

A Wise Wife in the Wilderness

Rebellion in the wilderness is a major theme as the Hebrew Scriptures trace the Israelites' journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. In Numbers 16:1-35 we encounter a double uprising that challenges the leadership of Moses and the religious authority of Aaron, the High Priest. Read this colourful tale, and its aftermath in 17:1-28.

Now Korah, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—descendants of Reuben—took two hundred and fifty Israelite men, leaders of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men, and they confronted Moses (Num.16:1-2).

Three obvious protagonists of this rebellion are named as Korah, Dathan and Abiram. However one rebel, On son of Peleth, though named at the start of this story drops out as the narrative proceeds. By the time we come to the disastrous fate of the rebels, On is nowhere mentioned.

On and his family escape a terrible ending. But how might we explain this? In 16:1 On is named as one of four rebels out of 250 'well-known' Israelite leaders, so he must have been notably committed to their cause. What became of him? Was he forcibly or willingly excluded? Did he make a heroic decision to leave the rebel group? If so, why? And who exerted influence on him?

Our questions lead us to reflect on the decisions, circumstances and influences that can take a person towards or away from wrongdoing and disaster on the one hand, and salvation on the other. As you discuss this rebellion story, ponder the significance of the figure of On.

Turning to traditional Jewish interpretations of this text we find that the Rabbis of old have preserved a perspective which honours On's wife as having saved her husband from the pursuit of disaster. According to one storytelling tradition (midrash),¹ On's wife tells her husband that he has nothing to gain from an alliance with Korah:

'Whether Moses remains master or Korah becomes master, you are but a follower.'

'But what can I do?' says On. 'Korah's band has sworn me to be with them.'

'Sit here and I will save you,' replies his wife.

Her plan is clever and pragmatic. She gets him drunk, puts him to bed, and then she herself sits outside their tent in an immodest and dishevelled state. As Korah's band comes looking for On, they retreat at the sight of her immodesty. By the time On emerges, Korah and his company have already paid the terrible price for their folly.

In conclusion, the Rabbis quote Proverbs 14:1: *"The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands."* The 'wise woman' refers to On's wife, they say, whereas the rest of the verse refers to Korah's wife who advised her husband very differently.

How does this midrashic view compare with your reflections on the presence and absence of On? Perhaps you observed that, at first glance, On's wife appears to be driven by pragmatism rather than by virtue or principle. Yet contemporary commentators suggest a different view. Clearly her instincts forge a lifegiving path for her family. She displays a strong character. She can stand up and oppose the rebellion, whereas her husband seems to be captive to 'the group.' She is willing to humiliate herself in order to save her family.

Continue to explore this text, attending to other creative interpretations. •

1. TB San. 109b. Num.R. 18: 20

To read the midrash visit: http://www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin_109.html#PARTb

Sources. Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers* Vol 2 (New York: Soncino, 1983); Kadari, 'Wife of On Ben Pelet: Midrash and Aggadah.' *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2009. www.jwa.org. Scripture: NRSV.

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