For friends or family members of a criminal, imprisonment is a fair judgment.

South Africa is actually an example of the polemic around the death penalty. During the election campaign held in April 2004 some political parties attributed the rise of violence and crime to the abolition of the death penalty. Others maintain that even criminals have the right to life. In a declaration published in *The Mirror* Father Eldred Leslie said: "It seems that those who, in their election campaigning call for the return of the death penalty are out of touch with reality."<sup>201</sup> The question of the death penalty is more than an electoral argument. The kidnapping followed by the killing of Lee Matthew last July 2004, that was splashed in headlines across most newspapers in the country continues to fuel the debate on the death sentence. In the case of such odious killing people expect the murderer to be sentenced to death as a fair compensation. The current debate is if God, in some cases, sentences people to death, as in the case of Korah's group, why should not human agents do the same. The complexity of this debate means that we cannot be too judgmental on what happened with Korah and his company.

The text requires that the memory of the death of the two hundred and fifty should be kept as a sign in order to avert future rebellion concerning the priesthood. Verses 36-40 (17:1-5 BHS) records that the priest Eleazar, Aaron's son, was instructed to collect the censers from the ashes, and make out of them plates to cover the altar. Eleazar is to do this because Aaron, in his position as High Priest, should not be in contact with anything than touches a dead body.

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<sup>201</sup> Eldred Leslie, "The right to life" in *The Mirror* (Wednesday, March 31, 2004), p.4

This is to remind the Israelites that no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the Lord, or he would become like Korah and his followers (v. 40).

People are always forgetful, therefore they need visible symbols to keep in mind what has been said or done. In Numbers we have several symbols, among them: the blue tassel on their garment (15:39), this new covering for the altar, and the staff of Aaron that blossomed (17:10).

An interesting feature to notice in this story is that the judgment in the narrative is sometimes ambiguous and there is not enough evidence in the text to explain these disparities. This episode presents a good illustration of the ambiguity in judgment as the censers used by the 250 leaders become holy because they had been presented to Yahweh, while their users were punished as sinners. Censers that had been used in the holy presence of Yahweh become sacred and should no longer be in contact with any body. They are declared holy. The coals were scattered away from the reach of 'ordinary people' (non priests).

#### **4.8. Leadership Issues in the Revolt of Korah**

##### **4.8.1. Sacral Authority**

There are important issues with regard to leadership raised by the account of Korah's revolt. When Korah claims, "For the entire congregation, all of them, are holy and Yahweh is among them; why do you exalt yourselves over the Lord's congregation?" (Num. 16:3), he questions the sacral authority of the priesthood. Moses in his answer refers to God's advocacy. "Yahweh will show who is holy" (16:7).

In the Jewish community, the dominant consideration is that the story has been used to defend sacral authority among religious groups. Those who hold sacral authority in religious groups use Korah's punishment to scare those who want to challenge their legitimacy. In rabbinic writings the name of Korah is used as a polemical title for Jewish sects. In his article "Korah and the Second Temple", Jonathan A. Draper underscores

how the story of Korah's revolt has been used in relation to the controversies between the Pharisees and the Zadokite priests that took place during the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty. The rabbinic Judaism of the first century AD used Korah's story in the controversies between Hillel, Shammai and those who were considered as heretical sects.<sup>202</sup> Each part would label its opponents as Korah's congregation that had to be destroyed. The following comment from Gunther Plaut shows clearly how Korah's tradition has been misused by Rabbis to legitimate their position.

Over the years the Korah story assumed great importance. Rabbis of mishnaic and talmudic times viewed themselves as direct spiritual descendants of Moses, and they interpreted the punishment of Korah as a warning to their own contemporaries who challenged the divine sanctity of rabbinic teaching. However, since a repetition of Biblical miracle could not be counted on, the Rabbis threatened their challengers with eternal damnation—for instance, when they declare that those who did not believe in resurrection would have no share in the world-to-come.<sup>203</sup>

Rabbis shift the Korah's story from a struggle for leadership to a legal dispute based on the misinterpretation of the law. This view allows them to see all heretics as following the path of Korah, therefore God will intervene to destroy them. To threaten his opponent, as the above article mentions, Rabbi Akiba argued that Korah was punished in the desert as well as excluded from divine grace for all time to come. The point he makes is that heretics who oppose his sacred authority will not resurrect to enjoy the world-to-come. Since the Rabbi cannot call on fire or earthquake to destroy his opponents, he suggests a punishment that nobody will live to confirm.

In many African religions and traditions people believe in the sacral authority of leaders because they assume that the chief, king, founders of religion and their subsequent successors have been chosen or appointed by God or divinities. Divine appointment gives some kind of stability to authority, which is supposed to continue until God or the

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<sup>202</sup> J.A. Draper, "Korah and the Second temple" in *Templum Amicitiae*, JSNT-Suppl. Series 48 (Sheffield: JSOT Press), 150-174.

<sup>203</sup> W. Gunther Plaut, "Korah: Rebellion and Divine Wrath"  
<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts>. 2004/11/01.

divinities decide otherwise. Many leaders endowed with sacral authority remain in power until death. Concerning African traditional leadership John S. Pobee observes,

A traditional ruler derived his title to authority from the sanctity of customs which is located in the family to which he belonged, and which entitled him to authority. He is thus a 'double pivot' i.e. the political head of the tribe and the center of the ritual expression. The sacral quality of kingship derives from the sociological fact that he symbolizes the whole society and is for that reason raised to a mystical plane.<sup>204</sup>

This sacral authority of the chiefs and kings was highly venerated by their community so that it was almost unbelievable that any one would rise up and challenge the traditional ruler without offending the gods or spirits. Some modern African leaders like Mobutu and Nkruma have tried to adopt a form of sacral monarchy to ensure the absolutism of their regime.<sup>205</sup>

The major concern raised by this story is whether one can use Korah's story to legitimate the authority of a chief or king who oppresses his people? We know that the Bible has been used in Africa as an instrument to support colonialism, apartheid, women oppression and all forms of exploitation and discrimination. But African theologians and mainly African women theologians are reading the Bible in order to correct and revisit erroneous interpretations. The God of justice and His word should not be used to support

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<sup>204</sup> John S. Pobee, *Religion and Politics in Ghana* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, Christian Council of Ghana, 1991), 25. The same assertion that Kings hold a double power as political head and ritual performer is attested by Olof Pettersen, *Chiefs and Gods: Religious and Social Elements in the South Eastern Bantu kingship* (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1973). See also Randall M. Packard, *Chiefship and Cosmology: An Historical Study of Political Competition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), who describes the Bushu chiefship in the Eastern Congo as follows: "Through the *mwami* the mediating roles of rainmakers, healers of the land, priests of earth spirits, and ancestors are consolidated, and the forces of nature domesticated" p.30.

<sup>205</sup> Pobee, *Religion and Politics in Ghana*, 31, writes: "Nkruma was shrewd enough to realize that chieftaincy could not be destroyed entirely and that there was something to be gained by cultivating it for himself." About the late president Mobutu, Callaghy says: "Mobutu portrays himself as a powerful neo-traditional king or chief and as the savior of his people. Traditional notions of kingship remain potent, and Mobutu has clearly drawn on them." *The State-Society Struggle*, 182.



injustice and oppression. Mosala captures well what thousands of Third World scholars, both men and women, express in the theology of liberation

I insist that a base and an engagement in actual contemporary struggles is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for the development of such a black biblical hermeneutic of liberation...The point here is that biblical texts do not suddenly become politically supportive of the black struggle just because they are being appropriated from its perspective. The relevance of the Bible in the black liberation struggle may be as much a negative factor as it is often a positive one.<sup>206</sup>

While it is clear that chiefs and political leaders should not misuse sacral authority by pretending that their opponents will be punished by the divinities, the problem is much more complex in the religious domain. Apart from the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican and some mission-founded Churches where the sacral authority of the pope, priests and other clergymen is well accepted, African Indigenous Churches (AICs) too have championed the sacral authority of their founders. In her book *Under the Canopy*, about St John's Apostolic Faith Mission Church, Linda Elaine Thomas says:

St. John Apostolic Faith Mission of Guguletu is one congregation within the historic politico-ecclesiastical movement of independent African Churches in South Africa. Acting upon a vision she believed came from God, Mother Nku launched her own Church, which drew upon precolonial African religious practices and imported Christianity.<sup>207</sup>

Mother Nku is not the only founder of AICs to have a vision from above in order to start a Church. The same pattern of calling and ministry can be found in Isaiah Shembe and the Nazarites Church of South Africa. The case of the Kimbanguist Church in Congo gives a good illustration. The starting point of the Kimbanguist was not a vision but an endowment with divine power to perform miracles. In an article on the Kimbanguist Church we read:

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<sup>206</sup> I. J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 8.

<sup>207</sup> Linda E. Thomas, *Under the Canopy: Ritual Process and Spiritual Resilience in South Africa* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1999), 5, 20.

In the brief period of six months he [Simon Kimbangu] became a new-wave prophet, started a separatist Church, took to the road as a preacher, cured the sick, raised the dead and rallied the local people against the strict Christian missions and, as he saw it, the corrupting European culture.<sup>208</sup>

The article continues by noting that the Kimbanguist Church is firmly established and spread widely under the leadership of the son of the Founder. It has its own New Jerusalem (Nkamba). But the interesting part of the story missing in the article is that the whole family of the prophet Simon is considered as sacred. This includes children, grand children and nephews. Also the leader of the Church must be a descendent of the dead prophet. A late development in the organization of the Church has led to change the name from "The Church of Jesus Christ on earth by the prophet Kimbangu" into "the Kimbanguist Church." This change was motivated by a new conception by current leaders of the Church who think that Kimbangu and his two sons represent the Trinity, God, Son and Holy Spirit, therefore there is no Jesus outside of the family of the prophet. The Church is doing well thus far and it has won the confidence of many organizations both in Africa and abroad. There may be members who question the succession of the leader of the Church by members of the family of the prophet only.

An important question in this study is how we interpret the Korah story when apparently unchallenged sacral authority surrounds us in our religious sphere. The danger is to misinterpret it, like in rabbinic writings, in order to silence those who oppose or denounce some irregularities in the Church.

#### 4.8.2. Freedom vs Authority

A close analysis of the action of Korah and his company leads the reader to interpret their action as a claim for freedom. "For the entire congregation, all of them, are holy and Yahweh is among them, why do you exalt yourselves over the Yahweh's congregation?" (Num. 16:3). Plaut says: "Korah's argument turns on the eternal tension between authority and freedom. Like many demagogues after him, Korah offered himself as a

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<sup>208</sup> Simon Kimbangu in <http://www.godulike.co.uk/faiths.php?chapter=58&subject=who> 2004/12/17.

fitting guardian of the spirit of freedom"<sup>209</sup>; the conclusion of this article states that though Korah was destroyed, his name and argument refused to disappear. The tension between authority and freedom is as old as the world. Even though people have always submitted themselves to some kind of authority be it divine or human, there is in each society a fraction that seeks to undermine the notion of authority.

In Christianity today people speak about an anticlericalism movement which is spreading to all Churches. In his article on anticlericalism C.T. McIntire argues:

The revolutionaries in Catholic Europe in 1820, 1830, 1848, and 1870 explicitly regarded priestly power as an enemy. The Papal States, as a 'government of priests,' epitomized to anticlericals all that was evil...Anticlericalism has not been absent among Protestants. Many a Baptist pastor, Reformed dominie, or Lutheran minister has evoked anticlerical responses. Charismatics, Brethren, and Quakers have found they can do without clergy entirely.<sup>210</sup>

Is any kind of authority in the Church inimical to freedom? Do we compromise freedom whenever we heed the word of any Church leader? The answer to these questions can help us interpret and apply wisely the Korah account in the present African context. The concept of freedom is wide and sometime confusing. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines freedom as "the condition or right of being able or allowed to do, say, think etc. whatever you want to, without being controlled or limited." In the context of the Church of Christ such kind of freedom without control would lead to chaos. The Church belongs to Christ who is the founder and the head, thus all authority is a delegated power which must be exercised within some limitations.

It is true that the clerical authorities in the Roman Catholic, Protestant Churches and African Indigenous Churches are accused of many abuses. The clergy is considered by certain laity as leaders in faith and morals, and often as guides in politics, economics, and social life. But in many instances people have been deceived by the clerical authorities who are unable to keep their own standards. If Korah's argument was to denounce the

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<sup>209</sup> W. G. Plaut, "Korah Rebellion and Divine wrath" <http://www.myjewishlearning.com>

<sup>210</sup> C.T. McIntire, "Anticlericalism" [http://www.mb-soft.com/believe/txn/anticler ...](http://www.mb-soft.com/believe/txn/anticler...)

fullness of power in the hands of Moses and Aaron, many of those who oppose the authority of some clergy persons today would identify with him. But we have shown that his revolt was a mixture of personal ambition and a protest against the privilege of priesthood given to Aaron's family excluding other Levites. Many Churches grant excessive power to the clergy so that it becomes a threat to the ordinary members. Avery Dulles cites a declaration from Vatican I, which the clergy may misuse to oppress laypersons.

But the Church of Christ is not a community of equals in which all the faithful have same rights. It is a society of unequals, not only because among the faithful some are clerics and some are laymen, but particularly because there is in the Church the power from God whereby to some it is given to sanctity [sic], teach and govern, and to others not.<sup>211</sup>

This strong statement on inequality or ranking in the Church can open the door to all sorts of abuse of authority. What it means is that this sanctity (Methodists would prefer the term holiness) gives the right to the pope, and bishops, assisted by priests and deacons, to govern the flock with pastoral authority as Christ's viceregents in order to impose laws and precepts on the Church. Dulles notes that, "They act as if they were engineers opening and shutting the valves of grace."<sup>212</sup> What is said of the Roman Catholics here can be applied to many Protestants and African Indigenous Churches as well. This inequality contradicts the concept of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12) and the humility of Jesus the founder of the Church. I concur with John Sobrino, quoted by John W. de Gruchy:

In the Church of the poor the age-old barriers between hierarchy and faithful, priests and workers, peasants and intellectuals have been broken down. They have been broken down not by a process of formal democratization in which all are equal, but by the rise of solidarity in the form of bearing one another's burden, being one ecclesial body, and thus making the Church one.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church: A Critical Assessment of the Church in All its aspects* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1985), 35.

<sup>212</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 35.

<sup>213</sup> John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy: A Theology for a just world order* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1995), 253.

By "broken down" the author does not mean a rejection of hierarchy but he encourages members to the fuller participation in the life of the Church at various levels as in a body. When this godly vision of the Church is left aside by those who view the Church in a hierarchical and triumphalistic ecclesiology, there is risk of creating uneasiness and rebellion among the members. In that case the revolt of Korah can be evoked as a warning sign to leadership. Gustavo Gutierrez argues that to achieve liberation the Church should watch over relations between her members.

The Church cannot be a prophet in our day if she herself is not turned to Christ. She does not have the right to talk against others when she herself is a cause of scandal in her interpersonal relations and her internal structure.<sup>214</sup>

When those in power in the Church behave badly they undermine the mission of the Church as salt and light of the world. I have put an emphasis on the exercise of power in the Christian Church because leadership in the Church is supposed to be guided by biblical principles of human dignity, which considers every individual as created in God's image and the mutual respect as members of Christ's body. However, any political leadership has to pursue some ethical values with regard to the followers in order to avert rebellion.

Should we, because of some failure due to human weaknesses, reject all kind of authority in the Church and society? I think that the result may be worse when a community or institution decides to get rid of every form of authority. We are advocating in this study participation and mutual respect so that those who lead and the followers acknowledge their relatedness and work in harmony and order. One cannot envisage a body in disharmony or disorder because it is doomed to perish. To use Korah's revolt in order to reject all authority is to miss the point.

#### 4.8.3. Democracy

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<sup>214</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 116.



Korah's argument seems to make allusion to what we would call today democracy. The way in which democratic theories and praxis have developed along the years has varied a great deal. The concept varies from a direct participation by the people in government to representative democracy and elitist democracy. It is even hard to point to a genuine democracy.<sup>215</sup> I agree with J. de Gruchy in his way of understanding democracy.

Democracy is rather an ongoing quest for justice, and therefore one whose success is contingent upon the development of moral people who are able to participate fully in the body politic, and institutions which allow and foster such participation.<sup>216</sup>

What de Gruchy calls full participation in the body politic is the right of the people to participate in the political process, including the right of individuals to choose their own leaders or representatives. When Korah asks Moses and Aaron "Why do you raise yourself above Yahweh's congregation?"; the question may imply that he did not acknowledge having participated in their elevation to power. He might not be totally wrong in his argument, because Moses and Aaron were not democratically elected but God-chosen leaders. We are not sure that Korah wanted a democratic ballot because there is no record at that time in Israel, nor in Egypt where they came from, of people participating in the election of their leaders. Moses and Aaron presented themselves as God's envoys for the good and welfare of the community. People would judge what they did, if it reflected God's will to His people.

Some founders of AICs as well as clergymen in mainline Churches hold the same argument, because they believe they are in a leadership position by a call from the Lord. Even in such cases a number of contestants argue as to who elected those Church leaders. Outside the Church, Western countries are exercising pressure to oblige some rulers in developing countries to adopt a democratic system, mainly to those who do not like to leave power. The level of democracy in beneficiary countries often conditions financial

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<sup>215</sup> For more discussion on the concept of democracy and its development see Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol.2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 949ff.

<sup>216</sup> J. W de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy*, 21.

aid from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Commenting on this aid Campbell argues,

Since for these donors, democracy is identified with the number of parties and free elections held, there are many cases where individuals create parties to gain access to donor funds. One is even faced with the situation in Africa of political leaders who live outside their own country, but jet in to form parties at the time of elections.<sup>217</sup>

Campbell criticizes these democracies put in place only to please donors and the West without any interest for the people. But the ideal of democracy taught by the West has been a hard lesson to learn for several African countries. One should remember that when independence movements started a number of politicians promised to free people from all forces that inhibit their freedom. These included colonialism, kingship and chieftaincy. All these powers were considered as maintaining people under bondage and domination. In his article on "Monarchy and democracy" Joe Teffo portrays the rise of democracy in South Africa and its outcome. He argues that,

During the run up to the 1994 general elections in South Africa, very few politicians had any respect for chiefs. In fact chiefs were terrorized, coerced into joining political parties or get their powers stripped off [sic]...Clearly, the climate of thought prior to the election was not in favour of chieftaincy and kingship.<sup>218</sup>

But the result did not meet the expectation because democracy could not meet all their needs. Teffo asserts that in spite of their participation in the democracy exercise rural people do not feel integrated in respect of prospects of democracy in plural societies. The reason why they cannot participate in the parliamentary democracy designed by Europe is that the rulers do not usually consult them and many of them have little education. He observes, "This is because there is no reason to suppose that the relatively few literate indigenous African people necessarily command a thorough understanding of European

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<sup>217</sup> Horace Campbell, "Democracy, Human Rights, and Power in Africa" in Nsongurua Udjo, Georges and Margaret C. Lee (eds) *The State and Democracy in Africa* (Harare: AAPS Books, 1997), 198-217.

<sup>218</sup> Joe Teffo, "Monarchy and Democracy: Towards a Cultural Renaissance" *Journal on African Philosophy* (2002), 1-16. <http://www.africanphilosophy.com/afph>.

style parliamentary democracy despite their recent participation in it."<sup>219</sup> Today many have realized that chieftaincy and kingship had some values to be preserved. Many African scholars have raised the same concern about the outcome of democracy in Africa. Speaking from his Congolese background Nzungu notes that,

The question is whether or not democracy is sustainable under the current conditions of economic crisis in Africa. There is the notion that under poor economic conditions, it will be difficult for democracy to take root...Democracy will not be handed down to people of Africa on a silver platter. It can be realized only through sustained political struggle.<sup>220</sup>

The reality that people are learning is that the concept of democracy by itself does not guarantee the freedom, stability and good governance they need. Democracy is an ultimate prize won by a determined people who are committed to improving their lives economically and politically. Teffo attests that, "We must strike out for ourselves in the course of material achievement and by our own effort and energy present to the world those forces by which the progress of man is judged."<sup>221</sup> In the case of South African democracy, Teffo suggests that there are norms and values, practices and institutions in traditional societies that must be adopted and adapted to new conditions. There is a very important traditional system which encourages the free and open interaction so important to a truly democratic system.

In South Africa, more than in other monarchies of the so called First world, the traditional leaders are crucial to any constitutional dispensation, because they remain in touch with the majority of the people who reside in rural areas. Monarchy controls social relationships among people in a given society...Almost all the concepts connected with human relationship can be understood and interpreted through the kingship system.<sup>222</sup>

The point Teffo is making in this article is that it is not the fact of rejecting kingship and adopting democracy that will make an impact in South Africa. What is required of the

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<sup>219</sup> Teffo, "Monarchy and Democracy", 12.

<sup>220</sup> Nzungu-Ntalaja Georges, "The State and Democracy in Africa" in Nzungu-Ntalaja Georges and Margaret C. Lee (eds.), *The State and Democracy in Africa* (Harare:AAPS Books, 1997), 9-24.

<sup>221</sup> Teffo, "Monarchy and Democracy", 12.

<sup>222</sup> Teffo, "Monarchy and Democracy", 12.

people is a strong commitment to uplift their values and work for their well-being. The name of a political system is not important, what matters is how people's interests are taken into account. He gives Botswana as an example of using traditional systems to build a democracy peculiar to herself, based on her own history. In another article Teffo acknowledges that even traditional African kingship had signs of democracy.

Effectively, the king is the king by the grace of the people and not by the grace of God as medieval Western political thought held. This, it should be noted, is an important extenuation of the non-elective nature of kingship. Although the king is not elected in the way in which, for example, a British parliamentarian is elected, a royal cannot become a king unless he is acceptable to the people.<sup>223</sup>

The reason why we have gone through all this analysis is that today the temptation is great, with the rise of democracy everywhere, to back up our argument with biblical insight. One could use Korah's claim to reject un-elected chiefs, kings and religious leaders in order to replace them by those democratically elected. We have shown that the popular kind of leadership Korah proposed could not solve all their problems. Korah argued that since everybody was holy and Yahweh was with Israel, anybody could become high priest or even lead the liberation like Moses. The above analysis helps us see that democracy in Africa is not doing better than ancient and current kingdoms. My country, for example, is called the Democratic Republic of Congo but in reality there is neither freedom nor the meeting of basic needs of the population as required by a true democracy, whereas some monarchies, like Saudi Arabia and Lesotho provide a better democratic system than most of African democracies. It is not my intention in this study to reject the benefit our communities and Churches would get if democratic systems of leadership were established in Africa. My concern is that we should move beyond the concept and see what leaders do to promote values in the society. I agree with de Gruchy as he concludes his book,

Democracy remains a form of political organization — the best option available for embodying penultimate expression of the vision of shalom —

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<sup>223</sup> Joe Teffo, "Democracy, Kingship and Consensus: A south African Perspective." In Wiredu Kwasi (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 443-449.

but it is not the kingdom of God. Christianity, as we stressed at the beginning, cannot be equated with any political order even though it may express a strong preference for democracy today as the best way of structuring equality, freedom, and justice.<sup>224</sup>

It is true that 'Democracy is not the kingdom of God.' As a concept it does not mean more than any other form of political organization; what matters is a system that promotes and works for the well being of the community. Dictatorship and bad democracy are both harmful to the well being of the people and should both be discouraged.

#### 4.9. Summary

This chapter has examined the revolt of Korah with 250 followers. It seems that they were not happy with the leadership of Moses and Aaron. The contention revolves around the priesthood's prerogatives. The group of Korah claimed that Aaron's appointment was Moses' idea and did not come from Yahweh. Moses asked Korah and his company to appear before Yahweh with their censers to burn incense, then Yahweh would decide who were the legitimate priests of Israel. We read that Korah and his company accepted the bid, but that as they started burning incense a fire came from the Lord and consumed all the two hundred and fifty contenders. Their censers were made into plates to cover the altar, as a warning sign to avert future rebellion.

What one can learn from the story of Korah is that it does not concern the opposition between 'ordinary' people and the leadership, but the struggle for power among leaders. Korah and the two hundred and fifty chiefs were all famous, renowned in the congregation and members of the assembly (Num. 16:2; 26:9). The problem of struggle for power is rampant in the Church of Christ and in politics. People can learn from this account that God is always on the side of leaders who are faithful in the exercise of their power. They may experience opposition and threat but at the end of the matter God will vindicate their cause.

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<sup>224</sup> J.W. de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy*, 276.



The ironical side of this story is the fact that the corrupted leadership of some religious institutions may use this account to silence legitimate opposition. They would accuse those who want to denounce their evil of being rebellious to God's appointment and promise them destruction like Korah. We have seen that this is how the story of Korah was used in some rabbinic writing to foster rivalry between Jewish sects, so that the name Korah became synonymous with heretic groups who did not acknowledge the religious authority of other groups. My argument in this study is that those who misuse their power should not take God's vindication in Korah's account as a proof-text. God will never approve any leader, even those endowed by sacral authority, to ill-treat God's people. To make allusion to Korah's story in order to cover up one's bad leadership is misinterpreting this biblical text.

Another lesson one can learn from the 250 men is to shun those leaders who seek allies to support their struggle for political power and those who are never contented with the opportunities that God has given them to serve His people. Korah had dragged other leaders along in an internal fight among the Levites (the tribe of Moses, Aaron and Korah) and caused their death, while it was clear that only Levites were to serve in the tabernacle and handle holy utensils. The caution is not designed to scare or to shun critical assessment of any leadership, but only as a warning to those who are drawn into rebellion by malcontented persons who covet other's positions or want to usurp power. People moved by self-ambition should not use Korah's account to oppose established leadership.

This chapter has also underscored three major current leadership issues in relation to the questioning of authority. The first one is the sacral authority which is embodied today in kingship, chieftancy and some religious clergy. Korah's argument may be interpreted as the rejection of sacral authority. My argument is that one should dissociate sacral authority from totalitarianism and absolutism. We have kings, chiefs and prophets of African Independent Churches who are working for the good of their community, creating peace and justice in their environment. To reject such a leader because of the sacral nature of his/her position would be an enormous mistake. Those who misuse their

power in the name of their divine mandate should not misinterpret Korah's story in order to intimidate their opponents.

The second way the story of Korah can be interpreted is the dualism between freedom and authority. There are people who consider any authority as an enemy of the people or obeying an authority as compromising one's freedom. The story of Korah should not be used in such an interpretation, because the absence of authority would lead to anarchy. The people of Israel could not take possession of the Promised Land, hence God's plan of liberation would fail, if Yahweh did not provide leaders in the wilderness. The same situation would happen in our Churches or nations if we push the quest of freedom to the extreme of rejecting any authority.

The third issue we have raised is the democratic system where people have equal rights to participate in the politics of their nation. Democracy seems to be very appealing because of the freedom it offers and other advantages. But the caution is that democracy is not the kingdom of God and the rule of the majority is not always right. The application of the concept varies from one state to another. The democracy imposed by the West and its donors does not bring satisfaction in many African countries. There is a need to adapt democracy to our realities and culture. We have suggested that some kingships or monarchies present democratic features more than some elitist democracies. Korah's story should not be interpreted in relation to the consecration of democracy. However, true democracy would better capture Christian teaching of the kingdom of shalom (peace, justice and well being). There is no better way to conclude this chapter than by quoting Plaut:

Korah was punished for his rebellion, but his questioning of the need for human rulers has remained a living issue for the late generation to contemplate.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> G. Plaut, "Korah: Rebellion and Divine Wrath" in <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts>.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **THE REVOLT OF THE REUBENITES**

#### **5.1. Introduction**

As stated earlier, the narrator joins different revolts together in the passage of our study (Num. 16-17). After analyzing the first strand of these revolts, which deals with Korah and his followers, we now turn to the Dathan and Abiram controversy. All these controversies revolve around the struggle for leadership. Even though we have shown that the revolt of Korah challenged Moses' leadership, its main target was the contest of the Aaronic priesthood. It is not so with the revolt of Dathan and Abiram. Their revolt focuses entirely on Moses' leadership. Dathan and Abiram attack Moses as a leader whom they consider as an incompetent leader and deceiver. Though their fate is linked with the one of Korah and his company in death, their grievances are more political. They reveal the frustration of unfulfilled expectations from a people who left Egypt and cannot enter the Promised Land.

The story of Dathan and Abiram's revolt is recorded in Num. 16:1-2, 12-15, and 25-34. The analysis follows the structure below:

- vv. 1-2      - Exposition
- v. 12        - Moses' summons
- vv. 13-14   - Charges against Moses
- v. 15        - Moses' reaction
- vv. 25-34   - Judgment of Dathan and Abiram.

## 5.2. Exposition

Vv.1-2 introduces a series of revolts found in chapter 16.<sup>226</sup> We noticed in our analysis of the preceding revolt that the times and places of these incidents are not recorded but the author is more interested in describing the leaders of the conspiracy. Vv. 1-2 presents Dathan and Abiram together with Korah and his company as the people who stood against Moses. In his presentation, the narrator mentions, together with Korah, three Reubenites, Dathan, Abiram and On, the son of Peleth as the instigators of the rebellion (Num. 16:1b-2a). In the course of the narrative the name of On is dropped out, nor does it appear in any biblical reference to this incident. Scholars offer several explanations about this isolated reference to On. These include On's early withdrawal from the conspiracy or a textual error of spelling which corrupted the original manuscript which brought in the name of On.<sup>227</sup> Without taking sides on the discussion about the omission of the name of On, this study will concentrate on Dathan and Abiram as the principal leaders of this second revolt.

V. 1b reads "Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, ... sons of Reuben." The narrator may have purposely mentioned Reuben as the ancestor of these leaders. The reader should remember how Reuben, according to natural right, was entitled to the privilege of the first-born and the dignity of the leadership among his brethren. But Reuben forfeited his prerogative because of an immoral act, lying with his father's concubine (Gen. 49:2-3). This revolt may then be considered as a way of claiming back their leadership. This interpretation is advocated by Jewish scholars, as stated in an article of Shabbat Table Talk:

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<sup>226</sup> Won W. Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness in Israel's Migratory Campaign* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003) identifies five revolts in this passage: (1) Dathan and Abiram versus Moses (16:12-14; 25-34); (2) Korah and the leaders versus Aaron (16:16-18); (3) Korah and the Levites versus Aaron (16:8-11); (4) Korah and the whole congregation versus Moses and Aaron (16:19-23); (5) The whole congregation versus Moses and Aaron (17:6-17; Eng. 16:42-50). This study maintains three revolts considering 2&3 and 4&5 as one.

<sup>227</sup> For more discussions about omission see George B. Gray, "Numbers" in *The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 194-195.

According to both medieval and modern commentaries, Dathan and Abiram thought that leadership role was rightfully theirs. Ancient Israel was a society in which the first-born typically became the leader. Dathan and Abiram from the tribe of Reuben, Jacob's first-born, were upset that Moses and Aaron were leaders rather than themselves, and they felt jealous.<sup>228</sup>

The involvement of Dathan and Abiram in the revolt is also explained by their proximity to the camp of the Kohatites. This interpretation seems justifiable to those who consider Korah as being the chief instigator of the rebellion. It is supposed that Korah was to rally for his cause 250 leaders as well as the Reubenites, Dathan and Abiram.

Dathan and Abiram became ringleaders of the rebellion under the influence of Korah, as a result of the camp of their tribe being next to that of Korah, and on this the rabbis base the statement "Woe to the wicked, woe to his neighbor."<sup>229</sup>

The proximity of the camp of these two tribes does not offer a convincing argument concerning the involvement of Dathan and Abiram in the revolt. Beyond their association with Korah, as we shall see later, the text shows that Dathan and Abiram had rather different charges against Moses' leadership. Their complaints are mentioned separately and their case is handled independently from that of Korah. This is why we have dealt separately with the two incidents in spite of some overlaps in the text.

### 5.3. Moses' Summons

#### 5.3.1. Translation

*v.12. And Moses sent to call for Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab; but they said "We will not come up."*

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<sup>228</sup> Shabbat Table Talk, [Http://...www.batkol.info/Parashot\\_Ar...2005/05/27](http://...www.batkol.info/Parashot_Ar...2005/05/27).

<sup>229</sup> Nahum M Sarna, "Dathan and Abiram" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Vol 5, 1311. Also the *Matthew Henry Commentary: New One Volume Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) suggests: "perhaps the Reubenites were angry that the tribe of Judah the first post of honor in the camp" p. 158.



### 5.3.2. Analysis

In the introduction of this chapter (vv.1-2) Dathan and Abiram are part of the group which gather against Moses and Aaron. But when Moses deals with Korah and his company (vv. 5-11) their names are not mentioned. The fact that in this verse Moses summons Dathan and Abiram to meet him shows that they went back to their tents after their first meeting with Moses, dissociating themselves from Korah and his company. This strengthens the argument that they were not protesting from the same motive as Korah's group. Moses orders that Dathan and Abiram appear before him and present their claim. He is not quite aware of how defiant Dathan and Abiram have become towards him. He has to learn it through the response to his summons – "We will not come up."

The Hebrew verb *עלה* "to go up, ascend" is sometimes used with reference to the presence of God on the mountain, in the tabernacle or in the temple (Ex. 24:1; Judges 21:5). It is said that, when referring to the journey to a holy place, one always ascends to such places whether or not in fact they are topographically elevated."<sup>230</sup> Or it is used with reference to appearing before the judges (Deut. 25:7; Judges 4:5). Thus the root *עלה* bears a positive connotation, be it in its active Qal or passive Niphal as opposed to 'descend, go down.' One goes up to Jerusalem, to meet Yahweh in his temple or on his mountain. Whereas 'descend' or 'go down' is linked with *sheol* or Egypt or any thing which is negative. The whole process of the exodus revolves around this verb. The sentence such as "I am the Lord who brought you up from Egypt" is repeated like a credo for Israel in the entire Old Testament. They are often warned not to descend or go down to Egypt again (Deut. 7:16, Isa. 31:1). The sentence "we will not come up" can therefore mean the refusal to go to the Tabernacle where Moses sits to settle Korah's matters, or the rejection of appearing before Moses as the ruler of the community. But metaphorically, it may mean something like "we refuse the liberation, we would like to go back to Egypt." By putting an emphasis on this refusal using the verb *עלה* the narrator prepares the reader for their judgment to come, as Moses prays that they may go

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<sup>230</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, "*עלה*" *NIDOTTE* vol.3, 403-404.

down to sheol alive. It seems, therefore, logical that if somebody does not want to go up, he/she should go down.

Unlike Korah and his group, who agreed to comply with Moses' trial, Dathan and Abiram show their anger in refusing to appear before Moses. They affirm their resolution twice that they will not come up (vv. 12 and 14). There is no indication in the text that the whole tribe of the Reubenites was involved in this revolt. Nevertheless, it cannot be excluded that Dathan and Abiram might be conveying a message of a certain faction of the congregation. Thus the summons gives them an opportunity to open their heart and lay their charges against Moses.

#### **5.4. Charges Against Moses**

##### **5.4.1. Translation**

*13. Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness, but you would also have dominion over us?*

*14. Indeed you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor have you given us an inheritance of fields and vineyard. Would you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up."*

##### **5.4.2. Analysis**

V.13 opens with throwing back at Moses the expression he has used to rebuke Korah and his company: "Is it a little thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the congregation of Israel" (16:9). Dathan and Abiram use the same expression to call the attention of Moses to their complaints. "Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness, but you would also have dominion over us?" Dathan and Abiram warn Moses not to take lightly the complaints expressed in this episode. The matters they raise are serious; therefore Moses should pay attention to their speech and eventually act accordingly. Dathan and Abiram call Moses to consider his inability to carry out the promises given at the beginning of this adventure.

Moses is accused of bringing up the people from the land of comfort in order to kill them in the desert. The same root עלה "go up", in the Hiphil form means, "you have caused us to come up." In an ironic way Dathan and Abiram describe Egypt by using the phrase "a land flowing with milk and honey," which has been often attributed to the Promised Land.<sup>231</sup> This positive portrait of Egypt from people who some years ago were groaning under the bondage of Egypt (Ex. 2:23-24) is an indication of how the whole experience of the exodus has turned into a nightmare for them. The enthusiasm and praises that the whole community expressed upon crossing the Red Sea (Ex.15) are replaced by complaints and murmuring. Dathan and Abiram express their disappointment at Moses' leadership. They regret that Moses took them from a land where they had plenty in order to kill them in the wilderness. On several occasions during their journey, when they faced hunger and hardship, the Israelites remembered Egypt as the land of abundance.

We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and melons and leeks and the onions and the garlic (Num. 11:6).  
...In the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pot of meat, when we ate bread to the full (Ex. 16:3).

It is true that as compared to the wilderness Egypt might be described as a land flowing with milk and honey. Food was not a problem for the Israelites who were given the best land for their settlement by Joseph (Gen. 47:5-6). They had cattle in abundance on green pasture in the delta of the river Nile. It is recorded that under the good conditions they were given upon their arrival in Egypt, the small family of Jacob had increased greatly (Ex. 1:7, 12). The narrative reports that Israel's advantages and peace were brought to an end after the death of the generation that knew Joseph (Ex. 1:8). Moses' action was designed to deliver them from Egyptian oppression and settle them in a land of abundance and freedom.

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<sup>231</sup> Leland Ryken et al. (eds). "The Land Flowing with Milk and Honey" in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 488. They argue that this phrase occurs 14 times in the Pentateuch, once in Joshua and several times in Jeremiah and Ezekiel within the contexts alluding to Israel's history. This passage is the only occurrence where the phrase is used for Egypt.

But the accusation claims that the liberation was an act of depriving them of the comfort and wealth they had in Egypt. Moses has cheated them by pretending to deliver them for a better life, and yet his aim is to kill the people in the wilderness. This assertion probably refers to what happened earlier in the narrative (Num. 13 & 14). The revolt of Dathan and Abiram comes, according to the narrative, after the story of the spies and the aftermath of their discouraging report. The reader will remember how the people reacted negatively upon hearing the report of the spies concerning the presence of giants in the Promised Land. They decided to choose another leader who could take them back to Egypt. This attitude led to their condemnation to forty years of wandering in the wilderness until the whole generation aged twenty and above perished (Num. 14:33). Obviously, Dathan and Abiram are aware of this condemnation as they see people dying in the wilderness and they know that they are going to die without reaching the Promised Land. The point here is who is to blame for this failure? For Dathan and Abiram, Moses bears the responsibility of their misfortune. On the other hand, the narrative attributes Israel's failure to enter the Promised Land from the South to the people's fear and rebellion.

As we have shown earlier, the journey to the Promised Land was not easy. The people had to face many challenges and trials. The text shows that Moses' opponents find the hardship in the desert worse than the bondage of Egypt. This feeling seems natural to those who have gone through a similar experience. When things become tough on the way to liberation people want to return to their bondage. Many African nations share the same experience, as some people covet the old times of colonization or Apartheid because of the many challenges brought in by the liberation. We will come later to this point of application. Here Dathan and Abiram have to answer the age-old question, do you prefer plenty in slavery or hardship with freedom? The text implies that Dathan and Abiram find slavery in Egypt more bearable than freedom and starvation in the wilderness. Moses and Aaron are the ones to bear the frustration of Dathan and Abiram as argued by Olson in his analysis of a previous rebellion of Israel in Exodus 16,

The people attack the leadership of Moses and Aaron who have chosen freedom for Israel. It is hard to try to urge people into a freedom they are

not sure they want. In the people mind's, "if wilderness freedom is like this, we want to exercise our freedom and go back to Egyptian bondage."<sup>232</sup>

V. 13b: Besides the allegation of the desire to kill the people in the wilderness, Moses is also accused of playing the prince over the people.<sup>233</sup> This is an allusion to an autocratic form of rulership, which lacks legitimacy. Dathan and Abiram claim that Moses is presiding over a free people without any mandate. This claim revives the tension between people-elected and God-chosen leadership, as found throughout the Moses narrative. It is not clear, as we have shown in the case of Korah and his company, that Dathan and Abiram are conveying the opinion of the whole congregation. They do not indicate if they want the council of elders to appoint a new leader or organize some kind of election in order to have a ruler elected. A close reading of the text seems to indicate that the rejection of Moses and Aaron, God's chosen leaders, is more about the struggle for position among leaders than the people's desire. It seems that they want to take the seat from Moses.

The experience of many African countries shows that there is nothing new about revolutionary movements that fight military dictatorships. They seem to be power-hungry driven rather than seekers of people's welfare. The African Great Lakes region sets an example. Kabila in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Museveni in Uganda, Buyoya in Burundi and Kagame in Ruanda emerged as the dawn of new hope, only to prove that the dreams of the masses were an illusion. They had promised to bring change in the life of the population, if they succeed in their protest. But their regimes have not brought the awaited prosperity and peace in the region. On the contrary, the misery of the poor has increased during their reign. It is likely that Dathan's movement carried the same illusive hope.

V.14a: They also accuse Moses of lying to the people. "Indeed you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor have you given us an inheritance of fields and vineyard." The conjunction וְאֵל rendered by 'indeed' is usually used to introduce

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<sup>232</sup> Dennis T. Olson, "Power and Leadership: Moses and Manna Story." *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 25 (2004), 317.

<sup>233</sup> See "שָׂרָר" BDB, 979. the use of the Hithp. Imperf. 2ms + Inf. Abs.



something greater, so could be better rendered by 'moreover'.<sup>234</sup> Here it is used to build upon the first accusation as an additional proof of Moses' deception. Moses' fault is not only that he removed people from their settlement but also that he did not deliver what he had promised. The reader should remember that upon his return to Egypt, Moses through his spokesman Aaron (Ex. 4:30) reported that God had promised to grant a land to Israel.

The Lord said I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt...So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of Egypt and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Ex. 3:8).

But at this point in time, God's promise of a land flowing with milk and honey (Ex. 3:8, 17) was a mere mirage to the wanderers. People who had expected to have fields and vineyards in the Promised Land see their dreams vanish, as they are all condemned to die in the wilderness. The reader knows that the people of Israel would soon conquer the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership, but Dathan and Abiram do not. The accusers want to get the fruit of liberation now, and they seem to be impatient of long-term fulfillment. If they cannot enjoy fields and vineyards here and now, then the whole deliverance is a failure. We are not sure that Dathan and Abiram have the interest of the whole congregation in mind when they ask for the inheritance of fields and vineyards. It is possible that their motivation is selfish. We are used to seeing African leaders, who accused colonizers of grabbing people's land, once in leadership positions, they themselves became owners of the same farms instead of distributing the land to the community. Many leaders seek people's voices during elections but after their promotion they serve their own interests. Possibly Dathan and Abiram claim vineyards for their own enjoyment.

The contenders also claim that Moses did not fulfill the patriarchal promise. To fail to bring the people into the Promised Land would also shed doubt on Moses' commission. Since the God who sent him is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, then He should accomplish His promise. They hold Moses responsible for the waste of time in wandering

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<sup>234</sup> "וְכֵן" BDB, 64.

in the wilderness. What is common to these patriarchs is the promise of land in which their descendants will live forever (Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8; 26:3; 35:12). We will come later to the significance of land and vineyards in Israel's life.

V.14b: "Would you put out the eyes of these men?" The phrase may be well rendered as, "would you blind the people not to see the failure of your enterprise?" Or "would you throw dust in the eyes of this people so that they should not tell the truth?" It is not clear from the accusation what particular action they refer to and who "these men" are. Dathan and Abiram may be speaking of themselves or referring more likely to a group of people who support their action. They refuse to be blinded by whatever Moses does as long as he does not take them to the Promised Land. This is a sign that Dathan and Abiram have lost confidence in Moses. 'To blind people' may be also interpreted as 'to enslave people.'<sup>235</sup> In this case Moses is accused of taking advantage of a people weakened by the austerity of the desert. Politicians know how to buy the conscience of the people and make them blind supporters of a regime, which does not care for their needs. People are fed with slogans and false ideologies so much so that they lose the focus of their own welfare. In D.R. Congo the former president Mobutu Sese Seko used to give presents to religious leaders and buy expensive cars for them so that they would not condemn the atrocities of his military dictatorship. The accusation does not indicate what practice Moses uses to blind the people. Is he accused of bribery or hiding the truth from the congregation?

Dathan and Abiram end their accusations, as in the introduction, by refusing to meet Moses. They repeat their resolution, "*We will not come up.*" Now it is definitive, Moses can do whatever he wants because the Reubenites will not appear at the tabernacle. There might be other reasons that motivates their refusal to join Korah and others at the tabernacle. Gordon Wenham thinks that Dathan and Abiram wanted to support Korah at a distance without endangering their lives because they knew that their claim was

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<sup>235</sup> W. Robert A. Watson, "The Book of Numbers" in W. Robertson Nicoll (ed.) *The Expositor's Bible* (London: A.C. Armistrog and Son, 1908), 197. The *Expositor's Bible* mentions the Babylonian fashion of enslavement by actually boring out the eyes of every tenth man.

illegitimate.<sup>236</sup> I think that Dathan and Abiram tried as much as possible to show that their motive was political and had nothing to do with religious institutions, including the tabernacle. Unfortunately, it was not possible to dissociate the political Moses from the religious one.

One important feature of these accusations is their emphasis on Moses' role. It is strange that in all their accusations Dathan and Abiram do not mention God, even once. For them Moses and not God took them from Egypt and he is the one to give them the land that flows with milk and honey. Their claim is totally different from Korah's company who are seeking a place within the priesthood. They seem to ignore the fact that all Israel believe that Yahweh delivered them from the bondage of Egypt in order to give them the land He had promised to the patriarchs. There may be two ways of interpreting their attitude. First, they have been deceived by unfulfilled promises and so they have lost faith in Yahweh. Second, they are among those who attribute success to God and failure to human agents. In the case of the exodus, one cannot dissociate God's acts from that of his human representatives. Moses and Aaron are said to consult Yahweh and implement His will. Whatever explanation one gives to this omission, Dathan and Abiram show that they are interested in political matters and not in ecclesiastical rivalry.

## **5.5. Moses' Reaction**

### **5.5.1. Translation**

*V.15. And Moses was very angry and he said to Yahweh, do not pay attention to their offering, I have not taken one ass from them, nor have I hurt one of them.*

### **5.5.2. Analysis**

V. 15a: Moses was offended by the charges laid against him by Dathan and Abiram. Though he is often described in the narrative as a meek and patient man (Num. 12:3), on this occasion Moses loses his composure and becomes very angry. The Hebrew adjective

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<sup>236</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 136.

פָּנָה expresses the magnitude of his anger and should be rendered as “exceedingly or extremely angry.” Moses could not take it any more. Dathan and Abiram, in their taunts, have changed the “land of slavery” into “the land flowing with honey and milk” and also turned God’s redemptive purpose into a means of killing them in the wilderness. Moses finds these accusations offensive to him as their leader and also to God, so much so that he asks God not to pay attention to their offerings. The term in Hebrew can be rendered as “Do not turn to, regard graciously or respect their offering.”<sup>237</sup> It is not clear what kind of offering Dathan and Abiram wanted to offer to God given that they had refused to come up to the tabernacle. There is no idea of an imminent offering in the text. Gray interprets the request as a simple prayer asking God to withhold his favour or a curse to deprive them of the right given to all Israelites to sacrifice to God.<sup>238</sup> Whatever the meaning, the fact is that Moses is not making his usual intercession in favour of the rebels. Since the accusations of Dathan and Abiram show that they have rejected God’s elected leaders, it seems logical then to Moses that God should not accept their worship. He requests that God will withhold His favour towards his opponents.

One might wonder if Moses has to instruct God on how to deal with people. In his answer to this question John Calvin argues,

Inasmuch as the decision of the quarrel depended on the approbation or rejection by God of the offering they were about to make, he does not seem to me to pray for more than that God, by refusing their polluted gift, should thus chastise their ambition.<sup>239</sup>

Calvin thinks that Moses’ prayer is the confirmation of what God is about to do. He thinks that God cannot accept an offering from Dathan and Abiram because they have rejected His chosen leader. Nevertheless, this interpretation should not overlook the emotion of Moses when he makes his appeal. I do not think that one should deny the fact that in this case Moses’ humanness comes out in the burst of his anger. He has changed his mediation and intercession into a prophecy of woe. On several occasions Moses’

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<sup>237</sup> “פָּנָה” BDB, 815.

<sup>238</sup> Gray, *Numbers*, 202.

<sup>239</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries on the Four Last books of Moses*, Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 107-108.

reactions reveal that he is a human being with the same emotions as anyone else. Yahweh has chosen Israel to be His people despite their weaknesses and shortcomings; He also chose Moses. The difference is that instead of being carried away in his anger to the point of assailing his adversaries, he refers the matter to God in prayer.

V. 15b: After expressing his wish or short prayer for his opponents, Moses goes on to defend his cause. He declares that his conscience is pure because, on the one hand, he has not accepted a present or required a tribute from his subjects. On the other hand, he recognizes that he has not oppressed any of his people (cf. 1 Sam. 12:3). Apparently, Moses' claim seems to be a general one, and not one addressing the specific charges laid by Dathan and Abiram concerning the failure to take them into the Promised Land. Moses is more interested in proving his innocence about oppression and extortion. His conduct has been selfless and noble, therefore his contenders should blame themselves for their misfortune in the wilderness. Moses knows that the people are responsible for refusing to conquer the Promised Land from the South when they were asked by God to do so (Num. 14:1-4). They decided to obey the discouraging reports of the majority of the spies and were condemned to forty years of wandering in the wilderness (14:34-35).

Moses wanted to meet the contenders, even after declaring his innocence before Yahweh. He knows that this matter would not be solved in absentia; therefore a confrontation was necessary. Since the contenders had refused to move out of their tents, the only way to meet them was to join them in their homes. The narrator decided, at this point, to revert to the trials of Korah and his company, delaying the confrontation with Dathan and Abiram until verse 25. This delay creates suspense for readers who are eager to know the outcome of this disagreement. It is possible that Moses preferred to deal with Korah first because he is not the primary target of their charges and also their trial is to be referred to God.



## 5.6. Judgment of Dathan and Abiram

### 5.6.1 Translation

*V.25 Then Moses rose up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel went after him. And he spoke to the congregation, saying, "Depart now from the tents of these wicked men! Touch nothing of theirs, lest you be consumed in all their sins." 27 So they got away from around the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram; and Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the door of their tents, with their wives, their sons, and their little children. 28 And Moses said: "By this you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, for I have not done them of my own will. 29 "If these men die naturally like all men, or if they are visited by the common fate of all men, then the Lord has not sent me. 30 "But if the Lord creates a new thing, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the pit, then you will understand that these men have rejected the Lord." 31 Now it came to pass, as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground which was under them split apart, 32 and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men who belonged to Korah, with all their possessions. 33 So they and all those with them went down alive into sheol; the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the assembly.*

### 5.6.2. Analysis

Moses understands that the case of Dathan and Abiram is serious and that he cannot deal with it alone, as he did in other instances. He resolves to be accompanied by the council of the elders as he walks to the tents of his accusers. It is a positive and commendable move for leaders to go towards their opponents and seek reconciliation. The presence of elders in the delegation that meets Dathan and Abiram is meant to prove that part of the leadership was still faithful to Moses. The confidence given to this council by the congregation allows Moses to deal boldly with the dissidents.

V. 26: It is likely that Moses and the elders did not change the determination of Dathan and Abiram. The confrontation between the two groups is not reported but one can imagine the outcome of their meeting by the reaction of Moses. He orders the crowd to move away from the tents of his opponents lest they perish with them. People are warned to dissociate themselves from "these wicked men" and avoid touching anything belonging to them (v. 26). Moses has tried in vain to bring them to the tabernacle's court, but they refused to come up and now Moses and the elders have joined them at their

homes hoping to resolve their antagonism, but they fail. The failure of reconciliation raises the crucial question: How far should a leader go with his antagonists to try to win them back? For Moses, this was the final attempt for reconciliation; after this he must rid himself of the troublemakers. We are too remote in time to assess if what Moses did was enough or if there was still room for more negotiations. We will come back to this when we consider the character of Moses in this narrative.

V. 27 states that the people separated themselves from the tent of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. The fact that they leave the accusers alone at this very moment perhaps indicates that they have gathered there out of curiosity and not as partners in the rebellion. But there are two ways of interpreting the attitude of the crowd. First, they know that Dathan and Abiram are fighting for their own positions in leadership and not for the cause of the congregation; therefore they let them bear alone the consequence of their actions. Secondly, even though the revolt of Dathan and Abiram was intended to bring a change in the leadership for the benefit of the whole congregation, the people realize that they will not win. It is known that the support of the mob is not consistent; they can cheer you today and curse you a day after.

The mention of the name of Korah in this verse poses some problems of interpretation because he was said to have been with his group at the tabernacle offering incense (vv. 18-19). It can only be assumed that he left the 250 and came in support of his allies Dathan and Abiram. The use of the singular *משכן* tabernacle instead of *אהל* here and in v.24 is also ambiguous. The Pentateuch often uses the singular form *משכן* for the tabernacle of Yahweh and not as a human dwelling. It may suppose that Korah, Dathan and Abiram have erected another tabernacle. This interpretation may explain why Moses asks God not to accept their offering (v.15). One possible explanation is that they have made their own altar in their tent. I concur with those who think that the term means their dwelling-place because the narrator uses both *אהל* (v. 26) and *משכן* (v. 27) to designate the same habitation.<sup>240</sup> At the end of this verse only Dathan and Abiram stand with their families at the entrance of the tent, curious to see what will happen. Nothing is

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<sup>240</sup> Richard E. Averbeck, "משכן" *NIDOTTE* vol.2, 1134 no 5439.

said about Korah, nor about his sons who are mentioned later in the narrative 26:11 (cf. 1 Chr. 6:22-38). Many biblical references in the Psalms and elsewhere show that the sons of Korah did not die along with Korah's company.

v. 28. Moses opens his judgment by stating that he is not doing things according to his personal will. He is accomplishing what he is told to do; in Hebrew, "not from my heart." He continues by affirming that he has been sent by Yahweh to do all these works. By "all these works" Moses may include the liberation from Egypt and the nominations of priests and other officials. This statement is his response to those who accuse him of being an autocrat. People who question his legitimacy should know that he is an envoy of Yahweh for liberation. Moses himself knows that this is not a satisfactory answer because the accusers would require more detailed explanations. The Israelites are moved to believe only when they see signs and miracles. Maybe this is the time to show that Yahweh is behind everything he does by performing a miracle.

To convince the audience that his commission comes from God, Moses pronounces the sentence that Yahweh has to confirm. *"If these men die the death of all men and are visited according to the visitation of all men, then Yahweh has not sent me"* (v. 29). The verb 'visit' can be used of God visiting for good or evil. What Moses wishes is that his detractors suffer something that is not common. The proposal is that if the contenders die a normal death, or by any common means that the people have already experienced or seen, then Moses should be considered as a pretender. People can then conclude that God has not sent him. But if an extraordinary thing happens, then they may acknowledge the hand of God.

V.30 expands on what miracle Moses expects in order to validate his commissioning by God. Yahweh should make something new; in Hebrew, "create a new thing or a creation". The new thing, as suggested by the narrative, is to be swallowed alive into שׂאול

*sheol*. *Sheol* is assumed to be under the earth and the place of the dead.<sup>241</sup> Entering that place without experiencing death on earth is, according to Moses, something the people had never seen before. Moses says if these challengers and all their belongings go alive into *sheol* then people will know that they have offended Yahweh. Here Moses presents himself as a simple servant of the Lord, executing God's orders. Moses presumes that whoever is not happy with his actions should blame God, who takes on the full responsibility for the exodus and all the stipulations and institutions. This is not the first time that Moses identifies any attack on God's chosen ruler as offending God. In the previous revolt he told Korah, "It is against Yahweh that you and all your company gather together, who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?" (16:11).

Moses' pronouncement specifies that either God performs exactly what Moses requires, therefore vindicating His servant, or that He does something less or nothing at all of what Moses asks and therefore He disowns his servant. The audience as well as the reader is therefore placed in suspense to see what God will do in relation to Moses' request.

Vv. 31-33. Moses' pronouncement draws an immediate response. As soon as Moses has finished speaking, God intervenes to accomplish what Moses has wished. It is interesting to notice the reversal of things in this episode. In the revolt of Korah and the 250 leaders, God decided alone on the punishment and proposed to consume those who were offering incense (v.21). However, the fire itself did not fall down until Dathan and Abiram were swallowed up (v.35). In this case, Moses is the one who initiates the judgment and God does the work. It seems that God accepts the role of an executor, providing convincing evidence that he supports His servant Moses. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed Moses' opponents up. The text asserts that even the households and possessions of the accusers were swallowed up (v.32). Here it is mentioned that among those who perished are "the men who belonged to Korah" without clear indication if these are Dathan and Abiram or Korah's allies. The text reads that the 250 princes who formed the company of

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<sup>241</sup> Translated as "Hades" in the *LXX* which can be either a place that receives all souls after death or a place of punishment of the wicked; see Joachim Jeremias, "Hades" *TDNT*. Vol.1, 148-149.

Korah, as stated earlier, died in the fire from the tabernacle where they were offering incense. Although their sentence was pronounced first, the fire did not come down until the entire households of Dathan, Abiram and probably Korah were swallowed up by the earth (v.35). However, Korah's sons are referred to later in the narrative (Num. 26:11) and in Psalms stating that they did not all die with their father.

The fate of Korah seems ambiguous in the text because it is not clearly stated how he escaped the fire which burnt his 250 allies and found himself associated with Dathan and Abiram. One possible explanation of this ambiguity derives from Korah's position in the entire episode. The Narrator presents him as the main instigator and the key player in the whole movement of revolts. He leads the 250 princes to the tabernacle for incense burning without taking himself a censer as ordered by Moses (v.17). While Aaron and the 250 princes were busy offering incense, Korah stood with Dathan and Abiram as they confront Moses and the council of elders; where he was eventually caught in the earthquake. As the coordinator of the revolt Korah had to be present everywhere, which explains why he could not be located in one particular group. On the other hand, it is possible that the narrator arranges his story in such a way that key actors who are mentioned by names, Korah, Dathan and Abiram, undergo the same fate, separate from the anonymous group.

It is hard to explain the severity of the judgment towards children and wives, who might not have participated in the wrongdoings of Dathan and Abiram. This is another tension that the reader of the Pentateuch has to wrestle with between the corporate punishment for and individual responsibility for sin. Sometimes the sinner bears the consequence of his/her sin alone and in other cases the whole family or congregation suffers for the wrongdoing of one person. It not easy for the reader to predict which sin entails individual or corporate punishment. The author seems to emphasize the corporate punishment of Dathan and Abiram as a means to eradicate any resistance to Moses' leadership.



V.34: Many people have come to witness this public confrontation between Moses and the elders, on the one side, and the contenders, on the other side. When the earth splits, and as they hear those who went into the pit alive screaming, the text says that all Israel around them fled for their lives, fearing that they would be swallowed up. The flight of the people may be a proof that they were not part of the rebellion. Abiram and Dathan were likely not speaking on behalf of the people, but seeking their own interest and positions. The sparing of the crowd also shows the limited extension of the opening of the earth. The crust selectively breaks around the place where these few families stood, almost under their feet, leaving the multitude of spectators alive. The miraculous nature of the catastrophe has been under debate among scholars who try to attach this catastrophe to some natural phenomenon in the region. There is no convincing argument on this matter.<sup>242</sup> After analyzing the revolt of Dathan and Abiram and its outcome, it is important to consider particularly how the narrator portrays God and Moses as important characters in this scene.

### **5.7. Moses**

This study has shown that Moses has played a passive role in the revolt of Korah, referring all matters to God's arbitration. He tells the people that only God can show who is holy and worthy to hold the censer (16:5). He presents himself and Aaron as simple mediators. This is not the case in the revolt of Dathan and Abiram. In this episode the heroic image of Moses takes the lead and his presence dominates the scene. His full involvement may be due to the nature of this second revolt. Dathan and Abiram are not interested in ecclesiastical matters, but their claim is political. They rebel against the political leadership of Moses whom they consider as having failed in his assignment. To counter this revolt Moses wants to deal personally with the contenders. Moses is the leader in charge of Israel; therefore rebels are answerable to him.

The narrative gives two different images of Moses' engagement with his opponents. First, Moses is portrayed in a positive image as a peacemaker. He is a leader who wants to

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<sup>242</sup> See Wenham, *Numbers*, 135-136.

enter into dialogue with his contenders and eventually obtain reconciliation. He is aware of their rebellion and yet he calls them to a meeting. Unfortunately, Dathan and Abiram refuse to attend the meeting. Who knows whether out of this meeting a common understanding and/or reconciliation could have been reached and the bloodshed of some innocent people (wives and children of rebels) avoided. Nevertheless, Moses is not discouraged by this attitude; he takes a second step by including the elders of the community in the visit to his contenders' home. Although their visitation was not met with success, the intention was good and recommendable. Many African leaders both secular and religious could learn a lesson on conflict resolution from Moses in this episode. Moses' approach in this conflict corresponds to the definition of problem solving given by John Groom,

It is a process that helps the parties in a dispute to confront the fact that in some respects their definition of the problem may need to be revised and they may have misunderstood the perception of other parties about the nature of the dispute.<sup>243</sup>

Moses is also positively presented as an honest leader. He challenges whoever accuses him of extortion or oppression. He openly declares before his accusers and before God that he does not take bribery or impose tribute on people and also does not hurt members of the community. Moses' testimony can be trusted because none of the charges laid against him refers to extorting people. Considering Moses' claim from my African and mostly Congolese background, I understand how hard it is for our rulers to claim their honesty in handling national resources and their innocence in their relationship with the population. The *New Partnership for Africa's Development* (NEPAD) acknowledges that democracy and good political governance are among the factors that should be promoted in order to sustain the development of Africa. These include transparency, accountability, and integrity, the rule of law and respect of human rights.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> John Groom, "Facilitating problem solving in internationalized conflicts" in Anthony Minnar and Mike Hough (eds), *Conflict, Violence and Conflict Resolution: Where is South Africa Heading?* (Pretoria: HSRC, 1997), 186.

<sup>244</sup> NEPAD's Document, *The New Partnership for Africa's Development* (Abuja, 2001), 12.

On the negative side of the portrait, Moses appears as a very emotional person who easily loses his temper when confronted by accusers. He becomes very angry, and driven by his anger he prays for a curse on his enemies. He asks God to punish his enemies in an astonishing way, that they should be buried alive with their families and possessions. The reader is not used to such a vindictive spirit from the leader of Israel. It is even disturbing to realize that God has entrusted him with all His confidence and answers word for word Moses' prayer of revenge. Families and their possessions are swallowed up. For the New Testament Church, this reaction sounds like a message contrary to the Gospel of love and even contrary to the African *ubuntu* which respects the humanness of all fellow human beings including one's enemies. Moses' reaction raises the question: What is the appropriate way of reacting against enemies? Desmond Tutu depicts the difficulty of treating fairly one's enemies, even within the African *ubuntu*,

It does not always happen, of course. Where was *ubuntu* in the Belgian Congo in the early 1960s? Why did the Rwandans forget *ubuntu* in 1994 and instead destroy one another in that most awful genocide that overwhelmed their beautiful country? I don't really know except to say that honouring *ubuntu* is clearly not a mechanical, automatic and inevitable process.<sup>245</sup>

What can one learn from the example set by Moses in this display of human weaknesses? It is obvious that leadership by terror is not commendable. For people from the Congo who have suffered from years of dictatorship and the killing of those who dared oppose Mobutu's regime, the reading of this story brings fresh memories of that epoch. It would be unfortunate if some political or religious despots would use this story to silence or kill their opponents, because Moses and God did the same. Moses' intolerance in this scene stands against one of the key features of leadership advocated by Calvin Miller.

All who lead must learn to cope with difficult people. The call to leadership demands that we learn that among those we lead exists a great many people who will be difficult, perhaps impossible, to lead.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (Johannesburg: Rider, 1999), 36.

<sup>246</sup> Calvin Miller, *The Empowered Leader: 10 Keys to Servant leadership* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 138.

It is true that the narrative portrays a realistic picture of Moses with his strengths and weaknesses. A close reading of the story shows that something positive can be learned from the humanness of its characters.

We expect from our leaders, mainly religious leaders, forgiveness and love for everybody, including their enemies. One should fuel one's heart with love and not hatred in order to sustain adequate leadership. Even in the secular world, organizations of human rights will not accept that opponents to one's leadership be put to death. On the other hand, we should not encourage leaders to deny and conceal their emotional injuries from evil people with courtesy and soft words so that they may appear acceptable. Leaders often experience hurts, but if they keep suppressing their emotions they end up by harming themselves. In certain circumstances their final reaction is a burst of uncontrolled anger, which becomes destructive to the society. It is known that suppressed emotions lead to depression. Moses shows that he shares fully in human nature. When he is able to control his emotions, he becomes patient and tolerant, interceding on the behalf of wrongdoers. But when he is hurt, he does not hide in hypocrisy, but honestly expresses his feelings before God and before people to expose evil. God's answer to Moses' prayer in this episode may be a reminder to many that God honors honesty. I concur with E. H. Peterson in his comment on some Psalms of anger when he observes that,

The way of prayer is not to cover our unlovely emotions so that they will appear respectable, but expose them so that they can be enlisted in the work of the kingdom. It is an act of profound faith to entrust one's most precious hatreds to God, knowing they will be taken seriously. Hate, prayed, takes our lives to bedrock where the foundations of justice are being laid.<sup>247</sup>

Peterson encourages people to express their true feelings without a cover up. Sharing one's hurt and emotions with God is not a way to legitimize anger or hatred but to allow God to deal with what we bring to him. Although we deplore the death of the contenders, Moses was released as God intervenes to heal his heart and help him continue to lead the

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<sup>247</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1991), 100-101.

people. This study is not trying to justify the killing of enemies, but it honestly acknowledges that no matter how tolerant or accommodating a leader may be, it is hard to turn all evil people into friends. In certain circumstances the leader has no choice but to denounce and relieve those who cause trouble of their leadership position.

My argument is that to understand the character of Moses in this narrative, the reader must not dissociate the two sides of his portrait. The positive and negative sides of his leadership articulate the internal tension of a leader who faces opposition and rejection. Should the leader always act with tolerance and patience at the point of letting chaos and anarchy ruin the community or should he harshly repress all revolt at the point of becoming a tyrant? All those in leadership positions have experienced this dilemma in one way or another. The reality is that one cannot strike the balance all the time in dealing with opposition. Depending on the circumstance and the disposition of one's heart, many leaders often swing between the two poles. It is part of human shortcoming, and Moses is no exception. Although leaders are called to transcend their natural inclinations in order to be shepherds of the flock in their diversity, their human nature is always present. This is true for both secular and religious leaders.

### **5.8. God**

In the previous revolt we have seen that God, as a character, was the ultimate judge to whom Moses and Aaron referred all judgment. In this case God plays a secondary role. It seems that Yahweh's action consists in approving or disapproving what Moses decides. Although He is still the one to do the work and intervene with mighty deeds, He is not the hero of the scene. The narrator portrays God in this way purposely to fit the circumstance. Dathan and Abiram contest Moses' leadership. He is accused of being incompetent and unable to lead the people into the Promised Land. Any portrait that diminishes Moses as a mere mediator in the service of the powerful God would weaken his position as the leader and serve as a tool to destroy his leadership. In order to show Moses in his full capacity as an efficient leader, the narrator has to demonstrate that he is in full agreement with God. Thus, if God accepts whatever Moses proposes, who is a



human being to oppose or contest his leadership? The dynamic of the narrative causes changes in its characters. Nothing is frozen or constant. It is important to follow the scenes as they unfold to see how each character adapts to new roles assigned to them. God remains the ultimate judge and ruler of Israel, but under certain circumstances He works in the shadow of His human representatives so that they may receive due respect and honour from their subjects. God in this scene executes Moses' decision but He is still sovereign to accept or refuse what His servant wants.

Contemporary readers wrestle with the theological problem raised by the death penalty imposed on all those who resist Moses' leadership. It is true that God in His justice, holiness and mercy endorses the killing of rebels and in some instances He implements it himself. How then should we handle crimes committed through jihad, genocide and suicide bombing in the name of establishing justice? The interpretation of this narrative can become a dangerous tool in the hands of those who want to shed the blood of human beings. The history of the Church is full of acts of intolerance and violence, such as crusades and inquisitions that people deplore today. It has always been hard to reconcile God's love with His terrible wrath. E.H. Merrill observes that,

Readers of the Old Testament who think long and hard about God's dealings with individuals and nations in ancient times have already raised these questions and more, for the narrative from Adam to the Chronicler is blood-soaked with murder and war...Over and over Israel's thinkers ponder the ways of God and strive without success to accommodate their understanding of a beneficent God to the reality of everyday life with its experiences of disease, pain, war, and death.<sup>248</sup>

This study is not designed to solve this important problem; however, we need to tackle this polemical issue in our attempt to understand the character of God in the narrative. It is important to notice that before Sinai, Israel's grumbling and rebellions were handled with tenderness and compassion. The reader remembers that on several occasions the narrative reports that the people grumbled against Yahweh and Moses as they faced

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<sup>248</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, "The Case for Moderate Discontinuity" in C.S. Cowles et al. *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 64 [63-94].

danger and hardship, to the point of threatening to go back to Egypt instead of dying in the desert. The most important incidents are: the attack of the Egyptians near the Red sea (Ex. 14:5ff); the lack of drinking water at Marah (15:22-26) and at Rephidim (17:1-7); and the craving for bread and meat in the desert of Sin (16:1-35). In each one of these incidents the Israelites obtained what they desired from Yahweh without any admonition. After the ratification of the covenant at Sinai things changed and all murmurings were considered as an act of rebellion.<sup>249</sup> Severe punishments are given when Israel breaks the treaty, unless Moses and Aaron intervene with intercession to avert God's wrath. The reason is that the treaty covenant signed between Yahweh and Israel was backed up with blessings if the people obeyed and curses if they disobeyed. Each partner had to keep its agreement. If the people obey Yahweh's ordinances, they will become a special nation to God, enjoying his protection and blessings (Ex. 19:5-6; Deut. 28:1-14). But if the people disobey, a curse befalls them, which includes plagues, diseases, slavery, exile and death (Deut. 28:15ff). Israel agreed to abide by all the terms of the covenants.

*Then he took the book of the covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey." Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Ex. 24:7-8).*

One way of understanding the violent suppression of rebellions in the post-Sinai narrative is to link those acts with the breaking of the covenant. People were aware of what consequences their disobedience entailed. The economy of their time allowed disobedience to attract a curse in any form that Yahweh decides because the people had ratified the agreement by their acceptance and by the blood. D. J. McCarthy states that,

If it is difficult to find any reference to the essential curses and blessings in Exodus or Joshua, we know from a book like Deuteronomy that Israel did

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<sup>249</sup> Dennis T. Olson, "Power and Leadership: Moses and Manna Story." *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 25 (2004), 316-331. In his article Olson suggests that murmurings before Sinai were considered as legitimate claims but after the covenant they became punishable rebellion.

know a form of covenant in which curses and blessings were connected with the stipulations.<sup>250</sup>

In some instances when people realized that they had broken the covenant, they would come to Moses to beg forgiveness from God before the plague or death occurred. The difficulty arises when God decides to use a human instrument, as he often does in Moses' narrative, to bring a curse on Israel. The same complexity occurs when God uses Israel to punish the Canaanites and other nations. The line of demarcation between acting as God's instrument and expressing one's own feeling is very thin so that the reader of the Bible, to some extent, becomes confused. How can one distinguish whether Moses is acting as God's instrument of judgment or from his own will? V.S. Poythress argues that, "When human beings are given responsibility to execute penalties, the penalties involved are only a finite image of God's own penalties and justice"<sup>251</sup> There is a great risk when sinful human beings execute the penalties of the just and holy God.

The study of the Pentateuch encounters polemical issues when God's acts display the hidden facets of His character and person. The application of Old Testament realities to modern situations requires care and discernment, nothing should be taken as a cliché. It becomes therefore absurd today to expect that any opposition to leadership, be it political or religious, should be punished by death when none of the led has signed such a treaty covenant with the ruler. Constitutions that govern our Churches and states do not allow rulers to kill their opponents. In fact many tyrannical rulers, such as Idi Amin Dada of Uganda and Mobutu Sese Seko of Congo, came to power through military coups without any agreement with the population. They also often exercised their cruelty by breaking their own constitutions. African leaders who may use this narrative to scare their opponents or justify violence are simply misinterpreting the Scripture. There is a way of dealing with leadership struggles today without evoking God's curse upon the rebels. The death of Moses' opponents was unique to their time, and no leader should carry it out in this age. On the other hand, this narrative should not be used to encourage any

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<sup>250</sup> Dennis J. McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), 14.

<sup>251</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1991), 125.

disobedience or rebellion against the leaders. One should learn that leadership is not meant to be resisted but to be helped for the benefit of all.

### **5.9. Israel and Land**

We have promised to come back to this important point that emerges from charges laid by the contenders. Dathan and Abiram underscore the significance of the land in the exodus narrative. The phrase "a land flowing with milk and honey" is repeated twice in the accusation (16:13-14). The land is at the center of the history of Israel and many volumes have been written to cover this topic. The scope of our study will not allow us to discuss this issue fully. It is obvious from the Pentateuch that Israel and its land are linked together. The Scripture uses the term "Israel" to designate both the land and the nation. When Dathan and Abiram ask for an inheritance of field and vineyard, they express the fulfillment of God's liberation from Egypt.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, I will give it to your descendants" (Ex. 33:1).

This verse shows that Yahweh has promised a land to the patriarchs and is committed to fulfilling his promise. This promise concerns a specific land, the land of Canaan. The occupation of this land gives an identity to the people of Israel. Israel's theology of the land states that Yahweh is the ultimate owner who gives Canaan as a permanent gift to his people (Lev.25:23). The invasion of the land by foreigners, or the exile of Israel from the land, should be considered as a curse. In his comment about the promise of the land Baruch Moaz observes that,

The land is thus the epitome of God's promises, and an important part of the whole without which the remainder is incomplete. Nowhere in the Scriptures are the people of Israel considered to be blessed outside of the

land. Nowhere is blessing promised to the people apart from blessing to the land.<sup>252</sup>

The land is not only the place of blessing but also a symbol of rest from oppression. T. Desmond Alexander argues that, "The fruitfulness of the land obviously reinforces the idea that it will be a place of rest. Within this bountiful domain human beings will enjoy God's blessing and favour."<sup>253</sup>

That is why Egypt could not be the Promised Land, because it is known as the land of slavery and oppression. The regret expressed by Dathan and Abiram in referring to Egypt as "the land flowing with milk and honey" appears as a reversal or denial of God's liberation. It is also contrary to Israel's belief that Canaan is God's land given as an inheritance to His son Israel. They covet the land of slavery and want to return there in contradiction with the whole project of exodus. Another contradiction contained in the accusation is to claim that Moses would be the giver of the land. According to Israel's theology, the earth, especially the land of Canaan, belongs to God. The people are only tenants and stewards. This is clearly stated by Poythress as he argues that,

The land was simultaneously a trust and a responsibility. Israel, as a kind of corporate Adam, was to guard the land from defilement. They were to tend and till the land in order to obtain and enjoy its increase. The fact that the land belonged first of all to God meant that it could not be permanently sold (Leviticus 25:23-24).<sup>254</sup>

The prophecies of Isaiah and Amos reveal how harmful it was for the poor in Israel when people started handling the land without the consciousness of God's ownership. Contemporary society, dominated by the scientific and mechanistic world-view inspired by the Enlightenment, has destroyed our environment. In this era of global eco-crisis,

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<sup>252</sup> Baruch Moaz, "People, land and Torah: a Jewish Christian perspective" in Philip Johnston & Peter Walker (eds), *The Land of Promise: Biblical, Theological and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2000), 188-200

<sup>253</sup> T. Desmond Alexander "Beyond borders: the wider dimensions of the land" in Johnston Philip and Peter Walker eds. *The Promised Land: Biblical, Theological and Contemporary Perspective* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 38.

<sup>254</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, 72



modern theologians discover the pertinence of this world-view as they consider how human beings misuse and destroy nature. Many African scholars attribute the ecological destruction of our world to a Western cosmology, which denies God's creation and views the earth as any commodity to be used for human ends.<sup>255</sup> They propose development based on a theology that takes creation into consideration.

We need a theology that takes matter seriously. While we live in a generous world, its limits are to be respected: there are bounds to bounty. When human beings develop a proper perspective on their place in creation the community of creation will exist in harmony and mutual sustainability. We need to move away from a selfish anthropocentrism, which is characterised by greed and high material consumption, to an attitude that takes seriously the perspective of the environment.<sup>256</sup>

Israel's theology of land has inspired the theology of liberation as well as political freedom from colonization in the contemporary world. The colonizers and Apartheid have deprived the indigenous population of their land. The war of liberation and independence in Africa was first and foremost the struggle for the redemption of our land. Today most African countries have acceded to political sovereignty. But the war against oppression is not over. For some marginalized people, African independence or liberation is not yet effective because they do not have access to land. In many African countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya, just to mention a few, land restitution is a crucial problem. People who have lost their means of production, their identity and their homes are waiting for the restoration of their land from the government. The redistribution is not easy because black land grabbers replace white land grabbers. Liberation is not effective until it leads to land possession.

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<sup>255</sup> Harvey Sindima, "Community of Life: Ecological theology in African Perspective" in Charles Birch, William Eakin and Jay B. McDaniel (eds). *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 137-147

<sup>256</sup> Andrew Warmback, "The Earth is God's and all that is in it: Development from the perspective of the environment" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 110 (July 2001), 77-88.

Today African theologians are re-reading the Bible in order to correct some mistakes made by those who used it to oppress the people and grab their land.<sup>257</sup> The exodus narrative offers a model, which is extensively interpreted to support the theology of liberation in the Third World. In his article on *Liberation Theology in South Africa*, Allan Boesak affirms,

We must understand what liberation means for the African. And this means that we have got to bring back what has been a reality in Africa heritage and African traditional thinking for centuries, namely, the concept of the wholeness of life, which is also a biblical concept. We have to move again to the sabbatical year. One of the striking things in the sabbatical year, which is also very striking in the ministry of Jesus Christ, is the wholeness of God's liberation. It begins with the rest of the land and renewed devotion to Yahweh, and it ends with the rest of the land. In between there are people and exiles and deaths and property.<sup>258</sup>

Boesak insists on the centrality of land in God's liberation, which is also the focus of African liberation. People should possess and have control of the land of their inheritance in order to recover their dignity and identity.

### 5.10. Summary

The revolt of Dathan and Abiram shifts the focus of the narrative from religious hegemony to political issues. The story reveals the frustration of a people who left Egypt with high expectations of becoming owners of fields and vineyards but who ended up by being condemned to die in the wilderness. Contenders questioned Moses' leadership because he was not able to fulfill his promise. This study shows that, on the one hand, the argument of Dathan and Abiram is very pertinent. It deals with the hope of Israel. Why should Moses continue to rule over Israel if he is not able to take the people in the land

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<sup>257</sup> G.O. West, *The Academy of the Poor: towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publication, 2003). He cites Takatso Mofokeng who recounts the white man exchanged the Bible for the land of black people during a prayer (p.70). Black theologians such as Maluleke, Mosala and Mofokeng have chosen a reading of the Bible that empowers the oppressed and marginalized.

<sup>258</sup> Allan Boesak, "Liberation Theology in South Africa" in Deane William Fenn (ed). *Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 265-271.

that God promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? The accusers regret leaving Egypt where they enjoyed life to become wanderers in the wilderness. Moreover, they are told that they cannot enter the Promised Land because they rebelled against Yahweh.

On the other hand, it is not clear from the text that Dathan and Abiram are conveying the wish of the congregation. They seem to be self-interest driven as they claim fields and vineyards for their inheritance. They put forward no proposal on what leadership they want in replacement of Moses, unless they seek the seat for themselves. They also refuse to meet Moses and settle the matter by confronting him with their views. Their attitude endangers innocent members of their families who perish in the doom because of their obstinate refusal of reconciliation.

Concerning the character Moses, the narrator presents two different aspects of his leadership. He is the peacemaker who, by all means, tries to meet the contenders and reconcile with them. When they refuse to meet him in the office, he is ready to go to their homes. He also appears as a team worker as he joins with the council of elders in his endeavour for reconciliation with his enemies. This positive portrayal is opposed with the negative aspect of Moses' reaction. He is quick tempered and intolerant towards those who resist his leadership. He not only wants them to perish but also to die in a very unusual way, being buried alive. The authority of Moses is regarded as uncompromising and unchallenged. I have argued in this study that the two images of Moses should be considered as two sides of one coin. On the one side Moses is God's servant who is struggling to make a nation out of an eclectic group of slaves rescued from Egyptian bondage. This requires patience and understanding as it takes time to forge the Israelites into a loyal and unite nation. The other side of the coin displays Moses' humanness. Being a leader does not change him into a god, he still bears shortcomings and failures common to all human beings. The tension that the reader sees in reading the text captures the dilemma of bringing together the two images of Moses in one character.

Yahweh in this scene intervenes only to execute what Moses wishes. Nevertheless, by

implementing Moses' plea, God shows that He is not opposed to the punishment proposed by Moses. The fact that both Yahweh and Moses are in total agreement on suppressing the opposition raises questions on leadership ethics today. The dilemma that the reader of this scene faces is how to interpret this text in the current era of religious extremism and dictatorship.

In my opinion the violence associated with the repression of rebellion in this text should not be interpreted as an excuse for the reign of terror imposed by some contemporary religious as well as political leaders. I have argued that the situation described in the text should be explained in relationship with the nature of the covenant between Israel and Yahweh. The treaty signed between Yahweh and Israel stipulates that the people shall obey all God's instructions while Yahweh promises to be their God and protector. The sanctions of such a treaty are that obedience entails blessings and disobedience brings curses.

Today there is no treaty backed up with curses and blessings between leaders and led. It will be therefore absurd for any leader to use this narrative in order to destroy his/her toughest opponents. Modern democracy fosters the culture of tolerance and Christianity is grounded on Jesus' love towards human beings, including one's enemies. This study is trying to comprehend the dynamic of a leadership contest and its consequences, but an overall understanding will be possible only after analyzing all three revolts contained in the selected passage (Num. 16-17). Let us move to the last revolt of the series.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE REVOLT OF THE CONGREGATION

#### 6.1. Introduction

The murmuring of the whole congregation is the last thread of the three revolts recorded in Numbers 16-17. We have earlier discussed the two preceding revolts, the revolt of Korah and his company and the revolt of the Reubenites. These two incidents were resolved by the killing of their instigators. One would think that the terrible death of the actors of the preceding rebellions would avert any further revolt among the people. This episode shows that the previous disaster did not stop people from challenging Moses' leadership. The whole congregation of the Israelites starts murmuring as they remember the destruction of a great number of their leaders killed in the two revolts. Yahweh threatens to destroy them but Moses and Aaron intercede for the people. When Aaron goes into the camp to offer incense in order to turn away God's judgment, the plague had already started its dreadful effect. Aaron's atonement quenches God's anger but not until 14,700 people had perished. The episode ends with the blossoming of Aaron's staff designed to vindicate his high priesthood. Our analysis of the passage follows the structure here below:

- 16:41a [Hebrew 17:6a]: Exposition
- 6:41b [Hebrew 17:6b]: People's charge
- 16:42-50 [Hebrew 17:7-15]: God's intervention and Aaron's atonement
- 17:1-13 [Hebrew 17:16-28]: Aaron's budding staff

#### 6.2. Exposition

16:41a. *But on the next day all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron...*<sup>259</sup>

The narrator introduces this episode by indicating the time when the event occurred. This is an innovation as compared to the previous events in which only the actors were

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<sup>259</sup> Since the analysis is done over the whole chapter 17, verses are translated at the point of their discussion.



### 6.3 Charges against Moses and Aaron

V.41b *You have caused the death of Yahweh's people.*

The accusation is very short but precise. Moses and Aaron are charged with the murder of the people of God. The pronoun אַתָּה "you" is used emphatically and may be rendered "You are the ones." The idea seems that Moses and Aaron should not put the blame on any other person or reject their responsibility for this affair. To point to Moses and Aaron as responsible of the death of the leaders involved in the two previous revolts reveals how the congregation interprets the matter. The narrative attributes to God the supernatural means used to get rid of the rebels. In 16:32 one reads that, "The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up...all the men who belonged to Korah, with their possessions. It continues in v.35, "Fire came forth from Yahweh and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering the incense." But in the sight of the congregation the use of supernatural calamities does not exclude the implication of Moses and Aaron in the killing of other leaders. The use of the hiphil of the root מוֹת "to die"<sup>261</sup> may indicate either that Moses and Aaron personally performed the killing or caused it through another person. In this case it should be understood that they have used God's intervention to kill others.

The congregation refers to those who died as "people of Yahweh." It is not clear if this term includes Korah, Dathan and Abiram or if they specifically think of the 250 men of renown whom Korah took in his company. This appellation stands in contradiction with the appellation "wicked men" used by Moses to describe the same group (16:26). There is a difference of view between Moses and the congregation in describing the group. Moses considers the contenders as a group of rebels and wicked men who deserve God's punishment. In fact, they have broken the covenant by rejecting God's chosen leadership and putting in jeopardy the exodus enterprise, therefore they have attracted a curse upon their lives. But the population seems to have another consideration of the departed leaders. They are people of Yahweh killed in leadership rivalry.

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<sup>261</sup> מוֹת "BDB, 559-560.

The appellation "people of Yahweh" may be appropriate if the congregation considers that God has chosen the whole of Israel to be His own possession and a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6). Moses uses the same term to designate Israel in 11:29, as he wishes that everybody among the people could prophesy. However, this position was to be enjoyed only under certain conditions, including keeping the covenant and obeying God's voice. A close reading of the text reveals that the congregation uses the term as a way to 'canonize' Moses' rivals. They seem, in this passage, to claim the innocence of those who opposed Moses and Aaron. It is hard to confirm that those who opposed the leadership of Moses and Aaron acted in strict obedience to God's voice and in accordance with the covenant. This designation reflects the same over-generalization used by Korah as he declared that, "The whole congregation of Israel is holy, every one of them" (Num. 16:3). As we said earlier, Korah's statement did not take into account the many rebellions and law-breakings that had characterized the sojourn of the Israelites in the wilderness. In the same manner, the argument of the congregation holding Moses' opponents as innocent people of Yahweh carries the same ambiguity. It presumes a corporate holiness or innocence of the contenders, which is difficult to establish when two parties are in conflict. It was up to God to confirm between Moses and Aaron on the one hand and the dead leaders on the other hand who were really God's people.

It is not clear what goal the people wanted to achieve by initiating this movement of protest. Unlike contemporary social movements that are organized and sustained in order to bring about change in the society, the text describes a movement that arises spontaneously and dies off after suppression. The revolt does not seem to have any claim whatsoever apart from expressing the disapproval of the killing of their leaders. This single action could fall under what sociologists call a political or social protest. "Protest refers to the act of challenging, resisting, or making demands upon authorities, power holders, and/or cultural beliefs and practices by some individual or group."<sup>262</sup> It often happens that when leaders die they become heroes even though they were not popular while still in power. Throughout history, ordinary people have often organized

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<sup>262</sup> Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper (eds.), *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 3.

demonstrations upon the death of political leaders. A recent illustration is given by the death of Dr. John Garang, the former political leader of the Liberation Movement of Southern Sudan (SPLM), who died in a helicopter crash on 1 August 2005, three weeks after he was sworn in as Vice President. Hundreds of people in shock went on the streets in protest. The media reported that demonstrators burnt office buildings, cars, and shops following the confirmation of Garang's death.<sup>263</sup> These spontaneous demonstrations do not need an investigation into the circumstances of the death to take place and usually they do not last long. In D.R. Congo the death of Patrice Lumumba, the first Premier Minister and independence fighter, resulted in a series of rebellions and civil wars that plagued the country for many years. The movement in Congo remained active because some politicians took that opportunity to advance their political ambitions. Apparently, people involved in the protest in this passage did not have committed activists or a cause to keep people in the movement. They all pulled out after a while.

#### 6.4. God's intervention and Aaron's atonement

V.42 [17:7 BHS]. *And it came to pass, when the congregation had gathered against Moses and Aaron, they turned towards the tent of meeting; and behold the cloud covered it and the glory of Yahweh appeared.*

God's intervention is introduced by the common Hebrew marker of story telling **וַיָּבֹא** "and it came to pass" to indicate that this event is related and subsequent to the charges laid above against Moses and Aaron. People were still talking to Moses and Aaron when the cloud and God's glory appeared over the tabernacle. According to the narrative the cloud was permanently over the tabernacle (Ex. 40:38; Num. 9:16) but the glory of Yahweh was intermittent (16:19). However, casual appearances are often recorded in the exodus narrative to mark special occasions when God has something to communicate to His people. We have shown earlier in this study that the writer of the book of Numbers constantly uses the appearance of God's glory over the tabernacle as a means to vindicate Moses whenever he is threatened (12:5; 14:10; 16:19). God's intervention comes swiftly,

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<sup>263</sup> [www.sudaneseonline.com/ene](http://www.sudaneseonline.com/ene) ...2005/08/15

so quickly that Moses and Aaron do not have time either to present their defense or to refer the case to Yahweh in prayer as in previous cases. It happened as if the lives of Moses and Aaron were in danger so that God had to stop people from carrying out their intention. The fact that the whole community gathered around the two leaders gives the idea of a mob in riot. The experience shows that anything can happen in mass movement protest because no one is likely to bear the responsibility of mass action.

Whatever might have been the intention of the crowd; they are stopped by the sudden appearance of God's glory. They all turn their eyes towards the tabernacle where the cloud and God's glory settle upon the tabernacle. It may be true that the congregation was afraid of this appearance because they had a fresh memory of what happened a day before when this same appearance occurred (16:29) and resulted in the destruction of 250 leaders who were offering incense. God's appearance brings a shift in the narrative. The attention of the reader is now drawn from the discussion between the congregation and their leaders to God's communication or verdict. All players in this scene suspend their action and wait upon God's order.

Vv. 43-44 [8-9] *Then Moses and Aaron came before the tent of meeting.  
And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,*

The sudden appearance of God in the tabernacle prompts Moses and Aaron to leave the crowd and present themselves before Yahweh. God's presence at that very moment constitutes a relief for Moses and Aaron who were surrounded by an angry crowd. This appearance succeeds in snatching Moses and Aaron unhurt from the hands of the congregation. They appear before God at the gate of the tabernacle of meeting where the trial of Korah and his 250 allies took place earlier (16:19). Then follows God's command to Moses and Aaron. Although the MT indicates that God spoke to Moses alone (v.44), the rendering of the LXX seems more accurate, which reads, "The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron"<sup>264</sup> because it matches the plural imperative of the verb **אמרו** that follows in verse 45.

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<sup>264</sup> *Septuagint*, the Greek version of the Old Testament. Bible Works 5.

V. 45 [10] *"Get you up<sup>265</sup> from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment." And they fell on their faces.*

The command is almost the same as in verse 21, "Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment." The verb "separate" is now replaced by "get up" to mark the difference between these two commands from Yahweh. The threat in both cases is to destroy the rebellious congregation immediately. Upon hearing this threat Moses and Aaron fall upon their faces. This is a common gesture of reverence for Moses and Aaron before Yahweh as they pray or ask for God's favor (16:4). Here we have Moses and Aaron in their office as mediators and intercessors on behalf of the people (cf. v.22). Although the congregation assaults them, Moses and Aaron know that they should not let the entire community perish. There is no leader without people to lead. They have done this several times during the journey, pleading with God in order to avert the wrath and spare the nation from destruction (11:2; 12:13; 14:13-19). In some cases Moses offers to be banished on behalf of the people (Ex. 32:32), even when they have overtly provoked God's wrath. Moses and Aaron decide to use the same intercessory approach in this scene because it has been successful so far. But, they have to learn that this case is unique and God has decided to deal with it differently. People are used to working with patterns and stereotypes, but God's dealings are always full of surprises. He does not wait upon Moses' intercession to carry out His punishment.

Vv. 46-49 [11-14] *So Moses said to Aaron, "Take a censer and put fire in it from the altar, put incense on it, and take it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them; for wrath has gone out from the Lord. The plague has begun." Then Aaron took it as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the assembly; and already the plague had begun among the people. So he put in the incense and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living; so the plague was stopped. Now those who died in the plague were fourteen thousand seven hundred, besides those who died in the Korah incident.*

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<sup>265</sup> The niph'al imperative, masc, plural, from the Hebrew root רָמָה BDB, 942. "Be exalted."



When Moses and Aaron pray to Yahweh in order to avert the destruction of the people, Moses understands that there is no need to continue interceding while the plague is already consuming the people. As soon as God's glory appeared on the tabernacle the plague went forth, before Moses and Aaron could utter their intercession. Since intercession was no longer an appropriate approach in this case, Moses resolves to take action in order to minimize the effect of the plague. It is not stated in the text how Moses knew that people in the camp were already struck by the plague and what measure should be taken to stop the progress of the epidemic. The text presents Moses acting from his own discernment as a man acquainted with God's way of doing things.

Moses' command in v.46 urges Aaron to take the censer and perform atonement in the camp. It is interesting to notice that in this scene commands and actions are short and their executions are quick. The charges against Moses are only four words, God's glory appears unexpectedly and the plague bursts quickly in the midst of the camp destroying many lives without warning. It seems that God decides to put an end to a series of revolts before it thwarts the whole enterprise of the liberation. One should understand that once the whole congregation turns against God's chosen leadership, the whole plan of liberation and the occupation of the Promised Land are put in jeopardy. There was a need for a quick intervention that would bring the heart of the community back to pursuing the journey.

The attention of the reader is drawn to Aaron's censer. Aaron is ordered to take the censer and make atonement (v.46). This is the second time Aaron is commanded to take his censer. The first time he was ordered to appear before God among other contenders so that God could decide who was entitled to hold the censer (16:17). When we remember that 250 men were killed in the preceding revolt, only because they touched the censer, then Moses' command to take the censer is designed to reinstate Aaron in his priestly office. The clear message of Moses' command is that Aaron can take the censer without undergoing God's punishment because he is the chosen one. The censer brings a curse when it is in the hands of other people but in the hand of the appointed priest it conveys blessings.

The wrath has gone out from God and is now consuming the people. To stop the disaster people should be cleansed in order to wipe away the sin that has brought the misfortune. It was the responsibility of the priests to make atonement in order to cleanse the people from all their sins and reconcile them with their God. The term "atonement" carries the idea of covering sin by making expiation as well as reconciliation. It is in this regard that Moses asks Aaron to perform the ritual. The end result of this process is the removal of guilt and appeasement of God's wrath.<sup>266</sup> In his comment about atonement Robert Paul writes,

We cannot ignore the "expiatory" element although equally we cannot ignore the fact that as the Hebrews understood their sacrificial system this "covering" for sin was initiated by God himself as a means of restoring personal relationships between his people and himself.<sup>267</sup>

In this passage the relationship is broken as God decides to destroy his people. The atonement is necessary to restore the broken relationship. Aaron acts according to what Moses has commanded. He puts fire in the censer and runs to the camp. He witnesses how the plague has already started ravaging the camp but he has the time to stand between the dead and the living (v.48). The plague is described as a fire burning a forest, moving from one end to another, and Moses the fireman stands in the middle before the whole camp is consumed. His intervention is efficient because it is said that the plague was stopped (v.48b). The people could see who really was the priest endowed with mediatorial and intercessory office in order to avert God's wrath.

Nevertheless, the use of the word כִּפָּר "atonement" in this passage is very significant for many reasons. Firstly, the blood of atonement that constitutes the central element of this ritual is absent from this scene (Lev. 17:11). It seems to be replaced by the incense. There is no other biblical reference where the shedding of the blood is replaced by offering incense in a ceremony of atonement. One could explain the change of the ritual by the

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<sup>266</sup> For more discussion on atonement see Richard E. Averbeck, "כִּפָּר" in *NIDOTTE* Vol.2, 689-710.

<sup>267</sup> Robert S. Paul, *The Atonement and the Sacraments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961), 28.

urgency of stopping the plague. Moses was compelled to find a quick way to make atonement without going through the whole procedure. The availability of censers, which were used by the 250 offered an opportunity to Moses to ask that one of them be used for this purpose.

Secondly, the uniqueness of this atonement is that, in Leviticus 16, Aaron is instructed to make atonement only once a year in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle. Complicated procedures were performed by Aaron on the Day of Atonement, including sin offerings for himself and for the entire congregation, as well as the slaughtering of animals. All these procedures are overlooked in this passage. Aaron in this case does not need to slaughter any animal or undergo the cleansing for himself and the people. The camp in the midst of dead bodies replaces the seat of mercy in the holy place, where atonement takes place. Every detail in this passage reveals that Aaron is performing a special and unique ritual, never to be repeated again.

Some scholars, such as John Hayes, have attempted to explain the absence of blood in this ceremony. Hayes argues that atonement by the blood was used to purge the contamination of the sanctuary rather than individuals. Since in this case Aaron has to remove people's sin and not to purify the sanctuary, the use of the blood was not necessary. He argues that,

The blood of the purification sacrifice is never applied to humans but only to parts of the sanctuary... the application of the blood must have purged the pollution that had attached itself to the sanctuary because of the wrongdoing. The sacrificial blood purged the pollution rather than removed sin.<sup>268</sup>

One may take seriously Hayes' argument for the absence of blood in Aaron's atonement but it does not justify the replacement of blood by incense. The question is why does Aaron only make atonement with incense here and does not repeat it in other cases where the Israelites sinned and were threatened with death?

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<sup>268</sup> John H. Hayes, "Atonement in the Book of Leviticus" *Interpretation* 52, no 1 (Jan. 1998), 5-15.

In my opinion, the narrator has purposely used incense offering to fit the circumstance of the moment. The reader may remember that the major contention of the first revolt was about who have the right to hold the censer. Korah claimed that the whole congregation is holy, each one of them, therefore Aaron should not hold the sole privilege of offering incense. But the death of the 250 leaders who formed the company of Korah shows that not everybody in Israel, except Aaron and his close family, is qualified to take the censer. In this incident the congregation has come back claiming that those who died were "people of Yahweh", meaning that they were approved to act in the name of God. To vindicate Aaron in the sight of the people as the authorized person to mediate between the Israelites and God, Moses orders him to take the same object that brought misfortune to others and handle it unharmed. People should understand that those who died were not "people of Yahweh" with the right of handling holy things.

V.48. It was an act of courage for Aaron to stand between the dead and the living in order to stop the plague. The nature of the plague is not explained, but one can imagine that it was a deadly disease because of its rapid expansion through the camp and the capacity of infecting a great number of people in a relatively short period. This will remind contemporary readers of dreadful diseases such as the flu in Asia and fever in some parts of Africa caused by viruses. In D.R.Congo, we have twice known an outbreak of fever caused by what is named "virus of Ebola", killing hundreds of people in a few days. Most important is the danger of being contaminated once one enters into contact with those infected. Medical staff that attend such patients run a great risk, chiefly when the cause is not yet diagnosed and before precautions of isolation are taken. By accepting to venture among the dead, Aaron is portrayed as the hero of this scene, enhancing his authority in the eyes of those who question his priesthood. The narrator underlines the efficiency of Aaron's action as he closes the verse by this statement: "so the plague was stopped."

V49. Although the plague is eradicated, the damage it causes is great if one has to take literally the number of dead people recorded in the narrative. The text reports that in a one-day incident in a short period as many as 14,700 people died. This is a huge number of people to be killed so quickly among the immigrants. One should realize that the total

population rescued from Egypt could not exceed a few million. It shows that the plague was of a supernatural character. There had often been death among the people of Israel during the journey, but nothing of this magnitude had ever been reported before. We can today compare it with what happened in the devastating effect of Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina or earthquake. But in this episode we deal with some kind of viral disease on a very limited scale, affecting a group of pilgrims. The speed of contamination was supernatural. Aaron's assignment becomes glorious in the narrative because his atonement has secured the survival of the people.

*V.50 Then Aaron returned to Moses at the door of the tabernacle of meeting, for the plague had stopped.*

The episode ends with a note of satisfaction for Aaron as he accomplishes his mission. He comes back to report to Moses, but also before Yahweh who dwells in the tabernacle. His office seems to be vindicated because he is the only one who can atone for the sins of the people and who has the right to hold the censer. The censer in the hands of other people brings death whereas in the hands of Aaron it conveys life. The question to be raised here is "Has the death in the congregation stopped the contest of the priesthood? The rest of the narrative shows that the matter was not entirely settled by the plague.

The striking feature of this episode is the silence that follows the end of the plague. V.50, which is the last verse of chapter 16 in the English version and seems to bring all human actors to a standstill. The plague had stopped but none of the various actors had expressed his/her feeling about the event. There are a number of issues that the reader would like to know in relation to the last disaster. The writer does not indicate what the reaction of the congregation was after Aaron's atonement. How did the people interpret the death of such a huge number of individuals? Were the people upset for having caused a disaster in their midst because of their revolt? Or, had the death of more people fuelled their rebellious attitude? Were they happy with Aaron and Moses for stopping the plague or did they consider them as responsible of the mass killing?



One would expect a word from Moses to comfort the survivors of the disaster or to give some directions for the way forward. This silence is a sign that the matter is not entirely solved at this point of the narrative. The rebellion was severely and violently suppressed but the root cause of the contestation was not dealt with. The silence may also reveal the tension that prevailed between the leaders—Moses and Aaron—and the congregation after a series of killing. The text includes the suspense by introducing the silence at this point in order to stir up the curiosity of the reader to what the end of the story will be. In order to settle the conflict, once for all, and bring into dialogue the leaders and the led, God had to intervene as will be discussed in the following section.

#### **6.5. Aaron's Budding Staff**

17:1-2 [Heb 17:16-18] *Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to the children of Israel, and get from them a staff from each father's house, all their leaders according to their fathers' houses -- twelve staffs. Write each man's name on his staff."*

After the silence observed in 16:50, which is the last verse of chapter 16 in the English version, chapter 17 opens with God breaking the silence. One probable reason for this intervention might be that the disastrous end of the three revolts had left people speechless. The death toll was so high that it seemed to paralyze all human efforts to solve the conflict. The Israelites had lost 250 princes, 14,700 members of the congregation and among the instigators of the revolt, Korah, Dathan and Abiram, with part of their households who were swallowed up alive into *sheol*. None among the human actors of the narrative was courageous enough to take the initiative of establishing communication between the contenders after such a horrific and deadly episode. God's address comes presumably on the same day, after Aaron had reported the end of the plague (16:50).

17:1. God instructs Moses to collect a staff from each tribe of Israel. There were twelve staffs according to the number of their tribes. Each one was to represent the head of the family. Scholars are divided upon the number of staffs. Is the staff of Aaron counted among the twelve or excluded from them? Those who consider the house of Joseph as

represented by Ephraim and Manasseh affirm that there were thirteen staffs.<sup>269</sup> Matthew Henry and others hold that there were twelve staffs in all because in many references about the twelve, Joseph is counted as one family.<sup>270</sup> This study is not interested in the debate concerning the number of staffs, since the writer has kept them anonymous in the text because they do not play any significant role in the interpretation of the story. What is important here is that each family participates in the 'test'. This is the first move towards unifying the entire congregation that had been divided over the killing.

God's instruction introduces a significant shift in this episode. Conflict between human beings is reduced to a test upon material things. Instead of continuing the killing of contenders God proposes that staffs should represent human actors in the conflict, which means de-personalizing the conflict. This proposal is risk-free for human lives. It is therefore evident that people unanimously accept to participate in leadership contest without risking their lives. The name of the tribe was written on the staff of each head of the house of their fathers. The illustration of a staff to represent a tribe is striking because in Hebrew the two words have the same root. The Hebrew word *מטה* means "staff, staff, branch, tribe."<sup>271</sup> This word is also used in Numbers (1:4, 16) in the sense of tribe. Each tribe is considered as a branch of the entire congregation of Israel. The idea is that a prince with a staff leads each tribe. We have discussed earlier (chap. 2) the role played by family ties in the exodus narrative, but also in relation to Moses' leadership. Aaron, Miriam, and the priests who are all descendents of one patriarch, the house of Levi, surround and support Moses in his leadership.

V.3 *"And you shall write Aaron's name on the staff of Levi. For there shall be one staff for the head of each father's house."*

The text reads that the name of Aaron represents the entire house of Levi (Gershon, Kohath and Merari). The author purposely discloses the name written on this staff in order to draw the attention of the reader to Aaron's position in Israel. There are also

<sup>269</sup> See G.J. Wenham, *Numbers*, 140 and G.B. Gray, *Numbers* 215.

<sup>270</sup> Matthew Henry, *Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, n.d.), 153.

<sup>271</sup> "מטה" BDB, 641

divergent views on why Aaron is used instead of Levi. James L Mayes thinks that, "The issue does not turn on Aaron's priority within the Levites, but on that of the Levites within Israel."<sup>272</sup> In my opinion Aaron's position is the key issue. Aaronic priesthood was questioned not only by Israel as a whole, but mainly from within, among the descendants of Levi. I consider this story as the continuation of Korah's revolt against the Aaronic priesthood. Since Korah and some of his allies were Levites, the problem is not the choice of the Levites to work in the sanctuary but the privilege of Aaron and his family as priests who have the right to perform rituals in the holy precincts of the tabernacle. This unique role of Aaron has caused the death of Korah and his 250 allies. However, people keep on challenging Moses and Aaron's authority. In this episode God wants to give unambiguous evidence of His choice in order to prevent further rebellion and its consequences.

*V.4 Then you shall place them in the tent of meeting before the Testimony, where I meet with you.*

Moses is ordered to lay all the staffs in the tent of meeting before the testimony. The word "testimony" is the short form of "the ark of testimony" used in 4:5 and 7:89. This ark, which contained the tablets of the Law of Moses, and its mercy seat, represents the presence of God. The place is known by all Israel to be holy, sacred and exempt from all kinds of fraud. The point is whatever might happen to the staffs, people would realize that it comes from the Lord.

*V.5 And it shall be that the staff of the man whom I choose will blossom; thus I will rid Myself of the complaints of the children of Israel, which they make against you.*

God discloses what is going to happen to the tribes' staffs. The staff of the man or the tribe that God chooses shall bud. The display of God's election through supernatural signs is designed to authenticate the source of authority of the chosen person or group of persons. The intention of this manifestation of power is to discourage those who do not have a divine mandate from taking upon themselves some special responsibility in the

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<sup>272</sup> James Mayes, "Leviticus, Numbers" in *Layman's Bible Commentaries* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 106.

community. The scene that follows is almost the repetition of what occurred earlier, when Korah and his people were told to offer incense before the Lord. The instruction was: "Tomorrow morning the Lord will show who is His and who is holy, and will cause him to come near to Him. That one whom He chooses He will cause to come near to Him" (16:5). What differs from the first scene is that Aaron is not going to appear with other contenders before the Lord with their censers, but only their staffs will be submitted to the test of budding overnight. The most significant difference between the appearance of the 250 princes with their censers at the tabernacle (16:5) and the twelve staffs here, is that no one will perish because of being unfit for the priesthood. God has decided not to continue shedding the blood of his people in their struggle for leadership. De-personalised staffs will indicate God's choice. This display of God's election should be considered as a sign that stands beyond forgery because it occurs at night and in a place where God's presence is permanent.

The narrator goes on to explain why such an outstanding sign was necessary: "thus I will make to cease from Me the complaints of the children of Israel, which they make against you" (17:5b). The constant murmuring of the people about God's elect leaders requires the use of unusual methodologies in order to stop the grumbling. God intends to achieve through the de-personalised test what Moses and Aaron did not accomplish through performing miracles and striking people to death.

*Vv.6-7 Moses spoke to the Israelites; and all their leaders gave him staffs, one for each leader, according to their ancestral houses, twelve staffs; and the staff of Aaron was among theirs. And Moses placed the staffs before the LORD in the tabernacle of witness.*

The people seem to accept joyfully the test upon material things, and each head of the tribe hands to Moses their staff without hesitation. This is a sign that God's strategy was not only to de-personalise the conflict but also to find a means of unifying the congregation divided over the killing of so many people. They are brought together around this test in which they are all equal competitors with Aaron and his family. It may be that some of the princes hoped to be chosen or at least to check whether Aaron would maintain his seat through this unusual testing. As the staffs were taken into the sanctuary

to spend the night before Yahweh, the entire congregation was eager to know the result on the morrow. "And Moses placed the staffs before the Lord in the tabernacle of witness" (v.7). We said earlier that the choice of the place where the staffs were laid was meant to avoid any suspicion of fraud. The seat of the Lord in the tabernacle was located in the inner holiest place. It was therefore a secure location for all the parties. No one could play some trick in this place since nobody, except the high priest on special occasions, was allowed to enter into the Holiest place.

*Vv.8-9 Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, the staff of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds. Then Moses brought out all the staffs from before the Lord to all the children of Israel; and they looked, and each man took his staff.*

To reveal the result of the test the narrator uses the common marker וַיָּבֵי "it came to pass", often found in biblical narratives to describe something that takes place and also to bind sentences within a discourse.<sup>273</sup> This introduction draws the attention of the reader to the fact that something important took place during the night. Another marker found in the text is the demonstrative particle הִנֵּה "behold" which is used here to assert the miracle.<sup>274</sup> It also functions, narratively, to draw the reader into the narrative. The text reads: "On the next day when Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, the staff of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and bore ripe almonds" (v.8). Nobody could deny the supernatural character of the ripe almonds that a dry staff bore overnight. A dry staff is brought to life and passes from budding, blossoming to even bearing fruits. It is like going through a full circle of maturation at once. Could what happens to the staff be a symbol of maturity for Aaron and the house of his father to take upon them leadership positions among the people? It will be hard to defend this argument because Aaron and all the priests owe their leadership to God's election and not to some outstanding capacities. It is all grace; the

<sup>273</sup> Michael A. Grisanti, "חֵי" *NIDOTTE*, vol.1, 1022—1026.

<sup>274</sup> "חֵי" BDB, 244. "The particle introduces clauses involving prediction. With reference to past or present, it points generally to some truth either newly asserted, or newly recognized."



budding staff as well as the Aaronic priesthood is not a human achievement. They depend totally on God who decides in His sovereignty who to elevate.

In v.9, Moses takes all the staffs out of the sanctuary so that each person present may testify to God's election. Names written on each staff helped each head of the tribe identify his staff. Apart from what happened to Aaron's staff, other staffs remained unchanged; therefore every prince collected the staff of his tribe. Moses has thus succeeded in showing the people that the choice of Aaron to priesthood does not come from him but from God. Moreover, the exclusivity of Aaron and his family is demonstrated by the fact that only his staff buds in the midst of all others. Those who saw the sign should have no objection, but should acknowledge that Aaron alone qualifies to draw near God and represent the people. Some scholars, like Wenham, have stretched their interpretation by establishing a symbolism between the almond fruits and the priesthood.<sup>275</sup> Despite significant insights shed by this approach, one should acknowledge that allegory, symbols and types are tools to be used with great caution in the interpretation of the Bible, lest the meaning of the text is obliterated.<sup>276</sup>

v.10. *The Lord said to Moses, "Put back Aaron's staff in front of the Testimony, to be kept as a sign to the rebellious. This will put an end to their grumbling against me, so that they will not die.*

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<sup>275</sup> G.J. Wenham, *Numbers*, 140. He argues that, Almond blooms early with white blossom and its fruits were highly prized (Gen. 43:11). White in scripture symbolizes purity, holiness and God himself (e.g. Is. 1:18; Dn. 7:9; Rev. 20:11). Jeremiah associates the almond (saqed) with watching (saqad) (Jer. 1:11-12). All these qualities were personified by Aaron and the tribe of Levi. A close reading of the narrative shows that there was more of God's mercy than personal qualities in Aaron to qualify him over other Israelites.

<sup>276</sup> Ronald S. Wallace, *On the Interpretation and Use of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: WB. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999). In his warning against the abuse of the use of allegory, Wallace observes,

Whenever allegorizing becomes a method of interpretation and is given any priority in the basic work of interpreting a passage, it nearly always becomes the means by which an irresponsible expositor with no basic training or skill can impose a self-chosen meaning on a text which may have a literal sense far different from that which is finally derived from it, 104.

God instructs Moses to keep the memorial of this event by putting back the budding staff in the ark of testimony.<sup>277</sup> It may be hard to assume that the staff was kept perpetually green, but the sign of its blossoming was to last as long as it was necessary in order to prevent further grumbling. To keep the staff fresh with its buds, blossoms and fruit would require the continuation of the same divine miracle that produced them. The staff would be a standing sign to be displayed in all instances when Aaron's priesthood is questioned.

The narrator explains that this sign is designed to convince and silence any opposition to the institution of priesthood and avert death. Since the ark of Yahweh was a sacred object that Israel had to preserve, its contents would also serve to teach the future generation about God's provision and judgment in the wilderness.<sup>278</sup> However, the ark and its contents did not survive the exile. Even before the exile the ark was often overlooked in the time of apostasy. But as long as the people did hold the ark as the central object of their worship, Aaron's staff would be remembered, preventing any contest about the priesthood. V.11 explains how God's instruction was carried out. It says that Moses did exactly what God commanded him. In this verse the command was to keep the budding staff of Aaron as a memorial.

*Vv.12-13 Then the children of Israel spoke to Moses, saying, "Behold we die, we are perishing, we are all perishing! Whoever even comes near the tabernacle of the Lord must die. Shall we all completely die?"*

This passage stands as the conclusion to the whole series of rebellions. The cry of the crowd shows that, at least now, the Israelites have realized the danger of their protest. The death has taken not only those in the leadership struggle but also the 'ordinary people.' People know that they are all vulnerable and Yahweh will not spare them if they keep on challenging His appointed leaders. They understand that the cause of the death of so many people lies in the control of the tabernacle, the privilege given only to priests.

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<sup>277</sup> It is said that the ark contained the tablets of the Law, a pot of manna and Aaron's rod that had blossomed (cf. Heb. 9:4).

<sup>278</sup> For more insight about the centrality of the ark in the cultus of Israel, see Marten H. Woudstra, *The Ark of the Covenant From Conquest to Kingship* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1965).

The Hebrew root קרב "approach, draw near" is used, in a cultic context, with reference to the service in the tabernacle.<sup>279</sup> The budding of Aaron's staff seems to achieve what all the violent repression did not. If one takes the outcry of the people in this passage as a sign of repentance, then the people blame themselves for trying to go in a wrong direction. They should keep their distance from the tabernacle and the priesthood in order to live in peace. The 14,700 are but a warning sign presaging that if they do not stop their rebellion against the priesthood they will perish completely, all of them.

It is not easy to understand why the narrator waited until the scene of the budding staff to describe the worry and desolation felt by the people. The budding staff alone cannot instill such a great fear. The reader should consider vv.12-13 as the result of all the horrible punishments of Yahweh contained in the previous scenes. Nevertheless, it is not fair to disregard the impact of the de-personalised test on the morale of Israel after a series of violence and killing. It was important that the entire congregation agreed on the position of Aaron within the community in a peaceful process.

Finally, the obstinacy of the people seems to fall down as they beg Moses to consider their fate. The intention of drawing Moses' attention to their imminent destruction is likely a request for his intercession. The people have paid a huge price for their rebellion and they cannot take any more. The budding staff has joined the bronze altar-covering taken from the burnt censers of the 250 leaders as a reminder to the people. These objects are kept so that people can remember how rebellious they have been and the severe punishment they underwent because of their protest. This practice resembles the pedagogy of our childhood when primary school teachers would keep a whip in a place where pupils could see it as a reminder that any wrongdoing or indiscipline would be sanctioned by whipping. The same kind of discipline by terror is applied here to Israel in order to avert further rebellion. People now seek Moses' intercession, lest they all perish. The battle is won because from henceforward the opponents to priesthood disarm. This seems to be the last revolt against Moses and the priesthood, recorded in the Pentateuch during the time of Moses and Aaron.

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<sup>279</sup> Bill T. Arnold, "קרב" *NIDOTTE*. Vol.3, 976-978.

The circumstances of protest in the text lead to describing the relationship between God and his people as grounded on the fear of punishment. It portrays God as a hard master whose intention is to harm His people. However, the reader should not fixate on God's image given in this episode. This portrayal does not reflect the full image of Yahweh's relationship with His people over the whole history of Israel. The reader of the Scriptures should acknowledge that Israel owes its existence to God's unfailing love (*Hesed*). They have been chosen not because they deserved it more than any other nation, but only by grace. The repression of mass action in this episode should be considered as a casual solution to preserve God's plan from a people whose commitment to God's liberation is shaking. The threat becomes serious when the revolt of a few jealous leaders in thirst of positions becomes contagious to the entire community. It is obvious that if the spirit of rebellion among the people were not quenched quickly, the whole plan of establishing the people on the Promised Land would crumble. The measure was made easier because of the inconsistency of the mob's action. They may easily change their mood according to circumstances and swing from protestation to total adherence.

The rhetorical question "shall we all completely die?"(v.13b), concludes the episode. The disheartened crowd gives up its rebellion, not through loving obedience but in fearful submission. They become conscious that God would not let them challenge the priesthood and Moses; therefore it is not wise to persist in what is consuming many lives. Moses and Aaron can continue leading the people. The whole story of the three revolts ends up with the vindication of Aaron's priesthood. The revolt of Dathan and Abiram against the political leadership of Moses seems to be overlooked by the writer in his conclusion. As stated earlier in this study, the introduction of the covenant and the tabernacle at Sinai shifts the emphasis of the exodus narrative from political liberation to the formation of a people of Yahweh's worshippers. The rest of the pentateuchal narrative underscores that the observance of the covenant and obedience to God's ordinances are the key to the success in the land and that rebellion would result in terrible consequences. Therefore, the vindication of the priesthood and its offices in this episode is in tune with the emphasis put on the religious life of Israel. This is true during the

wilderness journey, more so when they settle in the Promised Land. Dennis Cole observes that,

The tragedy of Israel's history was that she failed to follow faithfully these commands from the Lord, and her demise at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians was largely due to her tendency toward idolatry.<sup>280</sup>

The above statement conveys the overall understanding of Israel's history. The organization of the nation was grounded on her faith in God and on the political and social management that He defends. Failing to obey God would lead to the collapse of her national structure.

The rhetorical question at the end of this chapter, "Whoever even comes near the tabernacle of the LORD must die. Shall we all completely die?" finds its answer in the following chapter (chap. 18). In this unit of the law Yahweh underscores the distinction between priests and the Levites and their responsibility as guardians of the tabernacle. Chapter 18 also enhances the position of the priests in Israel by reminding the people of their duty to provide resources and income to the tribe of Levi through their tithes, firstlings and sacrificial offerings. It constitutes the conclusion of the vindication of the priesthood given by the suppression of revolts and the budding staff in chapter 17. To remain within the framework of this study, we will not analyze chapter 18, but it is briefly presented here to highlight the literary context of the passage of our inquiry (Num.16-17).

The striking feature of the people's attitude in this passage is the flimsiness of their support towards the leadership. When Korah and his company appeared before Moses earlier in this text the entire congregation seems to be with him. "Thus Korah gathered all the congregation against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting" (16:19a). But when Moses asked them to move away from the tents of the rebels, the crowd decided to leave

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<sup>280</sup> R. Dennis Cole, "The Challenge of Faith's Final Step: Israel's Journey Toward Victory in Numbers 33" in David M. Howard Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti (eds). *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* (Leicester: Apollos, 2003), 357 [340-359].



the contenders to die alone. It is even reported that they fled, fearing to be swallowed up by the earth (16:34). The day after, the same crowd comes back to express their solidarity with the dead leaders by accusing Moses and Aaron of having slain God's people. The text ends with a plea from the congregation, begging Moses to pray for them so that they may not perish. They show that in all their movement people are not committed to a cause that they are ready to defend no matter what. They react to circumstances and once they are threatened they pull back. Goodwin and Jasper observe that,

A movement that constantly needs to replace recruits who have dropped out is not likely to be very effective. And, of course, if too many people drop out and cannot be replaced, then the movement will decline or disappear altogether.<sup>281</sup>

The above statement finds its application in this narrative as recruits to challenge Moses' leadership change from one episode to another. The movement intended to bring change in leadership, as initiated by Korah and others, could not succeed because people who supported them in the first place were not committed to their cause. They easily dropped out whenever their life was in danger. This lack of commitment can be explained by considering other actors. It is important to discuss the role played by the two main characters of the scene, God and Moses, in order to understand why revolts were often followed by people's disengagement.

### **6.6. Moses**

In this scene the narrator portrays Moses as the mediator between Yahweh and His people. Moses is totally devoted to the welfare of his people. Although the congregation accuses him of killing men of God, he is the one to intervene so that God's wrath might be averted. On this occasion he has chosen not to react to the charges laid against him; his concern is how to spare the people from destruction. One could argue that God intervened so swiftly, threatening to wipe out the entire community, that there was no need for Moses to spend more time in making his defense. Yahweh decided to vindicate him even before he could plead his innocence. However, if one remembers how Moses

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<sup>281</sup> J. Goodwin and J.M. Jasper, *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts*, 91.

lost his composure when Dathan and Abiram challenged his leadership, the reason for his silence in this case might have another explanation.

To win the people back Moses had to adopt a reconciling attitude towards the people. Even those who accused him could realize that Moses is indeed compassionate to their fate. This attitude resulted in winning back the confidence of the people, who realized that if they did not comply with Moses, God's wrath would destroy them. The point is that Moses is such a complex figure that one cannot predict his reaction all the time. Each circumstance determines the reaction of the characters involved in the scene.

One characteristic of Moses' leadership is that he was torn between accomplishing his mission of leading Israel into Canaan and exercising his authority in quenching rebellions. This internal tension within him is captured by how he is differently portrayed from one scene to another. The fact that Moses would not let the exodus adventure fail stands as a motivating factor in all his reactions. The narrator depicts Moses as a person who condones the destruction of individuals who challenge his leadership or reject the institutions he put in place, such as the priesthood and the law. He is impatient with rivals who undermine his authority and discourage people from pursuing the journey to the Promised Land. With regard to the people, Moses is positively portrayed as an intercessor and responsible leader. He is ready to sacrifice his own life when the whole congregation is threatened with extinction. In many instances Yahweh threatened to wipe out the entire community, but Moses would intercede even to the point of asking to be annihilated himself in order to save others (Ex. 32:32). In his comment on Moses' intercession and Israel's unbelief von Rad argues,

Moses prays for the people; and God's answer to the prayer of Moses is most remarkable, the unbelief of this whole generation is immeasurably deep; yet even this cannot prevent the fulfillment of God's purposes of salvation. The failure of this generation cannot frustrate God's plan at some future date to reveal His salvation to the whole world.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Moses* (London: World Christian Books, 1961), 69.

According to von Rad, Moses' intercession is a confirmation that God's plan cannot be frustrated by people's unbelief. Salvation initiated in the land of Egypt should be brought to its completion in the Promised Land, no matter what. People have to learn that as far as this enterprise is in the hands of Yahweh, they cannot go without His chosen leaders. None of them will be allowed to liaise between God and the people without God's approval, lest he dies. The last sentence of this episode, "Shall we all completely die?" (17:13b), sounds like a sign of surrendering. If anyone who provokes Moses and Aaron is punished or anyone who wants to become priest is killed, why then should we be obstinate until we all perish? The logical resolution of this inquiry would be to consecrate God's elect leaders—let Moses and Aaron lead us.

#### **6.7. God**

In the revolt of the congregation God is portrayed as the ultimate judge of Israel. When the people and their leaders are in conflict, they seek God's arbitration. We saw that in the revolt of the Reubenites, Moses took the lead even to the point of proposing to God what sentence should be applied to the contenders, but in this episode God acts in sovereignty without consulting Moses and Aaron. God's intervention can be understood in two ways. Firstly, Moses and Aaron stand powerless as they are surrounded by a mob in anger. God knows that if a quick intervention were not provided, the situation would lead into violence and even the death of Moses and Aaron. God comes in swiftly to stop the movement before it becomes uncontrollable. Secondly, we have seen that one of the recurrent features in the exodus narrative is the identification of God with the leadership He puts in place. God takes any revolt or grumbling against Moses and Aaron as directed against Himself. For that reason, God decides to deal personally with the matter and rid Himself of the persistent rebellion of the people.

The episode also reveals that God's punishment is not without love. Even though His people deserved their punishment because of their increasing rebellions, He answers Aaron's atonement by stopping the plague. Although many people had already died in this event, the entire community could be wiped out if God did not show His mercy. God

is more concerned with keeping His promise of giving a land to Israel. The failure to carry out this campaign does not nullify the covenant of the ancestors. If the current generation disqualify themselves from entering Canaan, God would raise a new generation to inherit the Promised Land. Therefore, the punishment is not a sign of God's cruelty towards His people but a loving discipline of a father. The memorials of these rebellions (bronze plate and budding staff) are kept in the tabernacle so that the new generation may avoid falling into the same mistakes as their fathers. The narrative constantly draws our attention to the dilemma existing within the characters to find the balance between, love and judgment, tolerance and punishment. In many instances characters in this narrative have acted at the intersection of this duality.

#### **6.8 Summary of the revolts in Numbers 16-17**

In order to understand the dynamic of the three revolts taken together as a continuous movement of protest initiated by Korah and then spreading to the rest of the congregation, the chart below gives a synoptic view of events taken together. The reader may draw similarities and differences between different revolts.

	<b>Korah and his company</b>	<b>Reubenites</b>	<b>Congregation</b>
Introduction	Num. 16:1-3	Num. 16:1-3	Num. 16:1-3
Instigators	Korah and 250 leaders	Dathan, Abiram (+ Korah)	The whole congregation
Against whom	Moses and Aaron	Moses	Moses and Aaron
About what (Motive)	Aaron's exclusive priesthood (16:3, 10)	Moses' leadership of resettlement (	Killing Yahweh's people
Subject matter of the revolt	<p>-Moses and Aaron have gone beyond their power.</p> <p>-Everyone in Israel is holy, therefore has the right to act as a priest.</p> <p>-Moses and Aaron usurp power over the people.</p> <p>(16:3)</p>	<p>-Moses has wrongly removed people from Egypt, a land flowing with milk and honey.</p> <p>-Moses intended to kill the people in the wilderness.</p> <p>-Moses is incapable of bringing the people up to the Promised Land.</p> <p>-Moses usurps power over the people.</p> <p>-Moses is blinding the people by promises he cannot fulfill.</p> <p>(16:13-14)</p>	<p>-Moses and Aaron have killed people's leaders who challenged their leadership.</p> <p>(16:41 [Heb. 17:6])</p>
Moses' reaction to the challenge	<p>-Moses falls on his face (16:4)</p> <p>-He proposes the test of burning incense before the Lord to solve the matter (16:5-7)</p> <p>-Moses summons Korah and his company to the tent for trial (16:16-17)</p>	<p>-Moses summons Dathan and Abiram (16:12)</p> <p>-He becomes very angry upon the contenders' refusal (16:15).</p> <p>-He asks God not to reject his opponents' offering (16:15).</p> <p>-Moses and the elders go to the tent of Dathan and Abiram (16:25)</p>	<p>-Moses commands Aaron to make atonement by burning incense in order to stop the plague (16:46 [Heb. 17:11]).</p>



	<b>Korah and his company</b>	<b>Reubenites</b>	<b>Congregation</b>
Moses' reaction (continued)		<p>-Moses separates the rest of the congregation from his opponents (16:26).</p> <p>-Moses sentences the contenders to supernatural death (16:28-30).</p>	
Yahweh's reaction	-Yahweh asks Moses and Aaron to go away from the people that He may destroy the entire community (16:20-21)	-Yahweh requires that people be warned to move away from the tents of Dathan, Abiram and Korah (16:23).	-Yahweh asks Moses to go away from the people that He may destroy the entire community (16:44-45 [Heb. 17:9-10]).
Response of Moses	Moses and Aaron fall on their faces (16:22).	Moses tells people to move away from the tents of wicked men and forbids them to touch anything belonging to them (16:26)	Moses and Aaron fall on their faces (16:45 [Heb. 17:10])
Punishment	Fire from the Lord consumes the 250 leaders [+ Korah?] (16:35).	Earth opens up and swallows the households of Dathan, Abiram [and Korah?] and all their belongings (16:32-33).	The plague breaks out in the camp and kills 14,700 people (16:49 [Heb. 17:14]).
Reminding signs for further rebellion	<p>-Eleazer (Aaron's son) collects the 250 fire pans and hammers them into a bronze sheet to cover the altar to be kept as a permanent warning sign (16:39-40 [Heb. 17:4-5]).</p>		<p>-God proposes an additional test of budding the staff of the chosen tribe to priesthood (17:1-5 [Heb. 17:16-20]).</p> <p>-The budding staff of Aaron (for Levi) is kept in the Ark of covenant as a reminder to future generations (17:10 [Heb. 17:25]).</p>

## 6.9. Comments

The above table summarizes the rebellion stories as reported in Numbers 16 and 17. It brings out some features that allow comparing and contrasting the three movements. The narrator has chosen to knit the various units in to a single complicated story because they share a number of similarities. First, the introduction in vv.1-3 discloses the identities of the rebels and the leaders (Moses and Aaron) against whom they rebel. Second, the text seems to indicate a progression in the development of the rebellion. Starting with Korah, as the chief instigator, the movement spreads to the Levites, the Reubenites (Dathan and Abiram), then the 250 leaders from the different tribes of Israel, and finally it involves the entire congregation. Third, the narrator adopts the same structure in presenting these rebellions. Each unit presents the instigators of the rebellion, their motives and grievances, and closes with the response to the revolt. These three elements constitute the unity of the text, in spite of the breakdown of sequences in the record of each separate unit. After analyzing separately each one of the three strands of the rebellion, it is important to reflect on the overall picture of the dynamic of rebellion and the role played by both the challengers and those challenged, in order to grasp a wider understanding of this passage as a whole. This study has paid much attention to God and Moses, as the main characters in the narrative, but at this point it is important also to consider the contenders and their charges.

### 6.9.1. Korah

Korah seems to be the brain behind the entire movement of rebellion. The tendency to consider the whole story as 'the revolt of Korah' is justified by the prominent role he played in the protestation. Korah's name is mentioned first on the list of the conspirators of a series of revolts in this episode (16:1). He stands as the spokesman of the Levites (16:8) and the head of the 250 leaders (16:5-6). Korah succeeds in gathering the entire congregation at the gate of the tabernacle to support and witness the trial of the 250 leaders (16:19). He is an associate of the Reubenites and offers them support when they face Moses and the council of the elders (16:27). We have shown the ambiguity in the text about the fate of Korah. Although he is the head of the 250 leaders who offered incense, the narrator does not include his name among those who are burnt by the fire

coming from the Lord (35). On the other hand, as the ally of the Reubenites, he stands with them as they undergo punishment, but while Dathan and Abiram are swallowed up with their households and belongings, Korah's family seems to be spared as stated clearly in 26:10.

Korah complains about the exclusive spiritual hierarchy given to Aaron and his close family. He claims that the entire congregation is holy, therefore anyone of them can be considered as a priest (16:3, 8-10). Korah seems to be so convinced of his thesis that he urges the 250 leaders to accept the test of performing the priestly exercise of offering incense. Unfortunately, the test has deadly consequences in which all the contenders perish.

The reader should be cautious not to fall into a one-sided judgment of Korah's action. In this study we have shown how the Mishnah considers Korah and his company as an unholy alliance and how the name of Korah stands for any rebellious and heretic movement in rabbinic writings. "What controversy was not in the name of heaven [for righteousness end]? The controversy of Korah and all his company" [Ethics of the Fathers 5:20].<sup>283</sup> However, Korah raises a valid point even though the way he carries out his protest leads to the calamity. This controversy is brought forth to question the appointment of Aaron and his sons. Has Moses used his spiritual position to promote his biological brother Aaron above other members of the Levites or is he really implementing God's command? Korah's legitimate preoccupation may be shared by all those who suffer some injustice from sacral power in the Church as well as under monarchy. The question here is, should sacred autocracy go unchallenged because it is supposed to have a divine origin? Or should a charismatic and sacred ruler not be held accountable for his/her actions? In the same article cited above a pertinent question of reflection is raised: "Is there 'a voice of Korah' within each person?" The article presumes a 'yes' answer because it claims that it is impossible to perform an act of pure giving, without any intention of receiving something in return, or having a benevolent

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<sup>283</sup> Quoted in Shabbat Table Talk, "Parashat Korach—Erev Shabbat, 18 June 2004"  
[http://www.batkol.info/Parashot\\_Ar...](http://www.batkol.info/Parashot_Ar...) on 2005/05/27

mindset without it being mingled with personal concerns.<sup>284</sup> The voice of Korah is common to any human being but not everybody is willing to channel these concerns into a movement of protest.

Although Korah's objection is framed in a way that attracts full support from other tribes, his motivation seems to be for personal gain. One would think that Korah would fight for the abolition of the priesthood in order to validate his thesis that the entire community is indeed holy, or that he would democratize the autocratic leadership of Moses and Aaron and propose a wider distribution of power. Instead he wants to be involved among those who have the right to offer incense. He seeks his elevation from being a Levite to a higher position as priest. By using a sensitive matter, the holiness of Israel as God's chosen people (Ex. 19:6; 29:45; Num 15:40), Korah appeals to national pride in order to achieve his selfish ambition. Korah does not want to abolish the hierarchy, of which he is already a member. As a Levite and Kohatite, his group has the charge of serving in the tabernacle and carrying the most sacred objects of the tabernacle (4:1-20). In his article "Penalty For Sin" Staff Benson describes Korah's clan as follows,

They ranked second to the priests in Israelite society; they camped next to the tabernacle (God's dwelling place), and they coordinated the dismantling, carrying and erection of the tabernacle (see 16:8-11).<sup>285</sup>

This description shows that Korah is very much involved in the spiritual leadership of the Israelites at a high rank. He is more concerned about Aaron and his sons being at the top of this spiritual ladder. It is probable that the argument of opening the priesthood to the public is a tactic to help Korah occupy the prestigious seat of a priest. If this analysis is accurate then one can understand why Korah's rebellion was odious in the sight of Yahweh, to the point of attracting the destruction of all his allies.

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<sup>284</sup> "Parashat Korach—Erev Shabbat, 18 June 2004" [http://www.batkol.info/Parashot\\_Ar](http://www.batkol.info/Parashot_Ar) retrieved on 2005/05/27

<sup>285</sup> Rod Benson, "Penalty For Sin" in <http://www.jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/2869> retrieved on 2005/05/27.

Today some politicians, board members and clergy people use valid and reasonable arguments that appeal to the honor and self-esteem of the community in order to attract their support, but in fact the ultimate motivation is self-ambition. The problem of leadership hegemony emerges today and divides Churches, boards of many organizations and national politics. The situation in Congo can be used as a good illustration of this reality. The country has suffered five years of civil war and rebellion since the end of the Mobutu dictatorship. Many factions of rebels were fighting, each one pretending to being able to improve conditions of the population. When an agreement to have President Joseph Kabila share power with four vice-presidents, one from each of the main rebel groups, was signed in Sun City (South Africa) on 2 April 2003 the war in Congo stopped.<sup>286</sup> The condition of the population has not yet improved but the chief rebels have enjoyed sharing power and wealth during this long period of transition (2003-2006). Now that Joseph Kabila is democratically elected president, uncertainties remain as to what will be the reaction of those former chiefs of rebellion when they are no longer part of the government.

#### 6.9.2. Dathan and Abiram

These two are the Reubenites who associate with Korah to lead the movement of rebellion. As shown in this study, their grievance is political rather than religious. They wonder how Moses and Aaron, who failed to bring Israel into the Promised Land, should continue to rule over them. Their leadership has caused the people to die in the desert by depriving them of benefits they had in Egypt, which they depict as "a land flowing with milk and honey" (16:12-14).

Once again we have here valid arguments coming from the opposition. Moses and Aaron made promises to bring the people into a land of prosperity, but not everybody would live to see the fulfillment because the entire generation aged 20 and above is condemned to die in the wilderness (14:29-30). The point here is who is to blame. According to the Reubenites, Moses and Aaron should take the responsibility of the failure and maybe step

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<sup>286</sup> "Congo Civil War" in <http://www.globalsecurity/world/war/congo.htm> retrieved on 24 December 2005.



down from leadership. According to Moses, the people should blame their own obstinacy in disobeying God's command. Thus they are responsible for their fate in the wilderness. He claims his innocence in the whole matter (16:15).

Dathan and Abiram fail to make a pragmatic proposal of what kind of change should be put in place. They raise important issues that make their claim reasonable, but it is not complete until the claim is backed up by concrete solutions. If Moses and Aaron deceived people by their unfulfilled promises, are Dathan and Abiram able to change the situation and make things go differently? Failing to present an alternative that might defend the cause of the community against what they call Moses' autocracy could be considered as a cover in the pursuit of personal gain just like Korah and his company did. First, they seem more interested in the benefits they had in Egypt than in the redemption from slavery (16:13). Second, they claim an inheritance of fields and vineyards for themselves (16:14a). Third, when Moses offers to meet them, they refuse to see him (16:14b). They seem bold in challenging Moses' leadership, but in fact they avoid engaging in a discussion with him. They miss the opportunity to confront Moses with solid arguments and win the approval of the people. This attitude brings more confusion to people who might want to witness the debate and decide on whether or not Moses is doing right things. It is therefore not surprising that the people decide to move away from their tents as they face alone the consequences of their rebellion (16:34).

The form of protest portrayed by Dathan and Abiram is common today. Part of the exercise of democracy is to have an opposition which keeps an eye on the management of the ruling party. The media as well as political analysts know the weakness of each government. In Churches and corporations there are people who specialize in denouncing the wrongdoings of the leadership and bring them to the knowledge of the community. They move masses who are ready to riot because of these revelations. In many cases what they reveal is true information that the community on lower levels cannot access. People are now aware of what is wrong in the management of our nations, organizations and Churches, but this information does not help us move ahead. This negativity alone does not solve problems; we need practical solutions and ways of implementing them in order to build strong organizations and nations. What is deplorable is that instead of confronting

the rulers, many denouncers shrink back and refuse to engage in discussions with managers and ministers. The danger of this cowardly opposition is that it brings consequences to those involved in the movement and strengthens beyond measure the position of the leadership. The text shows that the failure of the movement led by Korah, Dathan and Abiram further strengthened the position of Moses and the high priesthood of Aaron (Num. 17-18).

### 6.9.3. The Congregation

In this group we include also the 250 leaders who accompanied Korah. This group is characterized by not having a proper agenda in the rebellion. First, the 250 leaders are just mentioned as Korah's followers. We have shown that they were not all Levites. The text describes them as "Princes of the congregation and men of renown" (16:2). These important members of the assembly seem to be embarked on a Levite struggle for the control of incense offering. They are attracted by Korah's idea of democratizing the priesthood and consecrating the equality of all the people (16:3). Heads of households ruled Israel as a patriarchal society; hence these 250 leaders would think of becoming priests in the community with all the privilege of closeness with Yahweh. They agreed to submit to the deadly exercise that had in the past killed two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1-2). They become even more marginalized when other members of the Council of Elders side with Moses against the rebels (16:25). It is unfortunate that Korah, the instigator, was not with them when they burnt in the fire. He might have left them and joined his other allies, Dathan and Abiram (16:35). Judgment fell upon the 250 but they might have been caught in the trap of someone else who wanted to promote his own case.

Second, the crowd is often naïve and receptive, and very easily influenced by all ideologies. In this episode the behavior of the congregation is characterized by their instability. When Korah and his company appear at the gate of the tabernacle to challenge Moses' authority, the congregation stands on their side (16:19). But as things turn against Moses' opponents and they are threatened with death, the entire congregation flees for their lives and lets their leaders face punishment alone (16:27). Even when they protest

because of the death of so many leaders, Korah, Dathan, Abiram and their households, and the 250 princes, there seems to be no coherent action, the reason being that they do not have somebody to head the movement. When the plague erupts in the camp, people beg Moses to intercede for them so that they might not all perish (17:12-13 Eng). The situation of the people in this episode can be compared to what Charles Kurzman describes in his article,

Some groups are eager and sufficiently organized to protest, yet are fearful that they will be ignored or even repressed if they do. These groups may not engage in protest accordingly until (1) they have at least some access to authorities, or they see signs that (2) repression is declining, (3) elites are divided, or (4) elites or other influential groups are willing to support them.<sup>287</sup>

All the elements of this statement are present in our text. The congregation in this episode witnesses violent repression. It has no access to authority and runs the risk of being ignored in the sharing of power. The two parties of contenders have their own views in pulling the congregation onto their side. Moses knows that the success of the exodus depends on walking together with the community. The whole enterprise of the exodus aims to bring these people into the Promised Land. Moses' opponents also strive to turn the community against Moses' leadership in order to implement their plot. The outcome is that the congregation stands in the middle of this tension of leadership and is tossed from one side to another. It is therefore predictable that they would not engage fully in protest.

In summary, the subalterns and 'ordinary people' are often drawn into revolts to advance the cause of top leaders who pursue their own agenda. On the one hand, leaders are aware that they can easily manipulate the mob because in many cases they do not take time to reflect on their actions. They are moved by appealing ideologies and become fanatics to the point of enduring sacrifices. On the other hand, one should be cautious about leaning too much upon the fragile loyalty of the mob. Their engagement as well as

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<sup>287</sup> Charles Kurzman, "The Iranian Revolution" in Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper (eds), *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 38-48.

disengagement is sometimes a matter of circumstances. When things change, the mob is quick to drop the cause they defend. Today in national politics and also within Church life, both the ruling party and the opposition use the flexibility of the community to win their sympathy. Unless one seeks to establish a dictatorship, all rulers understand the significance of winning the allegiance of the community. There is no power without people behind to support it. The analysis of this text has shown that the same power dynamic is active in Moses' struggles for leadership.

#### 6.9.4. Response to Rebellions

This study has demonstrated that the different rebellions in this episode are directed towards established leadership. The response to the rebellion depends on Moses' interpretation of the facts. When Korah and his company revolt against the priesthood, Moses dismisses Aaron as the target of the movement. "Who is Aaron that you grumble against him?" (16:9). Since Moses claims that he appointed Aaron according to God's command, it is legitimate that Aaron be taken out of this matter. Moses and Yahweh are accountable for the priesthood. To open up the priesthood to the public, as required by the contenders, was a threat to the office. One could hardly imagine Israel being deprived of the spiritual component of its life as all activities centered on the presence of the tabernacle in the middle of the camp. Moses refers the matter to God as he repeats twice, "The Lord will show who is His and who is holy" (16:5, 7). He claims that the intention of his contenders is presumptuous in daring to challenge an institution such as the priesthood: "You have gone too far you sons of Levi" (16:7). There was a choice to be made between cutting off the contenders and abolishing the priesthood. The end result is that Korah and his company were cut off.

In the case of Dathan and Abiram, Moses' assessment was also decisive to the outcome of the rebellion. Moses could not take all the accusations laid by his opponents. He is charged with the incapacity to lead people into the Promised Land; the Land of slavery is turned into a land flowing with milk and honey; and allusion is made to reject the whole process of deliverance (16:12-15). Moses estimates that such an offense requires

exemplary punishment and orders that the earth open and swallow up his contenders alive. A sentence that God confirms by executing word for word what Moses proposes.

When it comes to the revolt of the people, Moses' interpretation is varied. In the first instance, when Korah and his company draw the entire congregation for their support, Moses intercedes that God might not destroy the people. "Then they fell on their faces, and said, O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and You be angry with all the congregation?" (16:22). Moses assumes that they are innocent. Their support given to Korah is probably due to their ignorance or naïve appreciation of the event. They should not be held accountable for this act of rebellion. But when the same congregation reacts against the killing of their leaders, a plague consumes a portion of the population before Moses ordered Aaron to stop it by making atonement in the camp (16:45-46). There are two ways of interpreting this. First, Moses finds that they have acted intentionally; hence they deserve punishment. Therefore he intervenes when he assumes that justice is done. Second, God himself decides to bring judgment, in spite of Moses' intercession, because they are responsible for their acts.

The point is that the people are to be preserved, at least in part, to inherit the Promised Land. God's plan of deliverance might become void if Israel does not reach the destination. It is therefore not God's intention, nor that of Moses, to wipe out the entire community. The fulfillment of this plan dictates the ambiguous attitude of Moses towards rebellion. When the people are threatened unto death because of their grumbling and revolt, Moses intercedes until he obtains mercy. In some cases, the people are spared consequences, but in others they suffer some losses before being restored into full relationship with Yahweh. However, for other leaders who challenge God's plan of liberation by rejecting the established authority, Moses opts for their extermination. The critical question raised by this attitude is: Is Moses getting rid of other contenders to maintain himself in power or is he doing it so that God's plan of deliverance might not fail? Before attempting our own answer to this question I would like to consider God's attitude with regard to the response to the rebellions.



A close reading of the text shows that God's attitude is almost constant throughout. His response to all acts of rebellion is punishment, even capital punishment. He threatens everybody involved in the rebellions, but the implementation of his threat depends on Moses' intercession. Whenever Moses refrains from interceding, God carries out His sentence and puts to death the rebels. But if Moses intervenes and pleads in the favor of the rebels, the punishment is mitigated or dropped altogether. In my opinion Moses' intervention does not rule out God's sovereignty and His position as creator and ultimate judge of Israel. This portrayal of God is designed to enhance the authority of Moses as God's prophet. But this portrayal also raises a question about Moses' responsibility in the death of his people. If God is willing to implement what Moses demands, why could he not propose tests that would validate Aaron's priesthood without bringing death in the camp? The statement here below shares the same concern,

Obviously, in the eyes of the people God could not be held accountable for these deaths; the prophet serves as the conduit for the delivery of miracles, and only those miracles for which he constitutes an open channel can be delivered. If Moses had devised a less lethal test for the Divine verification and vindication of Aaron's priesthood, God would have provided a benign miracle to validate Aaron's priesthood and no one would have died.<sup>288</sup>

After this consideration of God's response to rebellion, we now attempt to answer the above question: Is Moses getting rid of other contenders to maintain himself in power or is he doing it so that God's plan of deliverance might not fail?

In my opinion it is not easy to separate what Moses does purely for God's sake from his own interest in dealing with his opponents. On the one hand, Moses received his call from Yahweh and all along the journey God has confirmed his position by using him in a very special way. Even Aaron and Miriam, his siblings and associates, were told that they could not equal Moses before the Lord (12:6-8). Moses is not leader by birthright of the firstborn, as it was practiced in Israel at that time, nor by popular election; his appointment comes from God. Thus, he would not let go his position of leadership,

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<sup>288</sup> [http://www.aish.com/torahportion/mayanot/Follow\\_the\\_Leader.asp](http://www.aish.com/torahportion/mayanot/Follow_the_Leader.asp) as retrieved on 25 December 2005.

unless God decides otherwise. As a human being one can understand Moses' eagerness to cut off all those who are jealous of his position. Many charismatic leaders today struggle with the same problem of whether or not they should pass the baton to others. In many instances only death removes them from power.

On the other hand, Korah, Dathan, Abiram and their allies were not trying to take power in order to continue the exodus. We read that some of the contenders were ready to take people back to Egypt rather than go to the Promised Land. Many incidents in the narrative reveal the tendency of the people to return to Egypt when they faced hardship. We read that even in the early stage of their deliverance the Israelites remembered Egypt for its variety of food and were ready to return to their bondage (Ex. 16:3, Num. 11:4). When they failed to take Canaan by the South because of the discouraging report of most of the spies, the narrative reports that the Israelites decided to choose another leader who would take them back to Egypt (Num. 14:3-4). We have seen that Dathan and Abiram described Egypt as the land flowing with milk and honey (Num. 16:13). We have also demonstrated in this study that the sentence "We will not come up" repeated twice by Dathan and Abiram (Num. 16:12, 14) can be metaphorically interpreted as a refusal to go up to the Promised Land. These few examples illustrate the danger that rebellions caused in the process of the exodus. Hence, should Moses have let the rebels seize power, the whole plan of deliverance would have been doomed to failure. The repression of rebellion was important to fulfilling the goal of the exodus. Punishment of the rebels served a twofold purpose, to secure Moses' seat and also to keep God's plan of deliverance going. The only disturbing feature of this repression in the eyes of contemporary readers is the dramatic and terrible death it entails.

We have shown earlier that the death penalty in this narrative has to be understood in the economy of the covenant signed between Yahweh and His people. They were aware that anybody who intentionally broke the covenant would be cut off from the people. The contemporary reader who interprets this narrative should be cautious about applying it uncritically to leadership struggles today. The pertinent question that should guide one's application of this text is, whether or under what conditions one leader ought to destroy his/her opponents because they reject established authority. The Church conveys a

message of forgiveness and love, including love for one's enemies. Even though God's justice requires that there should be a penalty for sin, the mandate for human agents to carry out divine judgment is a very controversial issue. In his article, "The Death Penalty: God's Timeless Standard for the Nations", Bruce Ballard argues that, "Whereas God had been the agent of the death penalty in the flood, this office is now explicitly extended to humans in relation to the crime of murder."<sup>289</sup> Without launching into the ongoing theological debate around Israel's mandate to implement God's punishment over the Canaanites, modern societies assume that only judicial institutions have the right to decide on the violation of laws and its penalty. Even then many societies have subscribed to the abolition of death penalty.

#### **6.10. Summary**

This chapter brings us to the end of our analysis of a series of revolts against Moses' leadership recorded in Numbers 16 and 17. This study has shown that there were legitimate and pertinent causes for the rebellions. The most significant causes were: the appointment of Aaron as high priest, the condemnation of all mature people to wander until death in the wilderness, and the killing of Moses' opponents. The first strand led by Korah and his company dealt with the appointment of Aaron as high priest. They claimed that Moses, using his relationship with God, arbitrarily promoted his brother for the office of high priest. They presumed that there were other people equally qualified for the office but Moses acted as a dictator. Dathan and Abiram considered the death of the whole generation in the desert as the failure of Moses' leadership and also of the exodus adventure. Therefore they should have stepped down and let people return to Egypt. The congregation was worried that Moses and Aaron could not resolve their conflicts peacefully without such a massive loss of lives.

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<sup>289</sup> Bruce W. Ballard, "The Death Penalty: God's Timeless Standard for the Nations" in *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43/3 (September 2000), 472 [471-487].

To all these grievances, Moses answered that he was only an intermediary and a simple conduit to transmit divine message. There was nothing in all this enterprise that emanated from him. His role was to implement God's ordinances. Whoever engaged in struggle against Moses was in fact fighting God; therefore God had to clarify the matter. In this case God's intervention was a dramatic repression of rebellion.

This passage offers several implications to leadership struggles as observed today. The main contention is to whom power belongs. Our democratic principles of leadership attribute the power to the people, who may exercise it through its representatives or in any other ways they approve. The sacral and God's chosen leadership portrayed by Moses cuts across people's rights and attributes decision making to God alone. The tension described in the text reveals the power struggle between the appropriation of power by God's chosen leaders and people's right to select their representatives. The narrative gives precedence to God's elect over people's choice because the ultimate vindication comes from God. In a theocratic regime such as the one Israel lived in, God's approval was crucial for anyone who wanted to access power. The drama today is that many autocratic leaders claim to being chosen by God in order to silence the opposition and perpetuate the oppression over populations. They take justice in their hands and fail to call upon God's arbitration. Surely, most of contemporary autocratic rulers know that God cannot vindicate their cause.

Another implication raised in this text is that Moses as God's representative was not a passive leader. He had power to condemn his opponents or to intercede on their behalf and avert God's wrath. It was his responsibility to be merciful or to choose doom. And in this passage Moses used both depending on which one suited the circumstance better. When his personal authority was in danger he draws doom on his opponents. But when God's wrath endangered his mission of leading the people into the Promised Land, he interceded for forgiveness and mercy. The exercise of authority becomes a very delicate tool in the hands of a leader endowed with such power. This study will draw some principles of leadership in times of crisis out of our findings from this narrative.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### LEADERSHIP ISSUES IN THE MOSES NARRATIVE

#### 7.1. Introduction

We have come full circle in our exploration of the struggles of leadership that Moses faced in the exodus narrative. The pathway of Moses leadership as described in the text is very complex. He has been activist and peacemaker, democratic and autocratic leader. He experienced rejection and veneration from his people. He enjoyed God's special favor but also suffered God's punishment. The itinerary of a multifaceted leader, such as Moses, can create confusion and contradiction in the mind of the reader of the narrative. This chapter is designed to sum up the major issues of leadership found in the narrative as they work together to shape the image of the biblical character—Moses. We will not come back to issues such as *democracy*, *freedom* or *sacral authority* that we discussed in chapter four. However, issues discussed in this chapter have an impact on the way one acquires and uses his/her power. This overall portrait of Moses is essential if one has to draw some biblical insights on leadership from the Moses narrative that may be applied to contemporary contexts.

#### 7.2. Leadership and Service

Leadership is first and foremost a call to serve and meet people's needs. The person who accepts the position of leadership should be prepared to accomplish a certain number of assignments and tasks on behalf of and for the benefit of the led people. Walter C. Wright says that, "Leadership is the use of power to serve the people."<sup>290</sup> In their book, *Credibility*, James Kouzes and Barry Posner quote an important statement from Cheryl Breetwor that defines what true leadership is,

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<sup>290</sup> Walter C. Wright, *Relational Leadership: A Biblical Model for Leadership Service* (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2000), 180.



You can't be motivated by self-interests and expect to be a leader. The instant you feel exempt from the standards of the organization, you cease to be a leader. A leader galvanizes people by living their shared vision.<sup>291</sup>

Kouzes and Posner provide a definition of leadership, which is people's need oriented and community centered. The above statement does not apply to dictators and autocrats who use leadership to advance their selfish ambitions. The principle of galvanizing people and living their shared vision is clearly displayed in Moses' passage to leadership. We have shown in this study how the narrator describes the circumstances surrounding the birth of Moses (Ex.1). The introduction to the book of Exodus describes how subsequent Pharaohs turned the peaceful settlement of the Hebrews under Joseph into forced labor. Rulers of Egypt took coercive measures to threaten the life and well being of the immigrant Hebrews, including infanticide. To escape from oppression, the Hebrew people groaned for liberation. A leader was indispensable in order to materialize the vision and dreams of freedom. That is how Moses entered the scene of this biblical narrative. In a very Ancient Near Eastern heroic fashion,<sup>292</sup> Moses was rescued from water, brought up in the royal palace, and later on became the liberator of the Hebrews. From his commissioning in the country of Midian, God told Moses that his mission should be in favor of His people. "The cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt" (Ex. 3:9-10).

Moses was conscious of his responsibility towards the people, so much so that he spent the rest of his life serving the Israelites. This study has explored the way Moses fought Pharaoh to snatch the people out of the hands of the Egyptians and against all enemies encountered during the wilderness journey. He strove to meet their needs of water and food in a very hostile environment such as the wilderness. He constantly stood in

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<sup>291</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Credibility: How Leaders Gain It and Lose It, Why People Demand It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993), 183.

<sup>292</sup> Scholars have established some parallels between the birth of Moses and the legend of Sargon of Akkad, and others in Greek mythology. However, the Sargon motif of birth offers significant differences from the biblical account. See comments in Brevard S. Child. *Exodus OTL* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 4-26.

intercession between Yahweh and the people to spare them extermination whenever they sinned and attracted God's wrath. Moses had demonstrated in his leadership what Maxwell would term as commitment and the capacity of problem solving.<sup>293</sup>

Moses' leadership as described here above, fits well into the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Mike Boon notices that leadership in the traditional African view exists in the context of humanity depicted through the Zulu expression "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (a person is only a person because of other people).<sup>294</sup> In spite of the hardship inherent in leading a multitude of people with conflicting behaviors and attitude, African philosophy requires that kings, heads of family or any person in a leadership position should be aware that humanity or community comes before self-interest. Our experience in several countries of Africa is that this philosophy of *ubuntu* is no longer in practice as we consider the abuse of power that has characterized many African leaders. The search for personal wealth and lack of accountability are among the root causes of bad governance that both international communities and Africans themselves deplore today.<sup>295</sup> The function of leadership is first of all service.

I purposely avoid using the concept of 'servant leadership' here because of the ideal attached to it by many scholars. Several authors suggest the unique and distinctive model of Jesus' leadership as the archetypical example of servant leadership.<sup>296</sup> A. D'Souza defines servant leadership as,

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<sup>293</sup> John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999).

<sup>294</sup> Mike Boon, *The African Way: The power of Interactive Leadership* (Wynberg, SA: Zebra Press, 1997), 80. In this book Boon cites the expression of *Ubuntu* philosophy in many other African languages (p. 31-32).

<sup>295</sup> NEPAD document includes bad governance and lack of democracy among the various issues that hinder the development of Africa and encourages each nation to tackle them adequately. This is stated in chapter 4 "Getting systems right: governance and capacity building" in Commission for Africa, *Our Common Interest: An Argument* (London: Penguin Books, 2005). The document reads thus, "It is another crucial dimension: how well the government answers to its people for its policy and actions, whether it is 'accountable' to its citizens. Democracy of some kind is an absolute fundamental here" (p. 36-37).

<sup>296</sup> The concept of servanthood in leadership has probably be introduced by Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and*

Servant-leadership empowers people through example, guidance, caring, understanding, sensitivity, trust, appreciation, encouragement, reinforcement and shared vision. Servant-leadership is much more than a mere leadership style or behaviour that we can learn to act out. It begins with mind and heart – with our attitude.<sup>297</sup>

I do not claim that Moses' leadership in the narrative meets all the characteristics of the above definition or matches the distinctive character of Jesus in the Gospels. However, even though he did not reach the servant leadership modeled by Jesus, Moses knew the value of his assignment and did his best to pay attention to people's needs. On several occasions Moses displayed a humble attitude.<sup>298</sup> D'Souza acknowledges in his book that the concept of servant leadership as described in the definition given above is difficult to live up to.<sup>299</sup> One should not judge Moses as failing to rise up to the high standards set for servant leadership because not all good leaders, current and of the past, meet all the above criteria. Leadership is a learning experience and one who has a heart for it keeps on learning and growing as he or she practices. "Successful leadership points in a direction; it is also the vehicle of continuing and achieving purpose."<sup>300</sup> To liberate the Hebrew slaves from Egypt and lead them to the Promised Land was the goal, assignment and direction that kept Moses going in spite of some weaknesses and shortcomings in the exercise of his power.

### 7.3. Leadership and Legitimacy

In many books on leadership, the problem of legitimacy is overlooked or taken for granted. Writers are more interested in defining leadership or describing the qualities,

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*Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), and ever since the concept has been refined. See Leighton Ford, *Transforming Leadership: Jesus' Way of Creating Vision, Shaping Values and Empowering Change* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991); Jerry C. Wofford, *Transforming Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books House, 1999).

<sup>297</sup> Anthony A. D'Souza, *Leaders For Today Hope For Tomorrow: Empowering and Empowered Leadership* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001), 20.

<sup>298</sup> See Moses' attitude in Num. 11:2, 29; 12:3; 14:13-14.

<sup>299</sup> A. D'Souza, *Leaders For Today Hope For Tomorrow*, 21.

<sup>300</sup> James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 455.

skills and actions required for a person who wants to be an effective leader. This focus on the leader as the principal actor in a given society or organization cannot capture the dynamic of leadership where leaders and followers need to pull together as a team in order to achieve success. In the context of the Moses narrative, the situation was even more complex. His mission was to persuade a disparate group of slaves to leave Egypt where they had settled for more than 400 years and go to an unknown place where they would enjoy freedom and plenty. Such a massive displacement to an unknown destination could not take place without the agreement and involvement of his followers. The involvement and accompaniment of Moses' followers could be won on the basis of his legitimacy. Edwin P. Hollander defines legitimacy as "the more usual way of acknowledging an occupant of the leader role, and validating the basis for his or her attainment of that status."<sup>301</sup> The Moses narrative reveals how significant questions related to legitimacy are; such as, how one becomes a leader? Who gives authority or mandate to a leader? How do followers respond to their leader? Legitimacy gives confidence, freedom and boldness to a leader to undertake and implement change.

This study has shown how Moses' leadership struggled with the problem of legitimacy all along his career as the liberator of Israel. While he was still living in Pharaoh's palace, we read in Exodus 2 that, moved by his nationalistic zeal, Moses killed an Egyptian taskmaster who was oppressing his people and started acting as a judge among the Hebrew slaves. He engaged in activism for human right to the point of taking the law into his hands, but his actions could not be sustained because he had no source of power, no legitimacy. Moses had no answer when he was met with this pertinent question from one of the Hebrew slaves, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" And the narrator adds, "Then Moses was afraid" and finally, "Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian" (Ex. 2:14-15). In spite of Moses' good will, he had to give up his activism and flee for his life out of Egypt because the Hebrews would not accept his leadership.

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<sup>301</sup> Edwin P. Hollander, [www.academy.umd.edu/publications/klspdocs/eholl\\_p1.htm](http://www.academy.umd.edu/publications/klspdocs/eholl_p1.htm) . Feb. 2006. "How and Why Active Followers Matter in Leadership" in *The Balance of Leadership and Followership Working Papers* (Academy of Leadership Press, 1997).

When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and commissioned him to be a liberator, a long discussion took place between Moses and God, because he was reluctant to accept the position (Ex. 3 & 4). The main argument revolved around how legitimate his power would be in the sight of the Hebrew slaves. The following questions put forward by Moses reveal his frustration from the failure of the previous attempt at leadership. "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (Ex. 3:13) "What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, 'The Lord did not appear to you?'" (Ex. 4:1). To convince his messenger, God offered to be with Moses as the source of his legitimacy. Whenever his authority is challenged, Moses could use the name of Yahweh or seek Yahweh's vindication.

Even with the assurance of being a God-appointed leader Moses needed to win the approval and involvement of his followers. It was not an easy task for Moses to be accepted by followers who did not participate in his election to power. In the first instance, Moses used the power to perform miracles in the name of Yahweh in order to incline the heart of the Hebrew slaves to accept him as God's envoy (Ex. 4:5). The narrator reports instances when Moses won the approval of the people because of his capacity to perform supernatural deeds. The most important were: Upon his arrival and before facing Pharaoh, he performed the signs he received from Yahweh. "So the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had visited the children of Israel and that He had looked on their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshiped" (Ex. 4:31). After the final victory upon the Egyptian army who drowned in the sea, the Hebrew slaves reiterated their confidence in Moses and in Yahweh. "And when the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in Him and in Moses His servant" (Ex. 14:31).

However, these memories were short-lived by the Israelites whenever they faced hardship on the way. They questioned again and again the legitimacy of Moses' leadership. Worse would occur when Moses' close teammates cast their doubt on his legitimacy. God would often intervene to vindicate Moses' power, sometimes in violent repression of the



contenders, in order to maintain the credibility of His elect leader in the sight of the congregation. This study has given examples of other leaders challenging Moses' legitimacy and God's intervention, as illustrated by the temporary leprosy upon Miriam (Num. 12) and the death of Korah, Abiram, Dathan and the 250 leaders (Num. 16). The charismatic leadership embodied by Moses made it possible that despite moments of revolts and murmurings, people would always turn to Moses for guidance because he held God's revealed plan for their liberation. Instead of turning against Moses and thwarting the whole process of liberation, the constituents reaffirmed Moses legitimacy by seeking his intercession for survival. Using a quote from Max Weber, Hollander argues that such a [charismatic] leader "has considerable emotional appeal to followers and great hold over them, especially in a time of crisis when there are strong needs for direction."<sup>302</sup>

In the African context where leaders who are democratically elected and those holding sacred or traditional power work together either in the Church or in politics, legitimacy and credibility become major issues of debate. On the one hand, some traditional chiefs, kings and charismatic founders of most African Initiated Churches (AIC) enjoy the support and acceptance of the community more than those who have been chosen through democratic election. In a few cases traditional rulers and charismatic founders of religions are accused of authoritarian power and not following the current trend of democracy. On the other hand, elected leaders in power manipulate many democracies in Africa so that their constituents feel excluded from decision making. What the authors of "*Democratization in Malawi*" deplore in their experience can be applied to the Congo and elsewhere. The writer observes that, "The ruling elite secured its position of dominance by using its control of instrumentalities of government to eliminate any perceived threats to the perpetuation of its dominance."<sup>303</sup> The same author adds, "Despite the erosion of internal legitimacy, the state had sufficient external support to

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<sup>302</sup> E.P. Hollander, "The Balance of Leadership"  
[www.academy.umd/publications/klspdoc/eholl.pl.htm](http://www.academy.umd/publications/klspdoc/eholl.pl.htm) .

<sup>303</sup> Fidelis E. Kanyongolo, "The Limits of Liberal Democratic Constitutionalism in Malawi" in Kings M. Phiri and Kenneth R. Ross (eds.), *Democratization in Malawi: A Stocktaking* (Blantyre: CLAIM, 1998), 360 [353-375].

sustain it.<sup>304</sup> One way of perpetuating the reign of African leaders is their monarchical tendency. Once in power many African heads of states behave as monarchs and keep the seat for life through manipulation. Ali Mazrui and Michael Tidy distinguish three styles of leadership that display the monarchical tendency in African political leadership.<sup>305</sup> First, *the quest for aristocratic effect*. This means a penchant for splendid attire, large expensive cars, palatial accommodation and conspicuous consumption. This ostentation often ruins the fragile economy and deprives the nation of its capital resources. Second, *the personalization of authority*. In this monarchical style presidents of republics develop a form of personality cult and embody the power. Third, *the sacralization of authority*. Linked to the personalization of authority, this last form leads to the glorification of a leader which can take a form of sacred dimension. This is done with the support and admiration of some fanatics. "This tendency towards sacred leadership makes republicanism somewhat unsuited to the style of politics of new states."<sup>306</sup> This tendency to 'royalize' African republics without the consent of the public erodes the legitimacy of many African leaders. Yet, they know how to cling onto power even when they are unpopular. However, it is clear that the use of power, which is not legitimate, may decrease the attractiveness of the leader.<sup>307</sup> Legitimate power in the Church and in politics remains a point of tension, as observed in the Moses narrative, but a true leader should always seek to affirm his legitimacy.

#### 7.4. Leadership and Teamwork

The Moses narrative introduces the reader to another important device of leadership, teamwork. Any effective leader is supposed to be a team builder in order to share or delegate part of his/her responsibility to other capable persons in the organization. From

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<sup>304</sup> F.E. Kanyongolo, "The Limits of Liberal Democratic Constitutionalism in Malawi", 361.

<sup>305</sup> Ali A. Mazrui and Michael Tidy, *Nationalism and New States in Africa* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1984), 191-193.

<sup>306</sup> Mazrui and Tidy, *Nationalism and New States in Africa*, 192.

<sup>307</sup> John R.P. French, Jr. and Bertram Raven, "The Bases of Social Power" in Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander (eds.), *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: Tavistock Publications, 1968), 266 [259-270].

the beginning of his ministry, Moses knew that he could not deal with the Hebrew slaves alone. He had tried to act as a lone ranger before but failed (Ex. 2); therefore he was not ready to venture in this process again without proper support. He opposed God's call by claiming his inability to accomplish the required task (Ex. 3:11). The first member of Moses' team, as suggested by Yahweh, was Aaron, his own elder brother (Ex. 4:14).

Besides Aaron, who was an inseparable ally of Moses in all his undertakings, the narrator mentions the prophetess Miriam, his sister, as part of the leadership team (Ex. 15:20; Num. 12:1-2). However, to accomplish his task Moses needed more than one person. At the beginning of his ministry the council of the elders seemed to be of great support to Moses' leadership (Ex. 3:16; 4:29; 17:5), but as the narrative carries on their role becomes trivial. They are called in only when things go wrong (Num. 16:26). The absence of teamwork left Moses with a heavy load of responsibility to the point of endangering his own health. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, was so concerned by Moses' consuming and excessive burden that he suggested a delegation of responsibility that would prevent him from burning out (Ex. 18:13-26). Later on as the people kept on harassing Moses because of the hardship they met in the wilderness, the narrative reports that Moses was so depressed that he asked for death. *"I am not able to bear all these people alone, because the burden is too heavy for me. If You treat me like this, please kill me here and now"* (Num. 11: 14-15). In his comment on this incident Olson attests, "This time it is God and not the foreign Medianite priest Jethro who suggests a similar remedy to Moses about sharing leadership responsibilities. A distraught Moses has forgotten the lesson of Exodus 18."<sup>308</sup> Yahweh suggested the decentralization of Moses charismatic and prophetic office by sharing his spirit with 70 other leaders (Ex. 11:15f).<sup>309</sup> The narrative does not give enough detail on how all these structures (Jethro's

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<sup>308</sup> Dennis T. Olson, "Power and Leadership: Moses and Manna Story." *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 25 (2004),

<sup>309</sup> The scope of this study does allow us to make a thorough exegesis of what it means to take some of Moses' spirit and put it on other leaders. The idea of the spirit being presented as a quantity that Moses had in large measure that it might be shared among others is unique to the Old Testament. See also Elisha asking a portion of Elijah's spirit (2 Kings 2:9). For more discussion on this matter see B.B. Gray, *Numbers*, 110-111.

administrators and the 70 elders endowed by Moses' spirit) worked together with Moses in carrying out administrative duties. There are two ways of attempting an explanation of this omission.

Firstly, at this early stage of the formation of the nation, most of the appointed leaders did not have enough abilities and skills to bear the responsibility among the people. The "Golden Calf" story is a good illustration of the immaturity of Moses' collaborators (Ex. 32). As soon as Moses delayed on the mountain, Aaron and Hur to whom he delegated power were unable to keep people from idolatry. Aaron fashioned a Golden Calf at the demand of the people and attracted God's wrath, which caused the death of 3000 Israelites. The story of the spies (Num. 13-14) and in many other incidents of revolts, Moses and Aaron stood alone to counter the people's contestations. Delegation of power requires that a leader has qualified people to get the job done. In the case of the Moses narrative the coaching of Joshua took almost the whole life of Moses before he could acquire the ability and character to lead the people of Israel. The reason may be, either Moses was himself still struggling to learn leadership skills so that he could not give what he did not have, or he was so overwhelmed by many responsibilities that he did not have time to coach others. The worst scenario might be that he was so used to keeping all the power in his own hands that he was reluctant to delegate responsibilities. The texts mentioned above reveal that several times he complained of bearing the burden of the people alone and would like to be relieved of some duties.

Secondly, the narrator seems to approach the history of Israel from the priestly point of view, hence the social and political side of the liberation is underplayed. The focus during the wilderness journey is on the formation of "the kingdom of priests" (Ex.19:6), therefore Moses needed a teamwork in his office as the spiritual leader. The emphasis on spiritual leadership becomes important in the narrative from the introduction of the law at Sinai onward (Ex. 19 ff). The shift in the liberation story from a political movement to the formation of a worshipping community at Sinai is reflected by the central role played by the tabernacle and leaders attached to this sanctuary in the pentateuchal narrative. The priesthood overpowers the council of the elders. After Sinai the image of Moses as political liberator comes under the shadow of Moses the spiritual leader. This shift

explains the reason why Moses needed the support of the tribe of Levi, as they were appointed to the works of the sanctuary. More closely attached to Moses' leadership were Aaron and his children in their position as priests and mediators between God and His people. Therefore, the spiritual teamwork of Moses was built on strong ties of family and friendship. This teamwork is presented as being efficient because whenever Moses was threatened, Aaron and his family, sometimes the entire tribe of Levi, would stand on his side and defend his cause. In certain circumstances they would participate in the violent repression of rebellion or disobedience as in the story of the Golden Calf where they killed 3000 Israelites (Ex. 32:25-29). Despite some sparks of jealousy and discontentment inherent to human nature, e.g. the murmuring of Miriam and Aaron (Num. 12) and the revolt of Korah (Num. 16), the Levites formed a teamwork and support to Moses' leadership all along his ministry. Viv Thomas observes that,

The modern emphasis on teams being built out of an amalgam of talents and abilities is shallow in comparison to this world of love and observation. Enormous power is generated out of such observant and loving relationships, a huge amount of work is accomplished, spirits are fed, and life is full of colour for all involved.<sup>310</sup>

Thomas does not underestimate the value of talents and abilities in the team making, but he wants to underscore that there will be less achievement if there is no relationship of love and appreciation that ties a team together. Moses could play on the familial cord to win the sympathy and allegiance of the Levites. Despite some cases of revolt, Israel seemed not worried by this model of leadership based on familial bonds. The support of the extended family or tribe becomes crucial in times of crisis. It is easy to come together and help each other in family or tribe when you face the same threat. Moses' leadership survived many revolts in the wilderness because the Levites stood with him as a support group. Boon observes that, "If a community comes under threat, there is an immediate psychological shift back to tribe. This happened among many communities in the period immediately prior to South Africa's first democratic election."<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> Viv Thomas, *Future Leader* (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1999), 38.

<sup>311</sup> Mike Boon, *The African Way*, 62-63.



Kingship and chieftainship in traditional Africa also operated on the same premise of familial or tribal bonds. Leadership in rural traditional communities was different from those today because the chief personified the unity of the people and was open to seeking consensus with people's representatives on various matters. It was far from being an autocratic regime. The interpretation of the Moses' narrative becomes delicate in Africa today because of abuses of leadership by misusing tribal or racial ties. This model of leadership based on tribe and race has shown its limit in African democracies. Leaders who use tribal or racial bonds to raise support for their regime have created divisions or political instability in their countries. The history of genocide in Rwanda is still fresh in memory even after more than a decade.<sup>312</sup> In a touching comment on the Rwandan genocide the writer argues that,

It was nonetheless this sort of "genetic" democracy which was accepted as legitimate for more than three decades. Legitimate to the point of "justifying" genocide, a genocide which today astounds the world! As if after three decades of racist governments, the ideological foundation of the state in Rwanda since the Social Revolution of 1959 could have any result other than genocide.<sup>313</sup>

The ambivalence observed in many African countries is that heads of governments want to please their Western donors and protectors by claiming that their regime is democratic, while on the ground they develop a monarchical tendency or a sacral authority based on the cult of their personality. Once on the seat they want to keep it until death or a coup d'état topples them. The description given by Boon of African leaders who swing between Third World and First World is that, "We must not allow such leaders to tell us that they are tribal or traditional. They are not. They simply use the tribe to gain their own political ends, they want power, wealth and status, at any cost."<sup>314</sup> The reader should be very careful in applying the relationship of Moses and the Levites to what is common in African leadership where rulers seek tribal or racial supporters in order to maintain

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<sup>312</sup> Genocide in Rwanda occurred in 1994.

<sup>313</sup> John A Berry and Carol Pott Berry (eds.), *Genocide in Rwanda: A Collective Memory* (Material presented at a Seminar in Kigali: Regie de l'imprimerie scolaire, 1995), 110.

<sup>314</sup> Boon, *The African Way*, 52.

one's power. Even though the system worked for Moses and his generation, it might not be applicable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa, which is politically and socially different.

### **7.5. Leadership Ethics**

The reader of the Moses narrative has to wrestle with understanding the leadership ethics portrayed by Moses. Moses' attitude in dealing with people who opposed his leadership was incredibly ambivalent. At times he would show exceptional tolerance and understanding towards his opponents and intercede for their survival. In other cases he would call a curse upon them or condemn them to death. In this study we have discussed the death penalty as practiced by Moses in the narrative. One possible explanation suggested in this study is that the practice of the death penalty has to be understood within the economy of the covenant signed between Yahweh and his people. The Sinaitic covenant entailed curses or blessings as the result of disobedience or obedience to the law. This suggestion does not give a definitive solution to the ethical problem raised by the ambivalence of Moses' leadership. Questions that a reader of the story may raise today are: "Should a leader forgive or kill his opponents when it suits him or her?" "What criteria were used in this narrative to determine forgivable or condemnable offense to authority?"

The narrative does not offer sufficient clues in order to provide a straight answer to each of the above questions. The intention is to understand the context of Moses' leadership. Moses, like many biblical figures after him, seemed to depend totally on God's determination in order to keep his position even when he faced the unhappiness of the people. As long as Yahweh wanted him in power, it was his duty to preserve the approval of the community either by exercising discipline or by showing them kindness. Being caught between God's strictness and the people's changeability, Moses had to wrestle in order to display a balanced attitude in all circumstances. We read that later on he was himself punished and banned from entering the Promised Land because he failed on one occasion to satisfy God's strictness (Num. 20). It becomes difficult for the reader of the Bible to decide whether the violent repression of Moses' opponents was a means to

satisfy God's strictness or just a way for Moses to consolidate his power by silencing potential contenders. The pertinent questions raised by Moses' ethical conduct are: "Is it morally sound that Moses should condemn other leaders to death in order to put down a rebellion?" Or, "Should one discard Moses' action in the liberation from Egypt because of the repression of those who wanted to thwart the exodus by their revolt?" The answer to these questions will demonstrate a double-standard judgment depending on to what side the respondent leans. This ethical ambivalence portrayed in the Moses narrative reflects the problematic situation of biblical leaders who were torn between pleasing Yahweh and meeting the expectations of their community.

Leadership ethics remains a serious problem even on our African continent today. The ethical issue posed by leadership and violence is met by mitigating answers. In his book, *On Heroes and Uhuru Worship*,<sup>315</sup> Ali Mazrui discusses the process of independence in Kenya. He raises the problem of moral judgment towards Kenyatta and his Mau Mau movement in their fight for independence and the repression they faced from the British army. It is true that Mau Mau, like any rebellion, were capable of some excesses in their actions. Mazrui poses "the problem of whether Mau Mau violence, let alone its worst excesses, was at all necessary."<sup>316</sup> But the key issue is how one can blame freedom-fighters when they struggle for liberation? Mazrui notices that the tendency is to elevate the rebellion to national prestige and worship national heroes. "We are going to have a re-christening of the Mau Mau rebellion."<sup>317</sup> Since people are divided in their moral evaluation of the actions perpetrated by the Mau Mau and those of the British army, Mazrui concludes,

Crimes are more and less wicked not just in themselves, not even merely according to their consequences, but also according to who commits them. By the very nature of things, greater standards of justice are expected of those in authority than from those in rebellion.<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Ali A. Mazrui, *On Heroes and Uhuru Worship: Essays on Independent Africa* (London: Longmans, 1966).

<sup>316</sup> A. Mazrui, *On Heroes and Uhuru Worship: Essays on Independent Africa*, 31.

<sup>317</sup> Mazrui, *On Heroes and Uhuru Worship: Essays on Independent Africa*, 23.

<sup>318</sup> Mazrui, *On Heroes and Uhuru Worship: Essays on Independent Africa*, 33.

A double-standard of moral evaluation seems to be the common way of assessing such a situation. Mazrui is right as he attests that people expect more from the authority than from the freedom-fighters. Strikers and activists who march on the road and commit acts of vandalism are less condemnable than the police who intervene with tear gas or hot water poured on the mob. This high expectation from the public makes the issue of leadership ethics very complex.

Another important feature of leadership ethics in Africa emerges from the dual relationship between the North and the South, the developed and the developing countries. African leaders are striving to respond to Western expectations while reigning on a continent which is still very much rooted in its traditions. Boon captures this dilemma as he observes that, "Africa, which is led largely by Takers, has no discipline. It is not governed according to the same ethics and values as either the First World or the tribal world, and therefore does not respond to them."<sup>319</sup> The example of our late president Mobutu Sese Seko of Congo can illustrate better the ambivalent situation that many African leaders face. On the one hand, Mobutu was championing African culture through his political philosophy of "Return to our traditional values" (in French "Retour à l'Authenticité"). In the name of this philosophy Mobutu rejected his Western names "Joseph Desiré" and became "Mobutu Sese Seko" and refused to put on a tie or wear any Western suit. He went ahead and forced the entire nation to change their way of clothing and get rid of their Christian or Western names in order to remain authentic to their culture and tradition. The outcome is that up to now many Congolese citizens do not have their Christian names in their passports. But on the other hand, he was ranked among the wealthiest leaders of the world with several mansions in Europe and lived in luxury. Even the type of costume he adopted to wear was made in France. The following extract quoted by Mike Boon from the research done by Graham, *Lords of Poverty*, published in 1989, gives a hint on the incongruity of Mobutu's regime to the reader.

President Mobutu Sese Seko owns 51 Mercedes-Benz motorcars, 11 châteaux in Belgium and France, and a beachside villa on the Costa del

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<sup>319</sup> M. Boon, *The African Way*, 50. By 'Takers' Boon means African leaders who took over from the colonialists and are self-serving and care nothing for the community, p.48.

Sol...The country is ranked as the eighth poorest nation on earth and the life expectancy for the average citizens in 1987 was just over 50 years... Yet Mobutu Sese Seko has become one of the world's wealthiest men. His personal assets, mostly beyond the borders of Zaire, are estimated by Western intelligence at between \$3- and \$4-billion.<sup>320</sup>

The above research mentions the Central African Republic and Uganda among African countries where leaders displayed the same inconsistency. Their countries are poor but leaders live in astonishing affluence. Today the list may be longer as many democracies are crumbling because of the ethical conduct of the leadership. If ethical values are not taken seriously in Africa, efforts made to develop our economies may amount to nothing. We may conclude this section with the pertinent diagnosis made by F. Malan and B. Smit on ethics and leadership in South Africa which is applicable to many Sub-Saharan African countries.

Political leaders excel in initiating and formulating creative policies aimed at the socio-economic improvement of the country's people in general. However the same cannot be said of the ways in which such policies are put into practice. Corruption and inefficiency are consuming scarce resources and destroying our national credibility and the very soul of our nation.<sup>321</sup>

## **7.6. Leadership and Crises Handling**

If there is one aspect of Moses' leadership that people can always remember as they read the pentateuchal narrative it is the number of crises he had to handle during his time in power. Moses' appearance on the scene of the history of Israel is placed in the context of crisis. He was born when the sojourn of the descendants of Jacob in Egypt turned into a crisis with the institution of slavery and genocide of the Hebrews by the new dynasty of Pharaohs who did not know Joseph (Ex. 1:8-22). Born in the midst of this crisis Moses owed his life to the conspiracy of a number of women who willingly chose to disobey

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<sup>320</sup> M. Boon, *The African Way*, 50. Towards the end of his life, Mobutu's fortune was estimated at \$6 billion, which disappeared in Western banks shortly after his death in 1998.

<sup>321</sup> Faan Malan and Ben Smit, *Ethics and Leadership: In Business and Politics* (Lansdowne, SA: JUTA, 2001), 272.



Pharaoh's command. Among these women are: Egyptian midwives, Moses' mother and sister, the daughter of Pharaoh who adopted the child and the daughters of Jethro who provided him asylum and a family (Ex. 1 & 2).

This study has shown how Moses made his first attempt to solve the crisis of his people but out of his zeal and enthusiasm he reacted by killing an Egyptian and was obliged to flee. In spite of this failure God entrusted him with the same mission, which he accepted after expressing his reluctance. The second attempt was a success backed by Yahweh's power. Moses inflicted plague upon plague until he broke the resistance of Pharaoh and obtained the liberation of his people (Ex.12). However, leaving Egypt was not the end of the crisis, more was still to come as they engaged in the journey through the wilderness. The people were to face all kinds of crises ranging from the material to the religious and psychological.

Materially, people suffered the lack of food and water in the wilderness, and Moses had to handle the crisis whenever it occurred. They were deprived of all the comfort they enjoyed in Egypt despite the fact of being slaves. People could bear with living in tents during the journey, but food and water are basic and vital needs that a person cannot renounce. Starvation and thirst caused more revolts in the wilderness than any other inconvenience during the journey. Quite often people told Moses that slavery with abundant food was more bearable than freedom with starvation (Ex: 16:3; Num. 11:4). Even when they received manna and quails, their diet was so monotonous that they kept craving for the diversity of food they had in Egypt. "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost-- also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" (Num. 11:5-6). For the forty years of wandering Moses was strained to exhaustion by trying to meet the persistent material needs of the people until he lost his composure on one occasion and was punished (Num. 20:1-13).

Religiously, it was not easy for people coming out of a very polytheistic society, such as Egypt in the time of Moses, to cope with the monotheist Yahweh and His laws. John Davis describes the religious state of Egypt as follows:

The Egyptians were just about the most polytheistic people known from the ancient world. Even to this day we are not completely sure of the total number of gods which they worshipped. Most lists include somewhere in the neighborhood of eighty gods.<sup>322</sup>

This religious background can explain the crisis that Moses had to deal with during the journey and even after settling in Canaan, as people were inclined towards idolatry. It is therefore understandable that the Ten Commandments open with a strong prohibition of worshipping other gods apart from or together with Yahweh (Ex. 20:1-6). In his comments on this text Alan Cole argues, "The main thrust is clear: because of YHWH's nature and because of what YHWH has done, He will not share his worship with another; He is unique."<sup>323</sup>

Psychologically, people were disturbed when the hope of entering the Promised Land dwindled, especially after the condemnation to death in the wilderness of the whole generation aged twenty and above. The revolt of Dathan and Abiram illustrate the frustration that people experienced because of their unfulfilled expectations (Num. 16:12-15). People became more aggressive and rebellious, threatening to stone Moses or any other person who tried to support Moses' view (Num. 14:10). People were also traumatized by the death of so many leaders who tried to oppose Moses' leadership or who fell at various occasions when they broke the law of Yahweh. Moses had to deal with this trauma as people accused him of being the murderer. "The whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 'You have killed the Lord's people,' they said" (Num.16:41).

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<sup>322</sup> John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in the Book of Exodus* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979), 86.

<sup>323</sup> Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 154.

There is no fixed recipe in the Moses narrative on how to handle crises. Moses reacted differently depending on the circumstance and his mood at that time. We have shown under the discussion of leadership ethics that Moses would change from being soft and tolerant to being harsh, as the case dictated. He has shown both strength and weakness as a human being called to solve problems that were sometimes beyond his expertise and capacity. However, he pursued his commission up to the end and was crowned as the narrative pays him tribute as an outstanding leader on the day of his death (Deut. 34).

Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do in Egypt-- to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel (34:10-12).

The secret of his success lies in the support he got from Yahweh in handling the various crises encountered in the wilderness. Moses enjoyed the total backing of Yahweh in all his undertakings. In some circumstances contemporary readers do not agree with the ethical decision taken by Moses. We are so remote in time and culture that it is hard to uncritically apply crises handling in the time of Moses to our current situation.

The significant lesson that any leader in the African context should learn from this narrative is that handling crises is an essential part of his/her portfolio. Africa faces problems of poverty, an HIV and AIDS pandemic, gender violence and homosexuality, just to name a few. Anyone who is called to take a leadership position in Africa today, either in politics or in religion, must be prepared to tackle the crises brought about by these social issues, in addition to solving other managerial problems. In a document published by the World Conference of Churches (WCC) on HIV and AIDS, the writer acknowledges that,

The lives and well-being of countless people rely on decisions and actions which are required today. All institutions, not least the Churches and their congregations, bear a great responsibility in responding to this challenge,

and must help all people and their communities to the best of their knowledge and ability.<sup>324</sup>

These decisions are not only required in fighting against HIV and AIDS but also in addressing all other social issues that plague the African continent. There are areas where Church and state have to link hands in order to bring transformation. To handle these crises a leader needs to make sure that the ingredients of leadership discussed in this chapter are dealt with. The lack of ingredients such as legitimacy, teamwork and ethics can cause decisions taken by a leader not to be implemented, and hence paralyze the handling of crises. Those in the secular world who dismiss the divine backing from God should make sure that they have some kind of support inside the country or outside to help them handle crises. Christian leaders should count, like Moses, on God's support in addition to their leadership skills and capacity.

#### **7.7. Leadership and Succession**

Succession planning is a crucial issue, not only during the time of Moses, but even today. One way of assuring the future of leadership is to think of a successor before the death of the leader. Several books have been written about mentoring future leaders, explaining that a leader needs to be mentored and to mentor others for the development of future leadership.<sup>325</sup> Bobb Biehl gives a concise definition of mentoring: "Mentoring is a lifelong relationship, in which a mentor helps a protégé reach her or his God-given potential."<sup>326</sup> When this ongoing process of leadership formation is lacking, opportunist takers, without a vision, grab leadership positions and plunge the organization or

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<sup>324</sup> WCC Study Document: *Facing AIDS: The Challenge, the Churches' Response* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1977), 4.

<sup>325</sup> To deepen the concept of mentoring Christian leaders, the reader can consult the following books: Bobb Biehl, *Mentoring: Confidence in Finding Mentor and Becoming One* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996); John Mallison, *Mentoring: To Develop Disciples & Leaders* (Lidcombe, Australia: Scripture Union, 1998). Walter C. Wright, *Mentoring: The Promise of Relational Leadership* (Bucks, UK: Paternoster, 2004); Keith R. Anderson & Randy D. Reese, *Spiritual Mentoring: A Guide for Seeking and Giving Direction* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999).

<sup>326</sup> Bobb Biehl, *Mentoring: Confidence in Finding Mentor and Becoming One* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 19.

community into anarchy. In the Moses narrative the issue of succession is more complex because the whole process of mentoring is blurred by God's election.

Moses himself might have acquired some leadership skills in Pharaoh's palace as a potential heir of the throne of Egypt, but it was not enough to equip him for his new function as the liberator. Upon his commissioning by Yahweh at the burning bush in Sinai (Ex. 3-4), he forged most of his ways of leadership through mistakes and failures under the guidance of Yahweh. In this study we have shown the long apprenticeship of Moses' leadership from the killing of the Egyptian as the first attempt of leadership (Ex.2), through the advise of Jethro to build a teamwork for supervision and administration (Ex. 18), through ups and downs in dealing with murmuring of a rebellious people in the wilderness (Ex. 16; 17, 32; Num. 11; 12; 14; 16; 17; 20; 21; 25), until the crowning of his ministry when he handed over the power to Joshua in the desert of Moab (Num 27:19-23, Deut.31; 34).

It is astonishing that after Moses' leadership having been challenged during all through his life, the succession seemed to be peaceful. One would presume that those who often contested Moses' leadership could wage war for that position after his death. There are two ways of explaining the smooth succession of Moses. Firstly, it is possible that people had learned from all the punishment incurred during the many revolts so that they ceased to fight for leadership position. This explanation, however, would be in ignorance of the obstinacy of a nation qualified as "stiff-necked." This study has demonstrated how again and again the people would start revolting, even after the killing of many among them (cf. Num. 11 and 16). Secondly, it could be argued that Moses had succeeded in putting in place certain mechanisms that allowed a peaceful process of passing the baton. I concur with this second option. On the one hand, the appointment of Aaron and his descendants to permanent priesthood and the role they played all along the Exodus narrative as close collaborators of Moses in all religious matters had prepared the people for his absence. The presence of the tabernacle in the camp and all the cultic activities it involved, mainly worship, sacrifices, rituals and feast celebrations gave much power to the Levites in general and Aaron's family in particular so that Moses' religious role



became secondary. Moses held the prominence of speaking with God in a unique way (Num.12:8), but priests would mediate between Yahweh and his people on various matters.

Amazingly, Moses granted a hereditary position to Aaron and his descendants while he neglected to assure a permanent leadership position for his children. "Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so they may serve me as priests" (Ex. 28:1). "Appoint Aaron and his sons to serve as priests, anyone else who approaches the sanctuary must be put to death" (Num. 3:10). The narrative reports that from the start Yahweh assigned Aaron to be the mouthpiece of Moses because of his lack of eloquence (Ex. 4:10). In the passage quoted above, Yahweh also asked that Aaron and his family be appointed to permanent priesthood. Although Moses and Aaron are biological brothers, Moses knew that as the years went by each family would develop and become a separate entity. The question is: "Did God choose the priestly family without Moses' consent?" Or "Was Moses unhappy that he and his sons were kept out of the office of priesthood?" As stated earlier, the problem in this distribution of power is to establish the extent of autonomy that Moses had in appointing his collaborators. Although the narrative does not give enough evidence to decide on whether or not Moses participated in the election of the priestly family, it is likely that he did not oppose God's choice. The character of Moses portrayed in the narrative presents him as a person who would express openly his feelings to God. Should he have been against the appointment of Aaron and his sons, he would have shared his disapproval with Yahweh. The greatness of Moses in passing the mantle of religious leadership to Aaron and his families lies in the support, confidence and investment of time he granted this family. The scope of their authority was primarily linked to the ministry in the Tabernacle; even though later on they had to settle some civil matters. Moses portrays what Walter Wright defines as leadership: "A transforming relationship in which the leader invests in the growth and development of the followers, empowering them to become what God has gifted them to be."<sup>327</sup> Wright distinguishes

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<sup>327</sup> Walter C. Wright, *Relational Leadership: A Biblical Model for Leadership Service* (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2000), 44.

three practical applications of empowering others namely, "mentoring, coaching and team building."<sup>328</sup> A close reading of the relationship that existed between Moses and Aaron's family and how he entrusted them with important responsibilities during the times of crisis in the wilderness, as described in this study, shows that Moses had accomplished the three applications of empowering defined by Wright.

The second strand of Moses' headship that needed succession was his political or administrative leadership. In some cases biblical characters such as Moses, Samuel, David and other judges embodied both political and religious authority. A very thin margin existed between Moses' political and religious office. However, in appointing Aaron and his family to priesthood, Moses made it clear that priesthood was kept apart from political leadership. This distinction of various offices – king, priest and prophet, would become more effective during the monarchy.

To relinquish political leadership is an area where Moses had to grow in his ministry. Having started as a lone ranger, by trying to deliver his people through his personal activism, Moses tried to control everything at the beginning. The assumption was that none of his followers were able to render the appropriate service that the people needed. "People come to **me** to seek God's will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to **me**, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and laws" (Ex. 18:16 [bold mine]). This lack of a competent substitute may be confirmed by the failure of Aaron and Hur to stand for Moses while he was with Yahweh on the mountain. They led Israel into idolatry of the Golden Calf, which caused the death of three thousand people (Ex. 32). But along the journey Moses might have learned to share power and prepare for his succession as he felt the weight of carrying alone the burden of leading a nation.

The narrator does not specify at what point Moses started coaching Joshua for succession. The failure of handling matters in his absence, as observed during the Golden Calf incident, could be one of the factors that motivated Moses to coach a capable successor.

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<sup>328</sup> Wright, *Relational Leadership: A Biblical Model for Leadership Service*, 44-61.

It seems that Joshua grew up in the shadow of Moses, only to be affirmed as a hero at the end of the narrative (Num. 27, Deut. 31 & 34). He is mentioned in the narrative without it putting him in the front line of events that would attract the attention of a reader as in the case of Aaron.

One would think that one of Aaron's sons, with their consistent participation in Moses' ministry, would carry on the liberation. But God had already prepared a successor for the political aspect of Moses' liberation. It would be interesting to study the itinerary of Joshua ascending to power. There seems to be two different accounts of Joshua's succession. One is of a long and steady mentoring under Moses as Joshua's name appears at strategic moments of the narrative. He is first mentioned as the commander of the army that won the first ever battle of the rescued slaves against the Amalekites in the Sinai region (Ex. 17:8-16). Nothing is said about how Moses discovered Joshua's military prowess. Then he accompanied Moses on the mountain to receive the tablets of the law (24:13), and he is the only non-Levite to have had access inside the Tabernacle. According to the text, Joshua might have been sleeping in the tent of meeting (33:11). He is one of the spies who explored Canaan and among the two (Caleb and Joshua) who were granted the privilege of entering Canaan because of their encouraging report (Num. 14:30). He is often described as "Moses' aide since youth" or "Moses' assistant" (Num. 11:28; Deut. 1:38). Besides being portrayed positively in the Pentateuch, Joshua is in one instance depicted negatively as being jealous of some elders who received a portion of Moses' spirit without coming to the meeting convened at the tent (Num. 11:28). In the light of this account, Joshua was mentored, equipped and qualified to take over the leadership after Moses.

The second account presumes, depending on how one interprets the text, that Moses was not sure of whom should succeed him at the head of the community. In Numbers 27:15-23, the narrator reports that Moses was praying to the Lord to provide a successor so that the people might not be like sheep without shepherd after his departure. Then God told him to take Joshua, a Spirit-filled man, and give him a share of his authority and then recommend him to Eleazar the priest and to the entire community. The decision would be obtained by inquiring of the 'urim' before the Lord. John Davis acknowledges that,

While the Bible does not specifically indicate why God chose Joshua for the great responsibility of leading the conquest of Canaan, we do have important information regarding the background and character of the man Joshua which should help us in understanding God's selection.<sup>329</sup>

One way of reconciling these two accounts may be to see that after private mentoring, Joshua needed a solemn and official acceptance by God, the priest and the entire community of Israel in order to be established in his position of power (Deut. 34). As we shall see in our next point about this narrative, God's approval was indispensable for any leader who had to be at the head of his people. If this explanation is accurate then, Moses' prayer was to ask God to confirm his protégé as the official successor. This procedure raises the issue of how to prepare the handing over after mentoring a successor. To prepare a successor is one thing, but to cause people to accept the one designated by the outgoing or deceased ruler is another thing. All will depend on how much influence the former ruler had upon the community so that people would continue to trust his choice even after his departure. In a non-hereditary position, like the one of Moses, the process may require strategy and tact. If it is admitted that Joshua was the protégé of Moses, then his acceptance proved how the Israelites had kept Moses' leadership in high esteem. It is not by chance that subsequent kings and even the Messiah would like to be identified as "the prophet like Moses" (Deut. 18:15).

In the African context, the issue of leadership succession raises a lot of discussions in many countries. The following remark of Victor Le Vine thirty years ago is still valid for many African countries.

Despite the existence of formal rules to facilitate leadership and regime succession, it has proven extremely difficult in Africa to do so peacefully and legally, and indeed, to settle the process of succession so that it can be accomplished without violence or threat to the stability of the political systems concerned.<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> John J. Davis, *Conquest and Crisis: Studies in Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 24.

<sup>330</sup> Victor Le Vine, "Problems of Political succession in Independent Africa" in Ali A. Mazrui and Hasu H. Patel (eds.) *Africa: The Next Thirty Years* (Sussex: Friedmann Publishers, 1974), 80.

In his study Le Vine shows that twenty-one of the twenty-four unconstitutional changes that took place between the beginning of 1965 and the end of 1969 in Africa were military coups.<sup>331</sup> Although the number of military coups has decreased, the issue of peaceful succession remains a problem in most African countries. The monarchical tendency of holding to power for many African leaders, as mentioned earlier in this study, is a key factor behind this disruption. Many leaders retain power until they become unpopular. The description made by Henry and Richard Blackaby can be evoked here:

The problem for some leaders is that they gradually come to see their identity as intrinsically linked to their position. They enjoy the respect and influence that comes with their position as head of the organization. As a result, they may hesitate to yield their office to younger leaders even when it becomes apparent to everyone else that a change in the organization is needed.<sup>332</sup>

They lose their credibility and adopt authoritarian measures to eliminate potential successors through persecution, imprisonment, exile or killing. In some cases, the unpopular leaders rig elections in order to remain on the seat. The outcome of such behavior is that once people are presented with an opportunity to have fair elections they choose to overthrow the entire regime or ruling party. In extreme cases, violence and rebellions arise in the country to topple the regime by force. Innocent bloodshed could be avoided if everybody abided by and respected the legal and constitutional procedures of succession that exist.

Churches and religious organizations in Africa are also facing the problem of succession. Succession is the root cause of several divisions in Churches where appropriate procedures of succession are either nonexistent or disregarded. Potential successors are often put aside by incumbent leaders who either prefer to retain power beyond the limit of their term or keep the leadership within a circle of a certain family, tribe, clan or race.

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<sup>331</sup> Le Vine, "Problems of Political succession in Independent Africa", 94.

<sup>332</sup> Henry and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People On to God's Agenda* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 257. In several instances the people escaped God's wrath and extermination because of Moses intercession.



The consequence of such unjust behavior is that a number of people break up and form their own denominations. The majority of political or religious leaders who misuse their power are unable to groom a successor or sustain the approval of their candidate by the community.

In countries where presidents enjoy the acceptance or credibility of the people and legal procedures are followed, peaceful successions take place. Tanzania can offer a good example, as they have now their fourth president since its independence in a smooth and democratic handing over. We have had Julius Nyerere, Ali H. Mwinyi, Benjamin Mukapa and now Jakaya M. Kikwete. Witnesses of politics in Tanzania confirm that Mwalimu Julius Nyerere had introduced two of them, Mwinyi and Mukapa. The credibility and trust that people held for the late president Nyerere was used to uphold the candidature of his successors. Another example is set by the succession of Nelson Mandela by Tabo Mbeki in South Africa. Many other African leaders are following what Boon recommends to African leaders as he argues: "Normally, when the time arises, the leaders will leave the environment to maintain a dignified withdrawal...one should also be mature enough to leave if it is the right thing to do so."<sup>333</sup>

In summary, the good example set by Moses in entrusting ahead of time the newly created office of priesthood with religious leadership and the peaceful handing over of the headship of the liberation to Joshua is commendable even today. In addition, Moses made sure that God, to whom the community belongs, approved his successor. This handing over stresses the greatness of Moses leadership and the trust he enjoyed from his people at the end of his mission. In spite of all the weaknesses displayed during the process of developing his leadership, Moses left his seat with honor and dignity. All leaders, current and old, who followed the path of passing the mantle of leadership to successors in peace are remembered with reverence and admiration even in Africa.

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<sup>333</sup> Boon, *The African Way*, 104.

### 7.8. Leadership and God's Partnership

God's partnership is the most striking and significant feature of Moses' leadership in the exodus narrative. From his commissioning at Sinai, the narrative describes the liberation of Israel as a joint operation done in partnership between Moses and Yahweh. On the one hand, Moses is portrayed as a prophet who makes known God's will to people; Yahweh himself being the liberator (Ex. 3: 7-8; 16-20). On the other hand Moses appears as the instrument of God in effecting the deliverance (Ex. 3:10-12). We have discussed earlier how scholars are divided between these two accounts of Moses' role. Some scholars attribute the heroic image of Moses as the liberator of Israel to the E tradition, while assigning the portrayal of Moses as a simple prophet of Yahweh to the J tradition.<sup>334</sup> At the same time, other scholars find it difficult to separate between these sources and combine J and E, as Wellhausen did, into one JE source.<sup>335</sup> This study has shown that there is no contradiction between the two views of Moses' office, but both together reflect the partnership that existed between Yahweh and Moses. A close reading of the narrative reveals that the text is consistent in displaying the collaboration of Moses and Yahweh in leading Israel throughout the narrative. We read that after the last victory of Israel over Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea, "the people believed in Yahweh and in Moses" (Ex. 15:31). Yahweh is the ultimate leader and owner of the people of Israel and Moses is His representative to implement God's will. The exercise of this delegated power becomes a privilege and also a great responsibility to Moses.

As a privilege, Moses seems to embody God's presence in the sight of the people of Israel as the instrument through which they can access and receive instructions from Yahweh. This embodiment of God's presence is reflected in things such as, the liberation from Egypt, the law and provisions of food and water in the wilderness, which are credited to Moses even though God is the source of everything. In the account of the

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<sup>334</sup> For more discussions on the J and E portrayals of Moses' role in the deliverance the reader can consult Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*. Vol.1 (London: SCM Press, 1975), 289-296.

<sup>335</sup> Read Richard E. Averbeck, "Factors in Reading the Patriarchal Narratives: Literary, Historical, and Theological Dimensions" in David M Howard Jr. and Michael Grisanti (eds) *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* (Leicester: Appolos, 2003), 115-137.

Golden Calf, the people complained to Aaron that since Moses who took them out of Egypt had disappeared, they needed a god (gods) to lead them (Ex. 32:1). Moses and the God who took them out of Egypt are considered in this passage as one. This view of Moses as God's partner is extended to subsequent rulers of Israel, mainly to the Davidic kingship in the Psalms. In his comment on Psalm 2, John Eaton notes, "the ceremonies of anointing and coronation as action [sic] of the Lord who declared the ruler to be his 'Son', the beloved partner of his own reign, and bestowed on him power to overcome evil."<sup>336</sup> In time this unique privilege of mediating God's will to the community became such a tiresome task that Moses risked his life in communicating God's will to the people, so much so that Jethro, his father in law, had to intervene with wise counsel in order to release him from excessive burdens (Ex. 18). One should not forget that partnership with God is not only a privilege.

The partnership with God was also a great responsibility to Moses. He knew that the Israelites were God's people, therefore in all his acts he needed to be sure that he won God's approval. He had to express his bond with God through obedience and trust in response to the love and faithfulness he received from Yahweh. The narrative reveals that despite all the favors Moses received from God, he was not exempt from God's judgment. The fact that Moses did not enter the Promised Land, like the other Israelites who disobeyed God in the wilderness, exhibits the delicateness of God's partnership in leadership. Moses had to seek God's support in all his undertaking; even when in many instances current readers find it difficult to understand some decisions taken by Moses with God's accord. It may be that we are so remote from Moses' culture and time that we cannot understand why God condoned a number of violent repressions exercised by Moses upon his contenders. This may have been a way to legitimate Moses' leadership which is not applicable to the present situation. We have here an example of the problem of appropriation of the text raised in our hermeneutical approach. We argued that a contextual reading should keep the dialogue between our context and the biblical context

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<sup>336</sup> John Eaton, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and New Translation* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 67. Many royal Psalms about the Lord's anointed king and David's line are interpreted as Messianic Psalms by NT writers.

alive because these two do not always fuse into one. This study has also discussed the problem raised by interventions of God in settling rebellions and the circumstances in which those actions may be understood. Nevertheless, Moses is portrayed as a ruler who totally depended on God in all his pronouncements. This dependency is displayed by the persistent and frequent intercessions that Moses held on behalf of the Israelites. Partnership requires accountability, and this is what Moses had tried to achieve through the entire narrative.

Many books on leadership today overlook partnership with God as an indispensable ingredient for successful leadership. The current trend in describing leadership puts an emphasis on the personal qualities of a leader and the relationship between leaders and followers. This bi-dimensional view of leadership leaves aside God, who is the third and indispensable stakeholder of any leadership. It is strange to notice that even books on spiritual leadership do not underscore God's ownership in creation. This omission is a failure to acknowledge God as the owner of the earth and everything in it, including the people to be led. Hence, any person endowed with leadership qualities is primarily accountable to God, whose people he/she leads. Emmanuel Ngara argues,

Leading a political party is not the same as leading a Church, nor is a private company run on the same principles as a government, higher education or soccer club. Yet, the qualities and behaviours demanded of people leading these different kinds of organizations or entities are basically the same.<sup>337</sup>

In his enumeration of what is required of all leaders, Ngara goes on, pointing to characteristics of a leader as having vision and purpose, commitment, character and the ability to be a role model, courage and tenacity, good management skills, leader's behaviour in relation to followers, giving a sense of direction, challenging, empowering, encouragement, team building, leadership, management and administration, and leadership styles with emphasis on servant leadership.<sup>338</sup> This list is repeated with few

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<sup>337</sup> Emmanuel Ngara, *Christian Leadership: A Challenge to the African Church* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2004), 38.

<sup>338</sup> Ngara, *Christian leadership*, 39-51. See also J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Secunderabad, India: OM Books, 2004). Sanders adds to the above qualities, the filling

modifications in many books on leadership, but they do not highlight God's ownership. This study underlines the importance of acknowledging that followers are God's people and He will assess how each leader treats his/her followers.

Those who have experienced totalitarian regimes, both in the Church and the state, can testify that dictators behave as if they own their followers and have the final word on every decision. The oppression of the poor and marginalized as well as the mismanagement of natural resources and the ecosystem reflect a certain conception of a world without God's supervision. This is the inherited view from the Enlightenment, secularism and even some aspects of postmodernism that try to reject God's supremacy over His creation. The rejection of God's ownership opens the door to exploitation and all kinds of abuse. This has been evoked in other domains of life. In his article "The Earth is God's and All that Is in It"<sup>339</sup> Andrew Warmback affirms that this is the basis on which sustainable development that takes into account the preservation of our environment, can be built. He concludes his article saying:

We need a theology that takes matter seriously. While we live in a generous world, its limits are to be respected: there are bounds to bounty. When human beings develop a proper perspective on their place in creation the community of creation will exist in harmony and mutual sustainability.<sup>340</sup>

Without a clear understanding of God's ownership leaders may misuse their power not only to destroy the necessary resources of our environment but also to oppress their followers. Moses narrative draws the attention of leaders to the fact that the earth and all in it belongs to God and those in positions of power are accountable to Him.

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of the Spirit for a spiritual leader. Still, it does not bring out God's ownership and His requirement of accountability from a leader.

<sup>339</sup> Andrew Warmback, "The Earth is God's and All that Is in It: Development From the Perspective of the Environment" in *The Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 110 (July 2001), 77-88.

<sup>340</sup> Warmback, "The Earth is God's and All that Is in It", 88.



## 7.9. Summary

This chapter has covered important issues related to leadership encountered in the Moses narratives. These include, leadership and service, legitimacy, teamwork, ethics, handling crises, succession and finally God's partnership. Dealing with these issues constituted a great challenge to Moses' leadership during the wilderness wandering. As a human being, he showed strengths and weaknesses as he struggled to solve the problems he encountered in his mission. There were areas, such as ethics and handling crises, in which a number of decisions were subjective and linked to the context or culture of Moses' epoch that one has to be very critical about before applying them to today's situation. This survey has commended Moses in availing himself to the service of his people and being able to hand over the mantle of leadership to Joshua. Assuring his succession by somebody who grew under his wings could be considered as the climax of Moses' leadership. Although he did not bring his people to the Promised Land, the narrative pays great tributes to the man who delivered Israel from Egypt and sustained their lives during the forty years of crossing the dry and barren desert. Crises offered an opportunity to Moses to achieve the development of his leadership from the feeble beginning in Egypt to the glorious maturity at his death. A significant feature of Moses' leadership remains his dependence on God. He was aware that the Israelites belonged to God. His power was only delegated to him and he was accountable for all his actions to the owner of the people.

Most of the leadership issues raised in this narrative can be applied to the African context. By engaging a dialogue between the struggle of Moses with regard to the above issues and the way authority is exercised by various African leaders, this study has demonstrated the need for taking leadership issues seriously in order to bring change on the African continent. Many political and religious leaders in Africa do not rise up to the standard and so plunge their community into anarchy. There is an outstanding ambivalence between what they claim, as African, and how they live and conduct their leadership. The study of Moses' leadership becomes therefore a way of scrutinizing our own leadership failures, both in politics and religion, and a way of rectifying areas where our continent is lacking the most. The violent and brutal end of many African regimes

and religious denominations is a symptom of how leadership issues are often overlooked or ignored. Thus, Moses sets an example of how a leader can overcome his/her weaknesses and leave a legacy to the future generation by which to be remembered. Mismanagement of resources and authoritarian regimes reveal that many African leaders fail to acknowledge that God is the owner of the earth and that He requires accountability from anyone who is in a leadership position. Moses' leadership is still evoked by both secular and religious writers of the liberation.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **8.1. Introduction**

This chapter concludes our survey of Moses' struggles for leadership in the Exodus narrative. Its main objective is to offer to the reader a summary of various issues covered in this study, a conclusion and recommendations for further reflection and investigation. In bringing together the findings of this study, this chapter captures the dialogue engaged between the Old Testament text and the context of the researcher in order to allow a better understanding of the dynamic of leadership imbedded in the Moses story. This contextual reading of the narrative has helped this study to draw on some issues that many African leaders grapple with even today. Areas that were not covered adequately in this thesis are proposed for further research.

#### **8.2. Summary**

This study focuses on Moses' struggle for leadership because of its implications for today's reality on the African continent where Churches and states wrestle with leadership issues. In spite of the complexity of the pentateuchal narrative and its multifaceted image of Moses, the liberator of Israel, this study has examined the story as a continuous narrative. This approach to reading the Moses story as a whole, while paying attention to some historical and literary difficulties found in the form handed down to us by the writers of the Bible, has helped to uncover various aspects of Moses and his leadership as the central character in the exodus episode, including his strengths and weaknesses. Chapter two discussed our hermeneutical approach to the Moses narrative and the interaction established between the Old Testament text and current issues in the African context.

Moses was born at a time when his people faced oppression and genocide in Egypt and were groaning for liberation. In danger of being killed at his birth, Moses owed his life to the conspiracy of a number of women who opted to defy Pharaoh's decree of destroying all Hebrew male children (Ex. 1:8-22). These were the midwives who refused to kill Hebrew babies during the process of delivery (Ex. 1:15-20); Moses' mother and sister who decided to hide the baby from the executioners (Ex. 2:1-4); and Pharaoh's daughter who adopted and granted Moses the status of a prince of Egypt (Ex. 2:5-10). Therefore, Moses was aware from his childhood that he belonged to an oppressed community, which needed to be rescued from her bondage. The major problem of that moment was to find a person who would be bold enough to challenge Pharaoh's power. Moses is presented in the narrative as the response to the quest for a liberator of Israel.

In chapter three, we examined the journey of Moses' leadership from the failure of his first attempt as the liberator of Israel in Egypt to the handing over to Joshua, his successor, in the desert of Moab. We have shown in this study how leadership was a learning process for Moses from the follies of a young activist in Egypt to God's elect and approved head of the newly constituted nation of Israel. At the beginning, moved by his strong sympathy for the oppressed, Moses decided to take the law in his own hands and killed a cruel taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave. The intention might have been good, reflecting Moses' intention to uphold justice but his people disapproved his act and rejected his mediation. His passion, pride and zeal were blown away by the lack of proper legitimacy to act on behalf of his people. In his disappointment he fled to Midian and became a shepherd (Ex.2:12-25). Moses had to wait for forty years before God's commissioning could tap into the dormant enthusiasm and energy and use Moses to rescue the oppressed nation. He came back to Egypt endowed with a divine mandate to pursue what he had attempted some forty years earlier. This time it was a humbled man that God met in the bush, deprived of his self-esteem and pride and confessing his inability to carry out the task (Ex. 3 & 4). In his book on Moses, Meyer observes that, "God must bring us down before He can raise us up. Emptying must precede filling. We

must get to an end of ourselves before He can begin in us."<sup>341</sup> Assured with the Divine Presence and the capacity to perform miracles in the name of Yahweh, Moses mobilized his brethren for action and after a long confrontation of power with Pharaoh, he succeeded in leading his people out of Egypt (Ex. 5-12).

The study reveals that coming out of Egypt was just the beginning of a journey in which Moses' leadership was often challenged. This study shifts the attention of the reader from the heroic image of the mighty founder of the Israelite religion, the lawgiver and liberator of Israel, to the agony of a man who spent his life fighting opposition and striving to meet the needs of a nation frustrated by years of wilderness wandering. The following statement from G. von Rad captures well Moses' struggles for leadership:

With quite horrifying obstinacy the people counter the work and service of Moses with murmurings, with hostility, even with open rejection. At one moment, in their faint-heartedness, they completely lose confidence in him and desire to return to Egypt (Ex. 14:11; Num. 14:3). At times, as in the story of Korah, they contest the unique character of the calling and office of Moses; they lay claim to equal rights with him, and to such immediate access to the presence of God as he enjoys (Num. 16).<sup>342</sup>

The story of Korah in Numbers 16 and 17, as mentioned by von Rad, is a good illustration of the challenges that Moses faced during his leadership. Hence, this study has discussed in detail the different strands of rebellions intertwined in the story of Korah. We have distinguished three major movements of rebellion. The first strand, led by Korah and 250 princes of the nation, contested the special privilege given to Aaron and his sons to occupy the office of high priesthood. The people raised the issue of equal rights for all Israel to appear before the Lord and questioned the mechanism that brought Moses and Aaron to the leadership position over the nation. This revolt reveals the tension that existed among the people between sacred leadership and the authority of those whose power emanated from the people. It suggests the frictions that transpired from the coexistence in the leadership of the community of individuals chosen by God,

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<sup>341</sup> F.B.Meyer, *Moses: The Servant of God* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1960), 51.

<sup>342</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Moses* (London: United Society for Christian Literature-Lutterworth Press, 1961), 13.



like Moses, Aaron and other priests, and people's representatives, such as the council of the elders. Today Churches and states experience the same tension when traditional or sacred authorities share leadership positions with elected representatives of the community. In many instances Moses avoided arguments about the legitimacy of God's elect leaders by referring the matter to God's arbitration and vindication. Moses did so in the case of Korah and his company by proposing a test in which God would choose who should occupy the office of high priesthood. But God's vindication was that the losing party had to be destroyed.

The second movement led by the Reubenites, Dathan and Abiram, targeted Moses' leadership. They complained against the condemnation of those who reacted negatively to the report of the spies and decided to thwart the whole project of liberation by returning to Egypt. The entire generation of grown ups who left Egypt was condemned to perish in the wilderness without reaching the Promised Land and inherit what they had expected (Num.14). In their frustration Dathan and Abiram accused Moses of failing in his mission to grant the Israelites the fields and vineyards they needed. Their disappointment was so grave that they refused any reconciliation with Moses. They were also left to face God's verdict and vindication. We have shown also that they faced the same fate as Korah and his company by being destroyed by God's wrath.

The last strand of rebellion in the Korah story concerns the uproar of the whole congregation as they reacted against the violent repression of Moses' opponents, especially in the two cases mentioned above. When an entire community withdraws its confidence from the leadership, it results in the downfall of the project. This was a serious challenge that could cause the whole enterprise of liberation to break down, if it were not quenched rapidly. Thanks to Moses' intercession and Aaron's atonement the community was spared from extermination by a plague that raged in the camp as the result of God's disapproval of their rebellion. However, 14,700 died in this revolt.

Many lessons have been drawn from Moses' leadership and the crucial role he played in various cases of rebellions and murmuring. The most important lesson from the entire

story is that Moses was neither a god, nor a superman, but just a human being whose life and qualities were common to any mortal. In his humanness, Moses served his people in his strengths and weaknesses during a period when they needed a leader most. Therefore, his story can inspire any leader today who intends to be used as an instrument in achieving God's purpose for his/her community and organization. Although he did not live to enter the Promised Land to which he devoted all his life, he paved the way so that Joshua and the new generation might inherit the land that Yahweh had promised to the patriarchs. The tributes paid to him by the Israelites at his death and his exceptional burial by the hands of God on Pisgah's summit of Mount Nebo witness without any doubt to the greatness of a life surrendered to God's purpose for the benefit of his people (Deut. 34).

We have seen that, like many leaders today, Moses wrestled with issues related to the position of leadership as in any community or organization. This study has considered six of the most important issues as they emerge from the reading of the narrative. These include, Moses' consciousness of being called to serve his people for God's purpose, legitimacy, teamwork, ethics, handling crises and succession. The awareness of the delicate task that awaited him when he accepted the responsibility of rescuing Israel from Egypt caused Moses to have a strong sense of service as displayed in the narrative. As God's mediator he gave his life to intercede tirelessly for the survival of his nation. He knew that God had entrusted him with the responsibility of being an agent who should lead the liberation to completion. He rose to the challenge and implemented the liberation of Israel. The whole enterprise depended firstly on his acceptance by the followers. As God's elect leader he struggled with how to legitimize his authority. The backing of God's presence and Moses' determination to pursue the exodus was vital, no matter what prevailed in winning the hearts of the people in spite of some unavoidable contestations from other contenders to the leadership position. It appears clearly from this story that the issue of legitimacy and credibility depends more on the service one renders to his/her community or organization than on the form of political regime that brings a leader to power, monarchial, traditional or democratic.

Moses wrestled in the area of constituting teamwork. We read how he started as a loner in his younger days, trying to prove his ability to work without the help of other persons. But through many failures he slowly realized that leadership is never a one-person activity. He primarily used his familial ties to build teamwork with Aaron and Miriam but he had to broaden his team in order to succeed in his mission. Jethro's intervention in Exodus 18, and his advice for a decentralized administration was a learning experience to Moses. Although the narrative does not elaborate on the relationship between Moses and other institutions, such as the council of the elders, the narrative reports that at every crucial moment Moses needed the backing of the elders to win the collaboration of the community. As rebellions and revolts increased, Moses reached the point of confessing that he would rather die than bear alone the burden of leading the community. He was then told by God to share the prophetic role (by apportioning his Spirit) with 72 among the elders of Israel (Num. 11:4-30). This teamwork was designed to provide the support Moses needed in times of crises so that he might succeed in his mission as a man of God. In this study we have underscored the significance of teamwork today and how the lack of it is paralyzing some Churches and institutions in Africa.

Leadership ethics in the Moses narrative remains a debatable issue as it guided his decisions in handling crises. As a leader of a people qualified as stiff-necked (Ex. 33:5), Moses had to weigh ethical values as he dealt with discontent and rebellion. From an impulsive activist as a young Egyptian prince, Moses became more mature as he reacted with softness or severity as the case required, but always with the aim of preserving the goal of the liberation, reaching Canaan. On several instances the people escaped God's wrath and extermination because of Moses' intercession. He had to plead for forgiveness with the Lord even when people openly rejected God's provisions. But on the other hand, he asked God to severely punish certain leaders of rebellions. We have discussed, in this study, ethical problems raised by cases in which the death penalty was pronounced on the contenders. This seems to be contrary to the Gospel of love and tolerance toward our enemies as taught by Jesus in the Gospels. We underlined also dangerous interpretations that might be drawn by some African leaders from the violent repressions of political

opponents contained in some texts of the narrative. Africa has experienced autocratic regimes that have been characterized by the elimination of potential successors. This is true in politics, but also in some religious congregations. Our caution is that the death penalty in the Moses narrative is to be understood in the economy of the covenant signed between Yahweh and Israel, which contained curses (death) or blessings as the result of people's obedience or disobedience. This narrative should not be used to legitimize the killing of political opponents because no country or organization has signed a treaty which includes the death penalty to those who break the covenant. Moreover the death penalty is being abolished by many African constitutions. Ethical issues are even more at stake in Africa today as many leaders are torn between keeping traditional values and cultures and at the same time conforming to the Western trend of life that dominates the global world. As it stands in the Moses narrative, many decisions taken by leaders divide public opinion because of the ambiguity of ethical values underlying any judgment.

The last issue we discussed in the Moses story was mentoring future leaders and its outcome of assuring peaceful succession. This study has acknowledged the greatness of Moses for grooming Joshua, and when the time came for him to hand over the mantle of leadership to the younger generation it was without a struggle. Moses' handing over is described in the narrative with such solemnity that all stakeholders, God, people and Moses, in agreement, gave their blessing to Joshua as the right successor to carry on the exodus. Moses stands therefore as a commendable leader even to the contemporary generation. People keep leaders in high esteem who know when to exit the seat.

Leaders with integrity recognize when they have made their most worthwhile contributions. Then they graciously hand over the reigns of leadership to the next generation.<sup>343</sup>

We have deplored situations where in many African organizations aging leaders who have become ineffective refuse to retire and allow new leadership to step in. By refusing to pass the baton, they become a hindrance to the good performance of the organization.

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<sup>343</sup> Henry & Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving the People On to God's Agenda* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 257.

Moses sets a good example to be followed by leaders who want to assure a bright future for their organizations even today.

### **8.3. Conclusion**

The struggles for leadership are not limited to a certain age or epoch. The Moses narrative has opened our eyes to pertinent issues that everyone who aspires to being a successful leader needs to consider. Leadership is never a means for self-interest but a way of availing oneself to serving others. Whatever may be his/ her personal charisma or skills, a leader will always need to be assured of the acceptance of his/her followers. It becomes clear also from the narrative that the call to effective leadership is a call to handling crises. It is common a saying that anybody can pilot a ship on a peaceful sea but only a qualified captain will take it through the storms. Moses has proven his greatness by laying down his life for the cause of the exodus. Hardship and revolts would not let him quit his vocation but with his faith and confidence in divine help he led his people out of Egypt and through the wilderness. He had to make some hard decisions, not for his enjoyment, but in order to preserve the common objective, liberation.

Moses was not blinded by his success to the point of holding onto the seat when his vigor was long gone, but he knew the grandeur of trusting the younger generation with new skills for the future of the Exodus. In his weaknesses and strengths Moses sets an example of effective leaders who made significant contributions in their society so much so that their examples are immortalized forever. How many organizations on our continent are groaning for an exodus if only we could raise persons like Moses to lead them?

Having come to the end of this journey, we would like to assess our itinerary by attempting to answer the four questions raised at the beginning of this study.

*Had Moses used his position to enslave the people of Israel?*

This study has shown that, in spite of some violent repressions of rebellions, the narrative asserts people's freedom to express their dissatisfaction of and disappointment at Moses'



leadership. The Israelites would not let the authority of Moses and Aaron go unchallenged whenever something went wrong in their journey. People's reactions capture well the complexity of Moses' leadership as he was often called to account for his decisions and also to respond to people's questions. It therefore appears that the Israelites redeemed from Egypt did not become Moses' slaves in the wilderness. It was also not Moses' intention to enslave the people of Yahweh, since he was told from the start of the exodus that Israel had to become God's possession and kingdom of priests.

*Is Korah one of the jealous leaders who are never satisfied with their position?*

A close examination of charges against Moses' leadership by the various movements of rebellion, demonstrate that the root cause of discontent among the people was not primarily jealousy. Although positioning and struggle for power among leaders are not absent, the motives of the different strands of rebellion represented by Korah go beyond the fight for power. Apart from hardship in the wilderness, lack of water and food, serious contestations to Moses' leadership are mostly stirred up by what was considered as a subjective appointment of the high priesthood, condemnation of aged people to die in the wilderness and the killing of Moses' opponents. One may deplore the procedure used in some cases by those who led rebellions but they raised legitimate and pertinent questions that required Moses to remain accountable to people he was leading. The presence of the opposition helped Moses not to establish an autocratic regime.

*How did these revolts affect Moses, the people and God?*

Revolts reveal the tension that existed in Moses' leadership between, on the one hand, his role as the liberator who had to lead people into the Promised Land and, on the other hand, being God's representative to exercise justice and punish wrongdoing. Moses becomes judge and intercessor at the same time and has to act in either role depending on the circumstances.

The ordinary people paid the huge price because they were drawn to side with leaders in their power struggle. Standing in the middle of the tension of leadership, "ordinary people" became victims as they lost many members in the conflicts. They had to learn

that leaders often pursue their own agendas, even when they seem to speak on behalf of the congregation.

Revolts enhanced the concept of God's sovereignty as the ultimate judge who had to decide when and how to reward or punish his people. Moses and the entire congregation had to conform with God's ordinances in order to reach the Promised Land.

*What lesson can our society learn from this story?*

It is important to know that opposition to leadership is not a bad thing and that our leaders should not be allergic to opposition. Confrontation may be a healthy exercise if it is done with the aim of calling to good governance and keeping the rulers accountable to the people. However, it becomes dangerous when some leaders, wanting to advance their personal cause, incite the people to rebellion and bring unnecessary death among the congregation. This is what has been happening in DR Congo and may be in other parts of Africa. The major lesson to be drawn by the "ordinary people" concerns how they should use their vote in electing and demanding accountability from those in leadership.

#### **8.4. Recommendations**

This research has revealed that Moses' leadership is a very complex topic, which has implications for many other key players in the Exodus and the entire process of liberation. We have put our emphasis on the struggles Moses faced in leading a rebellious people through the hardship of the wilderness. There are many other aspects that have been overlooked or superficially scratched for fear of taking us away from the focus of this study, yet they may shed light on some dark spots not covered in this work. I want to recommend the following for further research:

- In the desert of Sinai, Jethro the father-in-law of Moses suggested a model of administration, which was designed to release Moses from carrying a heavy burden alone and also delegating power to other potential leaders in the community. It is said that Moses implemented the suggestion and everybody

was happy. In the course of the narrative there is not enough information on how this administrative body discharged its duty. It would be interesting to trace the role played by these administrators during the reign of Moses and after.

- The organization of the Hebrew society, even before Moses, was centered on the heads of families who constituted the traditional council of elders. Moses was told to consult this council in order to mobilize the community for the liberation. After the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, the office of priesthood seems to have taken over some of the prerogatives assigned to the council of elders. Further research in this area can help us understand the relationship between this traditional authority of the council of the elders and God's appointed office of priesthood during the exodus period; their areas of collaboration and also the limit of competence for each of them.
- Joshua is mentioned several times as Moses' assistant and was entrusted with some tasks during the wilderness journey. The reader discovers only at the end of the narrative that it was part of his mentoring for the succession. A thorough study on how Moses coached Joshua and what influence this mentorship had on Joshua's leadership after the death of Moses may be a useful complement to the development of future spiritual leadership.
- It would be interesting to contribute to the ongoing debate concerning the late compilation of the final text of the pentateuchal narrative and if this production of the final draft does affect the authoritative character of its sacred text,

Due to the scope of our topic and the constraints of time, this study could not cover the above topics. I recommend that research in this area be carried further.

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