

The Story of Korah's Rebellion: Key to the Formation of the Pentateuch  
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The key to unlocking the Pentateuch has yet to be found. After more than two hundred years of testing now this key, now that, scholars find themselves with more keys than ever before, but none which gives entre to every nook and cranny of this maze-like book -- a book which, though seemingly composite, does not acknowledge itself as such. Even when segmented into composite elements by the application of literary, formal, or other criteria, it is silent as to how and when these composite elements came into existence, who composed them and for what reason. However sharply the tools of analysis have been honed, scholars are still at sixes and sevens when it comes to understanding the process by which the Pentateuch came to be what it is: a book attributed to a single author, Moses, who was believed to have penned virtually every word of it before his death in the wilderness.

This silence is loudly echoed by the silence of the historical, prophetic, and hagiographical books of the Bible. The book of Kings may tell us of the discovery in the Temple of a book allegedly written by Moses, but it does not explicitly tell us the length and breadth of it. And though we are assured that it had been lost for a very long time -- from the days of the Judges no less -- its original content was presumed to have remained intact.

So too, though we read in Nehemiah that Ezra read from the Torah of Moses, we are not told how much he read, or how it came to be that Ezra had become privy to a copy of the Torah of Moses which had been out of circulation from the time of Joshua, and hence could not have been in its entirety the book which had been found in the Temple in Josiah's day. Insofar then as the process of Pentateuchal formation is concerned, neither the Pentateuch nor the non-Pentateuchal books of the Bible have proved to be helpful.

The extant literature of the ancient Near East is no less unhelpful. However much it illuminates the background of Israel's history and literature, it is opaque when it comes to the process of Pentateuchal formation. And for good reason. There is no ancient Near Eastern equivalent of so multi-layered a composite of millennial history, multi-faceted story-telling, and wide-ranging legislation designed for societies both simple and complex. Being the anomaly that it is, the Pentateuchal process is not explicable by an appeal to ancient Near Eastern analogies which do not exist.

Since scholars have been unable to find in the Pentateuch or in the other books of the Bible, or in the literature of the ancient Near East any explicit confirmation of the hypotheses they have conjured up, it would seem to follow that only some as yet untried method may offer an implicit confirmation so persuasive that it borders on the explicit. It is just such an untried method that I wish to test out in this paper. For I shall argue that if one takes the story of the rebellion of Korah as one's starting point, and follows through on the paths that it logically compels us to follow throughout the rest of the Pentateuch, the historical and prophetic books of the Bible, the Hagiographa, and to an extra-canonical book, the Wisdom of Ben Sira, one will discover along the way the historical process by which the Pentateuch came to be the unity of composites that it is.

## II

If a wanderer, without any awareness of more than two hundred years of Pentateuchal criticism had stumbled by chance on a copy of the Pentateuch, and had opened it to the story of Korah's rebellion, it would be clear to such a one that this could hardly be a story pure and simple, but rather an account of a violent struggle for absolute power dramatically enhanced by the exceptionally harsh punishments meted out to the rebels by a God beside himself with anger. That this story reached beyond mere literary or theological concern would be evident from the fact that Aaron's son Eleazar was commanded to take the brazen firepans of the rebels and beat them out for a covering of the altar". . . to be a memorial unto the children of Israel, to the end that no common man that is not of the seed of Aaron draw near to burn incense before the Lord, that he fare not as Korah and his company as the Lord spoke unto him by the hand of Moses." (Numbers 17:4-5).

It is made even more evident from the fact that 32 verses (18:1-32) of hard-hitting legislation follows fast in the wake of the story, legislation drawing a barrier of permanent separation between Aaron and his sons the priests, and the rest of the tribe of Levi, the ministrants, removable only on pain of death: "Only they [the Levites] shall not come nigh unto the holy furniture and unto the altar, that they die not, neither they, nor ye." (18:3)

The story's implicit purpose would have spoken out to the untutored wanderer loud and clear: any challenge on the part of the Levites or the people at large to the priestly monopoly of Aaron and his sons would be put down as forcefully in the future as it had been put down in the past.

### III

Turning from the story of Korah's rebellion and trekking through the rest of the Pentateuch from Exodus through Deuteronomy, the untutored wanderer would very soon realize that he or she had entered a maze with no way out. Impressed by Yahweh's crushing of Korah's revolt and his crowning of Aaron and his sons with the priesthood, the wanderer would not have been surprised at the thousands of passages in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers that long before the revolt had endowed Aaron and his sons with the priesthood in perpetuity; assigned to them the role of sole expiators of the sins of the people; designed for them garments of beauty; built for them a splendid Tabernacle; and gave them charge of distinguishing between the holy and the profane, the clean and unclean. Nor would the wanderer have been surprised that the breaking of the rebellion was followed up with further underpinnings of the absolute authority of Aaron, his rightful heir to the high priesthood, Eleazar, and to the sons of Aaron at large.

What would puzzle the wanderer, however, would be the way in which the Aaronide path enters into and out of paths which are not Aaronide at all. One of these paths would show the markings of an absolute power lodged in a prophet-like leader, Moses, who was neither a priest himself nor an endower of a priestly class, nor the architect of an elaborate cultic establishment. This the untutored wanderer would discern clearly in the vignette of Moses's relationship to the Tent of Meeting and the cloud of God's presence as drawn in Exodus 33:7-11.

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; and he called it the tent of meeting. And every one who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose up, and every man stood at his tent

door, and looked after Moses, until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the door of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the door of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, every man at his tent door. Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tent.

Here is a simple tent of meeting, and not an elaborate tabernacle; here Yahweh comes down in a cloud to speak with Moses face to face and not to savor the incense of sweet-smelling sacrifices; here Joshua is tending the tent and learning to be a prophet like Moses, and not a priest like Aaron. Here in a word, is prophetic, not Aaronide absolutism, there are thus two roads leading away from each other, and not merging.

As if this were not maze-like enough, a third road opens up to our untutored wanderer as soon as he or she starts reading Deuteronomy. This road, by contrast to the other two, has the markings of a system of authority which is neither Aaronide or prophetic. Aaron takes center stage in Deuteronomy only when he kindles Yahweh's burning anger by building the golden calf. Otherwise, with the exception of the mention of his death, Aaron is conspicuously absent from Moses' farewell address. What the wanderer finds instead is a priestly class made up of that very tribe of Levi whose claims to altar rights had been so deeply buried in *sheol* with Korah and his company. Here in Deuteronomy, this class is endowed by Yahweh and Moses with altar rights in perpetuity, and with authority over the Law for all time:

"And of Levi he said, 'Thy Thumim and Thy Urim be with Thy holy one. . . for they have observed Thy word, and keep Thy covenant. They shall teach Jacob Thine ordinances, and Israel Thy law. They shall put incense before Thee, and whole burnt offerings upon Thine altar. Bless, Lord, his substance and accept the work of his hands. Smite through the loins of them that rise up against him. and of them that hate him, that they rise up not again.(Deut. 33:8a, 9b-12)

Realizing that these three roads cannot logically merge with each other, the untutored wanderer would have little alternative but to separate each of them from the others and mark them off one by one with clear signs indicating the authority system which had built them. Whether or not these roads at some time or other had actually led into one another is one which cannot be answered so long as one is confined to the Pentateuchal maze. Whether it can be answered by trekking through the historical, prophetic and Hagiographic books of the Bible, and the Wisdom of Ben Sira, can be determined only after our untutored wanderer has ventured forth.

## IV

Trekking one's way through the historical and prophetic books of the Bible is quite a different experience than that of trekking through the Pentateuch. Joshua, to be sure is somewhat reminiscent of the Pentateuchal maze with its mutually exclusive authority systems, and Judges proves to be no straight path either, but they are not nearly as puzzling and

bewildering as the Pentateuch itself, if only because no weighty legislation is heaped up along the way. As for the books of Samuel and Kings, they offer a relatively straight path which leads from prophetic absolutism to power-sharing, and from a pastoral agricultural and urban pre-monarchical society and embryonic cultic system to a more complex monarchical society with a priestly class, an elaborate cultic system, and a class of prophets split between "guild prophets" on the one hand and "free lance" prophets on the other.

The record as set down in Samuel and Kings would in outline be clear to our untutored wanderer. Samuel is pictured as a prophet with absolute power who crowns and uncrowns kings. Nathan is a prophet who holds kings to account and pressures David into designating Solomon as his successor. Ahijah the Shilonite gives Yahweh's sanction to Jeroboam's revolt against Solomon's heir Rehoboam. Elijah condemns Omri and Ahab in Yahweh's name, while Elisha spurs Jehu to revolt and take the crown for himself.

Throughout Samuel, Kings and the prophetic books attributed to Amos, Micah, Hosea and Isaiah, the wanderer would discover that prophetic absolutism was the order of the day whether it was manifest as with Moses and Joshua through an apprenticeship system, or as with Amos, a claim that Yahweh had spoken directly to one who was neither prophet or the son of a prophet. The issue was not whether the voice of Yahweh was absolute, but whether the claim to have heard that voice was to be trusted. The "free lance" prophets never hesitated to denounce sacrifices, and excoriate priests, kings, and "guild" prophets.

Indeed the untutored wanderer would have seen that until the reign of Josiah, the prophets had been able to ward off any challenge to their special relationship with Yahweh. Unlike the priestly class of Solomon's Temple and the Davidic kings, prophetic absolutism reached back to Moses the prophet of the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings. Not so the Solomonic priesthood or the Davidic kings whose legitimacy dangled precariously on prophetic whim. Whereas the prophets were protected by wilderness covenant rights, priest and kings had no such right to which they could appeal.

In Josiah's day, however a bid to gain this right was made when the high priest, the king, and a guild prophethess proclaimed that a book which had been lost since the days when the Judges judged was indeed the handiwork of Moses. Although the book is not explicitly stated to have been Deuteronomy, Deuteronomy is the only book of Moses which legitimized a Levitical priesthood, gave sanction to monarchy and set limits to prophetic absolutism. It would therefore seem highly plausible to our untutored wanderer that the lost book must have been Deuteronomy, for otherwise it would be difficult to explain that those who are the beneficiaries of the tripartite power-sharing stipulations of Deuteronomy—priest, king and "guild" prophet as against "free lance" prophets — the very ones who find and authenticate this newly-found book.

Priest, king and "guild" prophet had seemingly joined in a coalition to establish the legitimacy of a post-wilderness priestly class, and a post-wilderness monarchy on wilderness covenantal grounds. If successful, the free-lance prophets would once and for all be silenced. Yahweh very much wanted sacrifices. So much so in fact that he had chosen the tribe of Levi to serve as an hereditary priestly class, have the Urim and the Thumin in their charge, teach Jacob Yahweh's ordinances and Israel Yahweh's law, burn incense before Yahweh and offer whole burnt offerings upon his altar, and be assured of Yahweh's vengeance on their adversaries and those who hated them (cf. Deut. 33; 8-10). Henceforth any prophet who did not accept as binding the immutable laws alleged to have been given by Moses on Horeb, or the institutions

which Yahweh had allegedly established in the wilderness might be put to death as a false prophet, as was urged in the case of Jeremiah, and successfully against the prophet Uriah.

Here at long last was to be found the second of the three roads within the Pentateuchal maze, but it was evident that it was built not as a road to link up with prophetic absolutism but rather as a road built to bring it to a dead-end. It did not take our untutored wanderer much further trekking before discovering that the builders of the tripartite power sharing road had failed to achieve their hoped-for goal. First in chapters 40-48 in the book of Ezekiel, a prophet, solely on the basis of prophetic authority, stripped the Levites of their priestly prerogatives and turned them over to the son of Zadok, transmuted the king into a prince, and promulgated legislation that is not to be found in Deuteronomy. So little regard did this prophet have for the authenticity of Deuteronomy that he makes no mention of Moses, no mention of Horeb, and no mention of Moses' farewell address or his deathbed blessing to Levi. But neither does he make mention of the Aaronides, or Sinai, or most striking of all, the rebellion of Korah, the burial of the Levitical claims in *sheol*, and the line of demarcation between the Aaronide priests and the Levite ministrants which presumably had been drawn by Moses centuries ago in the wilderness. However much this Ezekiel may have been an exemplar of prophetic absolutism and however much he may have been aware of the fact that the Levites were practicing as priests as Deuteronomy prescribed, he knows nothing as yet of the story of Korah's rebellion and the establishment of Aaronide absolutism.

And as our untutored wanderer would discover as he or she read through the last of the prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi were as unaware of the Aaronides as Ezekiel.

In the face of a silence so eloquent, what choice would the wanderer have but conclude that as late as Malachi's final words admonishing Israel to adhere to the Torah which Moses had given in Deuteronomy, the longest, widest, and most heavily trafficked road in the Pentateuch had yet to be built. Not until the books of Chronicles, Ezra and the Ezraic sections of Nehemiah are opened and read, do the Aaronides, who are nowhere found in Samuel, Kings, or in any of the prophetic books make their first appearance.

## VI

The third road of the Pentateuchal maze thus opens up only after the Pentateuch has been finalized, promulgated and accepted by the people at large as God's immutable revelation at some unknown point in time between c. 445 B.C. at the earliest and 397 B.C. at the latest. Chronicles, Ezra and the Ezraic parts of Nehemiah, having been written after this momentous event, bear clear witness to the fact that the Aaronide road, though recently built, was believed to stretch all the way from the wilderness age to the Persian conquest. Although well-read in Kings the author of Chronicles does not-hesitate to superimpose Aaronide absolutism over the non-Aaronide priesthood and cultus to which the writers of Kings attest. Indeed the Chronicler goes so far as to virtually delete the history of the Northern kingdom of Israel from the history of Yahweh's people, and goes to great pains from the start to finish to differentiate between the Aaronide priests on the one hand and the Levite non-priests on the other as is evident from the following citations:

"The Levites were appointed for all the service of the tabernacle of the house of God, but Aaron and his sons offered upon the altar of burnt offering and

upon the altar of incense, for all the work of the most holy place, and to make atonement for Israel according to all that Moses the servant of God had commanded. And these are the sons of Aaron: Eleazar his son, Phineas his son. . . Zadok his son." I Chronicles 6:35-38.

"And Abijah stood up upon mount Zemaraim and said:

'Hear me, o Jeroboam and all Israel. . . Have ye not driven out the priests of the Lord, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites and have made you priests after the manner of the people of other lands? . . . But as for us, the Lord is our God, and we have not forsaken him; and we have priests ministering unto the Lord, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites in their work. . . (II Chronicles 13:4,9,10).

The third road of Aaronide absolutism, once built and opened up, succeeded, whereas the second road of power sharing in Deuteronomy had failed. The Aaronide road became the only road which the people of Israel were to travel from the day that the Pentateuch was promulgated until the Hasmonean revolt. For it is simply a matter of record that never again are the Levites to be found serving as priests; Davidic kings are never again found sitting on the throne; and the voice of the prophet are never again given ear in the land. By contrast the Aaronides, unknown even to the last of the prophets, alone served as priests in the Temple until its destruction in 70, and continued to enjoy an honorific separation from the Levites till the present day.

## VII

How did this singular achievement take place? How did a class which came to wield such absolute power emerge as it were ex-nihilo?

Unfortunately our sources are such that no definitive answers can be given. But however true this may be, answers of a sort may be elicited from the structure of the finalized Pentateuch; from the efforts of Ezekiel to strip the Levites of their priestly rights and to transfer them to a single family//from the disintegrating state of the restored community as reported by Nehemiah; and by the story of Korah's rebellion.

A close look at the structure of the finalized Pentateuch reveals that from Exodus through Deuteronomy, the claims of the Aaronides swamp the claims for prophetic absolutism as pictured in Exodus 33:7-11 and the claims for tripartite power-sharing as set forth in Deuteronomy.

So too we can infer from the fact that these claims were preserved in the Pentateuch, and not blotted out, that the prophetic absolutist corpus and tripartite power-sharing corpus must have had the seal of Mosaic wilderness authenticity so indelibly impressed on the people that to touch them in any way would endanger rather than enhance the Aaronide bid for absolute power. What could not be achieved by eradication might very well be achieved by quantitative reiteration.

Ezekiel's testimony to the corruptness of the Levites, a corruption attested to even by Malachi, who insisted that Yahweh would not break his covenant with Levi, and his efforts to end it by separating out a single family, the sons of Zadok, from the other Levitical families, foreshadow the Aaronide solution which was to have Yahweh and Moses strip the Levites of

their priestly rights and establish Aaronide absolutism in the wilderness rather than entrusting this task to a prophet.

The corruption of the Levites as attested to by Ezekiel and Malachi, coupled with Nehemiah's eyewitness report on the sad and deteriorating state of the restored community must have prompted a group of distinguished priestly families to seek a radical solution by banding together as the sons of Aaron, in a bid for absolute power. In order to justify this usurpation, they added to the prophetic Mosaic corpus and to Deuteronomy a newly crafted Aaronide corpus, and compressed all three elements into a single work, the Pentateuch.

Fortunately, for this bold and daring enterprise, the Persian emperor had a vital stake in its success. What he needed was a strong and loyal priesthood which enjoyed the willing support of the people and which had no royal ambitions as did the Davidides, or oracular pretensions as did the prophets.

And finally the story of Korah's rebellion with its violent leit motif and with its literal burying alive of Levitical claims would seem to echo the actual overthrow of the Levites by the newly constituted Aaronides on the eve, of or in the wake of the promulgation of the Pentateuch.

The story of Korah's rebellion so viewed turns out to be the powerful device that Aaronides could fashion to justify a rebellion against an existing priestly class whose altar rights had been promised to them in perpetuity in Moses' deathbed blessing. The Aaronides were thus able to take advantage of all the rebellion motifs that had already been recorded to tell the story of the most heinous rebellion of them all, one that outraged God more than any of the others, even that of the golden calf.

After 90 verses packed with violence, threat, symbolism and death-dealing law, it was scarcely likely that the people of Israel would ever forget the story of Korah and its message. And, as it turned out, they never did.

## VIII

Now that the last of the authority systems, the Aaronide, has been found, only one further question remains. Did the Aaronide claims remain simply claims, or were they implemented? For this answer the untutored wanderer must turn to Ecclesiasticus.

The wisdom of Ben Sira is the work of an author who not only acknowledges but that he had written the book, but also leaves us in no doubt that he lived during the High Priesthood of Simon the son of Onias. Although a book preeminently devoted to Wisdom, it is also a book which describes the class structure of his day and sings the praises of all the famous men to whom the Lord apportioned great glory from Adam through Nehemiah. And in the singing of his praises, Ben Sira lavishes his highest and longest and sweetest notes not on Moses, but on Aaron. For though Moses may be praised for giving God's revelation, Aaron is seen to be the revelation!

So, too, out of all that he might have drawn upon from Exodus through Deuteronomy to share with his readers, Ben Sira, with the exception of the revelation on Sinai itself, limits himself to those sections of these books which deal with Aaron's person, his sacred garments, his

expiatory functions, his priestly revenues and his overarching authority.

And out of all the episodes he might have chosen detailing challenges to the authority of God and to Moses, he chose one and one: the story of Korah's rebellion which is conjured up as a warning to those who might be deluded into thinking that Aaron's absolute authority was a mere claim and not a firm structural reality.

The bond between Aaron's singular role and Korah's fate is as tight in Ben Sira as it is in Numbers 16-18 as the following verses make manifest:

Moses ordained him [Aaron] and anointed him with holy oil: it was an everlasting covenant for him and for his descendants all the days of heaven, to minister to the Lord and serve as priest and bless his people in his name. He chose him [Aaron] out of all the living to offer sacrifice to the Lord, incense and a pleasing odor as a memorial for to make atonement for the people in his commandments he [God] gave him [Aaron] authority in statutes, and judgments, to teach Jacob the testimonies and to enlighten Israel with his law. Outsiders conspired against him and envied him in the wilderness. Nathan and Abiram and their men and the company of Korah, in wrath and anger. The Lord saw it and was not pleased, and in the wrath of his anger they were destroyed; he wrought wonders against them in flaming fire. (45:15-19)

And lest anyone still harbor doubts as to the reality of Aaronide absolutism in Ben Sira's day, one has only to turn to Chapter 50 and see through Ben Sira's eyes the Aaronide High Priest of that day surrounded by a garland of his Aaronide brethren carrying out with all the pomp, circumstance, and reverence as enjoined by the Pentateuch the Temple service on the Day of Atonement.

## IX

By allowing the story of Korah's rebellion and the establishment of the Aaronide absolutism that was legislated in its wake to lead our untutored wanderer first to the Aaronide system of authority in the Pentateuch itself, then to the non-existence of this authority in the other books of the Bible, then to its appearance for the first time in Chronicles, Ezra and the Ezraic parts of Nehemiah, and finally to its efflorescence in the Wisdom of Ben Sira, we discover that it holds the key that can unlock for us the process by which the Pentateuch came to be the book it is.