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## **Numbers 16: The Significance of Place— An Analysis of Spatial Markers\***

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### **Abstract**

The present study is devoted to the composite and complex story of Numbers 16. The episode is analyzed through the lenses of the construction of narrative space, paying close attention to the locations where action takes place, to the movements of characters, and to the associated adverbs and prepositions. Seven spatial markers are successively considered in order to sketch an interpretation for the whole episode. The study shows that, as the spatial signals unfold, a symbolic meaning of the story can emerge, the stakes of which concern Israel's organization, its recognition of YHWH, and its very survival.

**Keywords:** Numbers 16, Korah, space, spatial markers, Tent of Meeting, dwelling, tent.

The revolt of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram in Numbers 16 presents one of the more puzzling episodes of that book. The story, which recounts successive rebellions against Moses and Aaron, poses many questions for

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interpreters. Among these, two of the most striking concern the gravity and meaning of the rebels' claims (especially Korah's) and the relationship between these assertions and the final intervention of YHWH, which seems disproportionate in its violence.

The key markers of the reading proposed here are the spatial references that are scattered throughout the narrative.<sup>1</sup> Along with other kinds of investigations (based on source, social-scientific, and narrative criticism, for example), a close attention to the construction of narrative space, I suggest, can shed some new light on the difficult and composite story of Numbers 16. The present study focuses on the locations where action takes place, on the movements of characters, and on the associated adverbs and prepositions. Progressively, as the spatial signals unfold, a symbolic meaning of the narration surfaces, the stakes of which concern Israel's organization, its recognition of YHWH, and its very survival.

Even though the scope of this investigation is more synchronic than diachronic, the complex evolution of the story can by no means be overlooked. I start this analysis with a brief account of some significant twentieth-century publications dealing with the composition of the story and with the different historical and social backgrounds that each stage reflects. I then move to the theoretical basis of the interpretation that this study puts forward, with an outline of recent research regarding narrative space. Finally, I take up Numbers 16 specifically, concentrating on the portion in which spatial indications are most frequent and compelling (vv. 18-35). In this section of the text, I consider seven spatial indications in succession, gradually linking the observations in order to sketch an interpretation of the entire episode.

## **1. Some Significant Diachronic Studies on Numbers 16**

Diachronic studies have shown that accounts of several—two or three—revolts have been conflated into a single story. Working from the model

1. The book of Numbers is particularly rich in spatial references. The main plot traces the journey of Israel out of the Sinai desert (Num. 1.1; 10.12) to the banks of the river Jordan and the border of the land of Canaan (36.13). The book is structured around three main sections, each clearly distinctive in its topographical references: the organization of the people to leave Sinai (1.1–10.36), the progress towards the Promised Land (11.1–21.35), and the imminent entry into this land (22.1–36.13). On this subject, see Olivier Artus, *Etudes sur le livre des Nombres. Récit, Histoire et Loi en Nb 13, 1–20, 13* (OBO, 157; Fribourg: Editions Universitaires; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), pp. 15–40.

proposed by A. Kuenen and J. Wellhausen, George B. Gray and Hugo Gressmann discern in Numbers 16–17 an ancient source (attributed to J, E, or JE) and a priestly source, these being followed by a priestly redaction, which consists of an interpretation and expansion of the older material.<sup>2</sup> The names of the main characters allow differentiation between the primitive source (Dathan and Abiram) and the priestly material (Korah).

According to Gray and Gressmann, whose model has formed the basis of subsequent investigations, the earlier source (Num. 16.1b, 2a, 12-15, 25, 26, 27b-32a, [32b,] 33, 34) tells of Dathan and Abiram's revolt against Moses' political authority. The story ends with the insurgents' death, swallowed by the earth. The priestly source (16.1a, 2b-7a, 18-23, [24,] 27a, 32b, 35 and 17.6-28) focuses on a revolt by representatives of the people, led by Korah, against the Levites, namely Moses and Aaron. Moses requires the insurgents to offer incense to YHWH, an action that eventually leads to their demise. The story continues with the plague and the episode of Aaron's rod, which confirms the Aaronites' exclusive right to priesthood. Lastly, the final redaction (16.7b-11, 16, 17 and 17.1-5), though priestly in nature like the previous source, presents another point of view on the revolt. Here, the rebellion is situated inside Levi's tribe: some Levites, under Korah's leadership, protest against the exclusivity of the priestly rights. The rebels are consumed by fire, their censers being used to cover the altar as a commemorative sign. This interpretation issues from a priestly circle in favour of Aaronite priesthood, probably chronologically situated during the early Second Temple period, when Aaronite and Zadokite priests were established.<sup>3</sup>

Later research has either reshaped or detailed this basic explanatory model. For example, Jacob Liver disputes the differentiation of the revolts on the basis of their political or religious character, arguing that this bifurcation is completely foreign to the biblical world.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, according to him, the distinction between priests and Levites would be much older, dating from Solomon's time, when Levite families were

2. George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), pp. 186-218, and Hugo Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit. Ein Kommentar zu den Mose-Sagen* (FRLANT, 18; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), pp. 259-63 (Num. 16.1–17.5) and 275-83 (Num. 17.6-28).

3. Regarding the establishment of Zadokite and Aaronite priests, see, for example, Norman Henry Snaith, *Leviticus and Numbers* (London: Nelson, 1967), pp. 13-14, 255.

4. Jacob Liver, 'Korah, Dathan and Abiram', *SerHie* 8 (1961), pp. 189-217.

moving to Jerusalem and trying to get involved in the priestly service. The final redaction of the story would be issued from this circle, wanting to establish its right to the priesthood by evoking a genealogical difference between priests and Levites. Liver distinguishes two traditions within Numbers 16: one involving only Dathan and Abiram, the other including all three named rebels. These two traditions constitute parallel versions of a unique story, later joined together.

Sigo Lehming brings Gray's and Gressmann's studies a step forward.<sup>5</sup> Since Korah, in the earliest stage of the story, was opposed to the Levites, but then, in the priestly redaction, is presented as the leader of a Levite group, one can assume that his demands have been satisfied. He and his followers were successful in taking the Levites' place; the Levitical priesthood would thus have passed from one group to another. The introduction of Aaron into the story mirrors the situation of the priesthood at a later period: this time, Korah and his fellows are representing a Levite group requesting to share priestly rights with the Aaronite family. According to Lehming, this stage reflects a period when Aaron's clan gains exclusive access to priestly duties, while the Levites are moved to an inferior position.

Martin Noth and more recent commentators—including Jules de Vaulx, Baruch A. Levine, and Horst Seebass—have followed this three-stage model, with some variations.<sup>6</sup> For example, Philip J. Budd distinguishes two pre-existing traditions (one Yahwist and one non-Yahwist) before their fusion into the Yahwist document, during the seventh

5. Sigo Lehming, 'Versuch zu Num 16', *ZAW* 74 (1962), pp. 291-321.

6. See Martin Noth, *Das vierte Buch Mose. Numeri* (ATD, 7; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), pp. 104-16; Snaith, *Leviticus and Numbers* (who attributes the Dathan and Abiram's story to the JE's source); Jules de Vaulx, *Les Nombres* (Sources Bibliques; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1972) (who discerns a twofold tradition at the basis of the Yahwist source, joined by the priestly redaction); Josef Scharbert, *Numeri* (NEB; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1992); Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20* (AB, 4A; New York: Doubleday, 1993); Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), esp. pp. 73-85 (who attributes most of the story in Num. 16-17 to the Holiness School—a priestly source distinct from and ulterior to P); and Artus, *Etudes sur le livre des Nombres*. See also Horst Seebass, *Numeri* (BKAT, IV/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001), who situates the priestly redaction against the background of a revolt led by some lay people, then followed by the whole community, claiming the right to offer certain types of sacrifices, previously reserved for priests. The tradition of the Aaron's rod story would be independent, dating from the early post-exilic period.

century, then reviewed by a priestly redactor, and finally completed by the author of the book of Numbers. According to Budd, this last stage of the story reflects the opposition of the Levites having stayed in Palestine during the exile (represented by Korah) to the authority coming back from Babylonia under the guidance of Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>7</sup>

While acknowledging the complex origins of Numbers 16, and keeping in mind the evolution of the story as retraced by the research aforementioned, I propose an interpretation of the episode in its present, received form. Following a new line of scholarship, characterized by a more synchronic than diachronic approach, I aim to focus on a particular literary element: spatial markers.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. The Study of Space in Narrative: An Outline

The construction of narrative space and the meaning place can convey in a story have long been overlooked—not only in biblical interpretation, but in literary studies in general. In contrast, the element of time has received much attention, and has been regarded as an essential component in the very definition of narrative.<sup>9</sup> However, the two authors of the article ‘Space in Narrative’, in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, note a recent ‘spatial turn’ in narrative studies.<sup>10</sup> This turn has been influenced by an increased consideration of space in many disciplines, most dramatically in philosophy and literature (e.g. Henry James’s novels and essays [1863–1916], Mikhail Bakhtin’s studies, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s

7. See Philip J. Budd, *Numbers* (WBC, 5; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984).

8. Regarding synchronic readings of (parts of) the book of Numbers, see for example Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS, 4; Philadelphia/New York: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1990); Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1996); Artus, *Etudes sur le livre des Nombres*; Won W. Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness in Israel’s Migratory Campaign* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Rolf P. Knierim and George W. Coats, *Numbers* (FOTL, 4; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

9. This tendency is discernable in both literary criticism and philosophy. See, for example, the following two classic essays: Edward Morgan Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: E. Arnold, 1927), and Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit I, II et III* (Paris: Seuil, 1983–85).

10. See Sabine Buchholz and Manfred Jahn, ‘Space in Narrative’, in David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 551–55 (esp. p. 551).

and Gaston Bachelard's philosophies).<sup>11</sup> Today, the study of narrative space is developing in many areas, including semiotics, gender, and post-colonial studies.<sup>12</sup>

In the field of biblical literature, space has first been considered in theological, anthropological, and cultural studies, before being analyzed in narrative criticism. To outline briefly this progressive attention to space, one must first cite the pioneering essay by Robert Cohn, which investigates the theological meaning of essential places involved in the biblical narrative: the wilderness, Canaan, Mt Sinai, and Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> Frank Gorman's research on the category of space in the priestly theology starts with the principle that the organization of space results from a cultural and anthropological production.<sup>14</sup> In priestly texts, the cultic system reflects the conception of a fully organized world, since God created it. This world is ordered according to the notions of inside and outside, with the Tabernacle as the innermost category. Philip Peter Jenson continues Gorman's research, arguing that 'the spatial dimension is the clearest expression of the Holiness Spectrum in its grading and its polarities'.<sup>15</sup> The gradation of holiness is reflected in the spatial organization of the Tabernacle, in the different materials (pure gold, gold, copper, etc.) used for its construction, in its furniture, and in the kinds of fabric present in it. Even the experiences involving the senses, such as touch, sight, and smell, are to be organized according to the graded holiness of the place.

11. See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (ed. M. Holquist; trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945); Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957). For a history of this new attention to space, see, for example, Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

12. See the bibliography in Buchholz and Jahn, 'Space in Narrative', p. 555.

13. See Robert L. Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space: Four Biblical Studies* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

14. See Frank H. Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time, and Status in the Priestly Theology* (JSOTSup, 91; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990). See also, by the same author, 'Priestly Rituals of Founding: Time, Space, and Status', in M. Patrick Graham, William P. Brown, and Jeffrey K. Kuan, *History and Interpretation: Essays in Honour of John H. Hayes* (JSOTSup, 173; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 47-64.

15. Philip Peter Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World* (JSOTSup, 106; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), p. 89.

One should also mention David Clines's contribution, which is based on Eliade's distinction between sacred and profane places.<sup>16</sup> The sacred place maps out space, giving it its centres, axes, and orientation: 'In so doing, it creates meaning within space'.<sup>17</sup> Sacred place, in the Hebrew Bible, differentiates space. The land of Israel and, more particularly, its holy places, such as Shechem and Bethel, are landmarks in the people's geography and identity. During the wilderness wandering, the people, facing 'an aimless space of no holy place', construct a 'portable holy place that will give orientation to the community'.<sup>18</sup> Later, Jerusalem becomes the sacred place *par excellence*, the centre of the people's cultural and cultic geography.<sup>19</sup>

Yairah Amit is one of the first authors to address the question of place in narrative criticism.<sup>20</sup> In her study on biblical narratives, she devotes a chapter to 'Place, Story, and History'.<sup>21</sup> Her aim is to study the functional aspect of spatial indications: names or descriptions of places can add

16. See David J.A. Clines, 'Sacred Space, Holy Places and Suchlike', in *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays, 1967–1998* (JSOTSup, 293; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), II, pp. 542–54.

17. Clines, 'Sacred Space', p. 543. See also Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959).

18. Clines, 'Sacred Space', p. 546.

19. Many other contributions should be mentioned. On the construction of space in biblical narratives in general, see, for example, Johan Brinkman, *The Perception of Space in the Old Testament: An Exploration of the Methodological Problems of its Investigation, Exemplified by a Study of Exodus 25 to 31* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992), and Victor H. Matthews, 'Physical Space, Imagined Space, and "Lived Space" in Ancient Israel', *BTB* 33 (2003), pp. 12–20 (both with bibliography). About particular narratives, see, among many others, Gerald A. Klingbeil, 'Ritual Space in the Ordination Ritual of Leviticus 8', *JNSL* 21 (1995), pp. 59–82, and, by the same author, '"Up, Down, In, Out, Through and Back": Space and Movement in Old Testament Narrative, Ritual and Legal Texts and their Application for the Study of Mark 1.1–3.12', *EstBib* 60 (2002), pp. 283–309.

20. Less attention is given to narrative space prior to Amit's work. See, for example, Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (trans. D. Shefer-Vanson; JSOTSup, 70; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 4th edn, 2000 [1st edn 1979]), who underlines the close relationship existing between time and narrative, but lacking between space and narrative (see esp. p. 184). As for Berlin, she devotes no chapter to spatial dimension, approached only in the section about the point of view; see Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Bible and Literature, 9; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983).

21. Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (trans. Y. Lotan; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), esp. pp. 115–25.



realism and a sense of historicity to stories, whereas the absence of such information can foster a fictional atmosphere. Spatial indicators can be ideological (as in the books of Chronicles) or typological (e.g. Abraham's route or the exodus from Egypt) in nature.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. The Meaning Conveyed by the Spatial Markers in Numbers 16

The first 17 verses of Numbers 16 do not include significant spatial markers, but a look at the general plot of these verses helps to situate the second part of the story, on which I will focus. A portion of the people, composed of famous men from various tribes, rises up against Moses and Aaron, complaining of their abuse of power. Rejecting any exclusivity in the cultic service, the rebels affirm the holiness of each member of the congregation: 'All the assembly, all of them are holy, and YHWH is in the centre of them' (v. 3).<sup>23</sup> Moses' reply to these assertions is divided into two parts. Addressing himself to Korah and 'his assembly'<sup>24</sup> (vv. 5 and 6), he first requires an offering of incense, saying that YHWH will choose 'the holy one' and cause him to come forward (vv. 5-7). He goes on to remind 'the sons of Levi' about the privileged position that they already occupy; therefore, they have no real justification for requiring the priesthood (vv. 8-11). Moses then turns his attention to Dathan and Abiram, two rebels belonging to the tribe of Reuben (v. 12). These two, however, categorically refuse to 'go up' to Moses. Rather, they express their

22. See also the online article by Jean-Pierre Sonnet, 'L'espace dans le récit de la Bible: Repères théoriques', available at <[http://www2.unil.ch/rrenab/docs/sonnet\\_espace.html](http://www2.unil.ch/rrenab/docs/sonnet_espace.html)>.

23. Translations from the Hebrew are as literal as possible and are intended to preserve the original gender.

24. The word עֲדָה is generally considered to be of priestly origin. See, for example, Gray, *Numbers*, p. 89, and Budd, *Numbers*, pp. 181-86. According to Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 335, the עֲדָה includes either all adult males of Israel, or only its chieftains, a group of leaders with legislative and judicial powers. With the establishment of the monarchy, the term disappeared, to be replaced by its synonym קָהָל. Here, only the use of the possessive would suggest that reference is being made to only a part of the people—those who have joined the protest—and not all of it (see the similar uses in Pss. 22.17; 68.31; 86.14; Job 16.7). A frequently advanced hypothesis is that Korah had organized another assembly to rival the one that was effectively directed by Moses. The assembly set up by Korah would be a type of 'parody' or 'caricature' of the people of Israel. See Noth, *Numeri*, p. 110; de Vaulx, *Les Nombres*, p. 195; Budd, *Numbers*, pp. 186-87; Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 306; Artus, *Etudes sur le livre des Nombres*, pp. 171-72.

grievances concerning Moses, recounting the recent history of the people while omitting any reference to divine intervention (vv. 12-14). After defending himself against these accusations before YHWH (v. 15), Moses reiterates his order concerning the offering of incense (vv. 16-17), which is immediately executed (v. 18a). I now turn to the second part of the episode (vv. 18-35), the confrontation per se, for a close reading based on spatial indications.

### **a. At the Entrance of the Tent of Meeting (vv. 18b-19a)**

The location of the rebels after their offering is expressed by a complex construction: ‘and they stood at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and Moses and Aaron...’ (v. 18b). The Hebrew word order induces that the verb וַיִּעַמְדוּ has the same subject than the preceding one, וַיִּקְחוּ. However, the insertion of the phrase ‘and Moses and Aaron’, at the end, indicates that these characters are also subjects of the verb. The significance of this first spatial marker, the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, will now be explored through other occurrences of this place in the Pentateuch.

The entrance of the Tent of Meeting (פֶּתַח אֹהֶל־מוֹעֵד) is a key place in the priestly theology.<sup>25</sup> First of all, according to Exod. 29.42, this is the meeting place *par excellence* where YHWH speaks with the people through the mediation of Moses. The entrance of the Tent of Meeting is also the place where whole-offerings and sacrifices are made, where Aaron and his sons consume what remains of the sacrifices and offerings, where certain acts of purification take place, and where lots are drawn to choose the two goats for Yom Kippur.<sup>26</sup> Eventually, the entrance of the Tent of Meeting is the place where the investiture of priests (and Nazirites) takes place (Num. 6.10, 13, 18). According to YHWH, Moses

25. Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985), p. 184, situates the ‘entrance of the Tent of Meeting’ inside the court of the Tent, probably between the gate and the altar, accessible to lay people. This place had a lower degree of holiness, compared to the area of the court located between the altar and the Tabernacle. Klingbeil, ‘Ritual Space’, pp. 61-64, with regard to the ordination ritual (Lev. 8), notes the transitional character of the actions performed in the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, appearing as a threshold or liminal space.

26. Concerning offerings: Exod. 29.42; 40.6; Lev. 1.3, 5; 3.2; 4.4, 7, 18; 12.6; 15.14, 29; 17.4-9; 19.21; concerning consuming the rest of offerings: Exod. 29.32; Lev. 8.31; concerning acts of purification: Lev. 14.11, 23; concerning the two goats: Lev. 16.7. The entrance of the Tent of Meeting is also a place of gathering for the people; see Num. 10.3; 25.6; 27.2.

‘will bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting’ (Exod. 29.4) in order to anoint and dress them in their priestly robes (Exod. 29.4-8; 40.12-15). It is there that Aaron and his sons must remain during the seven days of their investiture (Lev. 8.33, 35; 10.7), both the place and the duration highlighting the passage implied by the ritual. It is also at this place that Moses calls the assembly to attend the ordination ceremony (Lev. 8.3-4).

By standing at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, Moses and Aaron are thus giving an implicit answer to the rebels. The location they choose, which is both the place of meeting with YHWH and the place of the priests’ investiture, affirms their particular status as intermediaries or mediators between the people and YHWH. Moses reasserts the legitimacy of his power, and Aaron his right to the priesthood.

Korah immediately reacts to Moses and Aaron: ‘And Korah gathered all the assembly against them at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting’ (v. 19a). The noun עֲדָה, ‘assembly’, being employed without the possessive (in contrast to its use in vv. 5, 6, 11, and 16), seems to refer to the people as a whole and not just to the supporters of Korah.<sup>27</sup> By choosing such a place, Korah is tacitly criticizing Moses’ and Aaron’s privileged positions, as already expressed in v. 3: Moses and Aaron are not the only ones who can speak to YHWH, but ‘all the assembly’ share the privilege. Korah’s action thus appears as the application into practical terms of his initial criticism.

More subtly, the scene could also refer to the meeting of the assembly during the investiture of the priests. The first divine order concerning the investiture, addressed to Moses, states: ‘Gather (הִקְהֵל) all the assembly (בְּלִי-הָעֵדָה) at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting’ (Lev. 8.3). In Numbers 16, Korah ‘gathered (וַיִּקְהֵל) all the assembly (בְּלִי-הָעֵדָה) against them’ (v. 19a). Apart from the crucial phrase ‘against them’, Korah’s action is described as the perfect execution of the order of Lev. 8.3, which

27. There is, however, a certain level of ambiguity, since the verbal phrase עַל-קֶהֱל, here hiphil, is previously used in v. 3 (niphil) to designate those rebelling against the power of Moses and Aaron. One possible interpretation of these parallel occurrences is that the rebellion, initially limited to 250 men, has spread to the people as a whole. For Seebass, the community, at this point, is not in direct opposition to Moses and Aaron, but rather manifests a certain ‘stumme Solidarität’, in the sense that it allows itself to be assembled by Korah rather than Moses; see Seebass, *Numeri*, p. 197. According to Magonet, עֲדָה does not refer to the whole of the community but only to Korah’s supporters, assembled by him to bear witness to events as they unfold; see Jonathan Magonet, ‘The Korah Rebellion’, *JSOT* 24 (1982), pp. 3-25 (esp. p. 20).

begins the rite of investiture. In acting in such a way, Korah appears as taking Moses' place in the ceremony. Instead of introducing Aaron and his sons into the priesthood, Korah thus demonstrates his opposition to Moses and Aaron (עלייהם). Having already gathered a עדת, a possible competition to that of the sons of Israel, Korah acts as if trying to install a new priesthood to replace Aaron and his sons.

### **b. From the Centre of the Assembly (vv. 19b-22)**

The different actors in the conflict having taken their positions, 'the glory of YHWH appeared to all the assembly' (v. 19b). The manifestation of the glory<sup>28</sup> prepares the word of YHWH, addressed to Moses and Aaron: 'Separate yourselves (הבדילו) from the centre of this assembly, that I may consume them in a moment' (v. 21). The first part of the command includes two phrases that are clear references to what had just transpired.

On the one hand, the construction עדת + מן + הבדיל evokes v. 9a, where Moses questions Korah and 'the sons of Levi': 'Is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated (הבדיל) you from the assembly (מִעֲדָתָם) of Israel...?' The hiphil verb הבדיל constitutes a key word in the priestly organization of space. It is the verb used in Genesis 1 to name the three main divisions that God performs during the creation: the separations between the waters (1.7), between day and night (1.14), and between light and darkness (1.18). As Gorman notes,

inherent in such a conceptualization of creation is the idea that the order of creation was brought about through the separation and classification of the basic elements of creation... If true, it means that these divisions must be recognized and maintained if the created order is to continue to exist and not collapse into confusion and chaos.<sup>29</sup>

The verb is also used, for example, in the divine command to hang a veil inside the holy place, to separate within it the ark of the testimony (Exod. 26.33). The organization of space and its complex divisions are thus also to be respected within the cultic service, cultic order being established 'as an integral part of the created order'.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, the basic distinctions between the holy and the unholy, and between the clean

28. On the subject of the notion of כבוד, see, for example, Budd, *Numbers*, pp. 156-57. In the sacerdotal tradition, the apparition of the glory, in contrast to the apparition of the cloud, takes place at critical moments during the time in the desert and often precedes a divine word or action.

29. Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual*, p. 41.

30. Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual*, p. 42.

and the unclean (Lev. 10.10; 11.47; 20.25) are as well expressed by this verb הִבְדִּיל, maybe as a way to suggest the divine origin of these differentiations. As we can see in Num. 16.9, itself reminiscent of 8.14 (see also Deut. 10.8), the same verb is used for the distinction of the Levites among the people.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, as underlined by Jenson, the spatial organization of the Tabernacle (and, from a larger perspective, of the world itself) is directly reflected in the hierarchy of the congregation.<sup>32</sup>

The respecting of those boundaries and classifications is thus to be understood as the condition for the existence and the preservation of the world and of the people, as they have been established by YHWH. These distinctions also regulate the cult, which itself allows the presence of the divine in the midst of the people. One can thus say that they preserve both the holiness of the divine and its presence within the human community.

In this regard, the divine intervention of Num. 16.21 makes Moses and Aaron the objects of the separation as a means to re-establish the order, which the community has lost via Korah's gathering of the assembly at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, against Moses and Aaron (v. 19a). Moses and Aaron have to be separated, probably in order to restore them to their status as religious and political leaders. As for the Levite supporters of Korah, originally 'separated from the assembly', as recalled by Moses (v. 9a), they are most likely included in the expression 'this assembly'. The word of YHWH is therefore the direct cause of a turnabout in the situation, reinstating Moses and Aaron as the only members 'separated' from the congregation.

On the other hand, the phrase 'from the centre of this assembly' (מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַזֹּאת) recalls the rebels' claim: 'All the assembly (כָּל־הָעֵדָה), all of them are holy, and YHWH is in the centre of them (וּבְתוֹכָם יְהוָה)' (v. 3a). The centre of the assembly, where the rebels assert YHWH to be, now becomes the place that YHWH enjoins Moses and Aaron to flee from. More precisely, they have to get away from 'the centre of *this* assembly', as if the rebels ('this assembly') had situated themselves in the middle of the congregation, declaring themselves a central power. The aforementioned studies on the spatial organization of Israel have shown how crucial is the concept of 'centre' (הֵוֶה) in the priestly geography: the Tabernacle

31. The verb is also used to express the difference between Israel and the other nations (Lev. 20.24; see also Ezra 6.21; 9.1; 10.11).

32. Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, pp. 115-48.

is located in the 'centre' of the people (Exod. 25.8; 29.45-46),<sup>33</sup> while the area of the Tent with the highest level of holiness is situated in its very centre.<sup>34</sup> By suggesting that the rebels have situated themselves in the centre of the congregation, YHWH's word hints both at their usurpation of Moses' and Aaron's status and at their profanation of the holy place.

Spatial indications thus appear not only to establish the geographical locations of the actors, but also to bear subtler meanings. YHWH is not merely directing Moses and Aaron to move from one place to another; he is also affirming two fundamental principles of the people's organization. First, Moses and Aaron are the only two to be 'separated' or privileged intermediaries between YHWH and the people. Second, people not established by YHWH cannot occupy the 'centre' of the congregation, a place which is the very symbol of the divine presence amid the people. The divine order thus requires a 'decentralization' of the new power established by the rebels. Spatial terms, therefore, progressively sketch a symbolic scene, revealing both the political, cultic, and religious implications of the conflict.

After the intervention of YHWH, Moses and Aaron kneel and react to the divine word: 'O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, a single man sins, and you are angry (תִּקְצֹף) with all the assembly...' (v. 22).<sup>35</sup> The

33. At least according to the priestly representation of the Tent of Meeting, as shown by Israel Knohl, 'Two Aspects of the "Tent of Meeting"', in Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, and Jeffrey H. Tigay (eds.), *Tehillah le-Moshe* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), pp. 73-79. According to the priestly view, the Tent of Meeting was situated in the middle of the camp and considered the fixed dwelling place of God. The Pentateuch also contains some fragments of a prophetic tradition (see Exod. 33.6-11; Num. 11.16-17; 12.4-10; Deut. 31.14-15) that locates the Tent of Meeting outside the camp and presents it as a site of prophetic revelation. Knohl interprets this contrast in terms of two conceptions of holiness: the priestly tradition would reflect a model of holiness where the centre of the settled area is the place where the holy is revealed and where the cult takes place (see Mircea Eliade's model), whereas the prophetic tradition would be more akin to a model where the sacred places are situated in remote areas, outside the inhabited world (see Victor Turner's model).

34. See Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, pp. 89-93. The notion of centre has to be understood here not as the geographical middle, but as 'the innermost shrine' (p. 91), the climax of a gradation of successive places.

35. Gray, *Numbers*, pp. 203-204, considers Moses and Aaron's intervention as an example of priestly theology. Probably influenced by the individualism of Ezekiel (notably Ezra 18), v. 22 would be typical of the opposition to the former doctrine of the solidarity in sin. In a narrative perspective, Moses and Aaron's speech reminds of two of Moses' interventions earlier in the text, when he sets out the situation as one of opposition between a single person and a group. In vv. 5 and 7a $\beta$ , Moses announces that YHWH will

theme of YHWH's anger (אֵפֶן), which appears in Moses and Aaron's prayer, warrants closer observation, since it is linked, as we shall see, to the spatial organization of the encampment.<sup>36</sup> In Numbers, the occurrences of the root אֵפֶן, when they are included in a divine pronouncement (Num. 1.53; 18.5), take place in speeches indicating how to avoid anger. Speaking of the status of the Levites, YHWH stipulates: 'The Levites will camp around the Dwelling of Witness so that anger (אֵפֶן) will *not* fall on the assembly of the sons of Israel' (Num. 1.53). This is echoed in the laws following the narration of Numbers 16–17, when YHWH says to Aaron and the Levites: 'You will keep guard on the sanctuary and on the altar, so that anger (אֵפֶן) will *no longer* fall on the sons of Israel' (Num. 18.5). Anger is to be kept away by the institution of the Levites, as mediators between the priests and the people. Especially, it is the geographical organisation of the camp, with the Levites in the centre (Num. 1.50; 52–53), which ensures the absence of anger. The Levites' position points up the central role of the Dwelling and establishes an empty space for YHWH to dwell in. The sons of Israel are asked not to occupy the entire area, but rather to leave a certain space for the presence of YHWH.<sup>37</sup>

Moses and Aaron's intervention can thus be understood not only as the observation that YHWH is angry, but also as an additional hint to the disorganization of the congregation. Since the spatial organization of the people, with its reflections in its rituals and hierarchy, is the very condition for the presence of YHWH among the congregation, the divine anger appears as a consequence of the geographic, political, and religious

decide 'who is for him' and that 'the man chosen by YHWH will be the holy one', in direct contradiction to Korah's claim of a collective holiness (v. 3). In vv. 9–10, Moses uses a similar argument, which distinguishes the assembly as a whole and the sons of Levi, separated from the assembly by YHWH. Each time, the distinction of a single man or a certain number of people breaks the uniformity of the group. Now Moses and Aaron differentiate the man who has sinned from the assembly, stressing the different levels of implication in the revolt. Delineation between people is thus parallel to the distinction of places, both restoring order and organization where homogeneity tends to be established. For the parallelism between levels of holiness that people and places can have, see, for example, Clines, 'Sacred Space', p. 552.

36. According to Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence*, p. 110, the word אֵפֶן is typical of the Holiness School (Lev. 10.6; Num. 1.50; 16.22; 17.11; 18.5).

37. See André Wénin, 'Le serpent, le taurillon et le baal. Variations sur l'idolâtrie dans le premier Testament', *RTL* 34 (2003), pp. 27–42 (especially p. 32): 'Quant à la Tente qu'Adonaï commande à Moïse (Ex 25,8), elle inscrit le manque au centre du campement des tribus et au milieu de leur cortège lorsqu'elles se déplacent (Nb 2,1.17): elle vient signifier qu'Israël se renierait s'il prétendait à remplir tout l'espace'.



confusion. The assembly has lost its centre—YHWH's Dwelling—and, with it, its own distinctiveness, which is the condition of its very existence.

### c. One Dwelling is Substituted for Another (vv. 23-24)

YHWH addresses Moses again: 'Speak to the assembly, saying: "Go up yourselves (עלו)'<sup>38</sup> from around (משכן) the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram"' (v. 24). The verb עלה, the core of this divine order, constitutes the framework of the previous intervention of Dathan and Abiram (vv. 12b, 13a, 14bβ), who refuse 'to go up' (לא עלה), vv. 12b, 14bβ). This refusal concerns Moses' command, but also, *a posteriori*, the exodus from Egypt (v. 13a) and, *a priori*, the entry into the land of Canaan (see Num. 13.17, 21, 22, 30, 31).<sup>39</sup> Now YHWH orders the assembly to 'go up itself' (niphāl), which could refer to the order that Moses has not given but which Dathan and Abiram refused to obey. Therefore, the verb of the divine order can be interpreted both as an invitation to resume the movement of liberation initiated by YHWH, from Egypt to the promised land, and as an admonition to reject the two rebels' allegations.

The phrase 'the dwelling (...משכן) of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram' presents multiple difficulties. First of all, in the Pentateuch, the term משכן in the singular is always used to refer to the Dwelling of Witness or of YHWH (e.g. Num. 16.9).<sup>40</sup> Second, it is highly unlikely that Korah, Dathan, and Abiram inhabit the same dwelling, especially since the

38. Imperative niphāl of עלה, translated here as a reflexive. See Paul Joüon, *Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique* (Rome: Institut biblique pontifical, 1965), §51c.

39. Concerning the exodus from Egypt, Lehming considers the verb עלה as a *terminus technicus* designating the journey from Egypt to Canaan, as in Gen. 13.1; 44.24; Exod. 33.3; see Lehming, 'Versuch zu Num 16', p. 303. Concerning the entry in Canaan, see de Vaulx, *Les Nombres*, p. 191. For Scharbert, however, the text refers to a refusal to go up to the Temple in Jerusalem, in the context of the Davidian hierarchy; see Scharbert, *Numeri*, p. 67. See also Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 133.

40. The BHS proposes the tetragrammaton instead of the names of the three men. This indication is followed by Gray, *Numbers*, p. 204. However, Liver considers the term משכן synonymous with אהל; see Jacob Liver, 'Korah, Dathan and Abiram', p. 196. See also Lehming, 'Versuch zu Num 16', p. 309. There is effectively another occurrence in the Pentateuch (Num. 24.5) where the term is used to indicate a human dwelling, but it is used in the plural and in a poetic context. The traditional interpretation is that Korah would have created a משכן rival, to whom YHWH is referring here. See Budd, *Numbers*, p. 181, and, for a counter argument, Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, p. 416.



former is a Levite and the latter two are Reubenites.<sup>41</sup> Finally, according to v. 19a, Korah brings the assembly together at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. YHWH would therefore order the assembly to move from a place where it was not situated.<sup>42</sup>

These complications, together with the verb עלה, already examined, invite a less literal approach to the text. The expression ‘from around (... מסביב ל) the dwelling’ reminds, once again, of the legislation about the organization of the camp of Israel: ‘[The Levites] shall encamp around (... סביב ל) the Dwelling...and anger will no longer fall on the assembly of the sons of Israel...’ (Num. 1.50, 52-53). ‘The sons of Israel shall encamp...opposite / at a certain distance around (... סביב ל) the Tent of Meeting’ (2.2). If the Levites alone are to camp around or close to the Dwelling, the position of each tribe is a reminder that the centre of the camp is reserved for YHWH.

In Num. 16.24, however, the preposition סביב is not used with respect to the Dwelling or the Tent of Meeting. On the contrary, the Masoretic text clearly states, by its very difficulty, that YHWH’s invitation is to move away ‘from around the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram’. The divine command therefore presupposes that the people are no longer gathered around the Dwelling of Witness, but rather around the dwelling of the rebels.<sup>43</sup> The assembly has broken the form of encampment ordered by YHWH. The Dwelling has been replaced as the centre; the three rebels have become the middle around which the people have been gathered. As suggested by the previous verses, the assembly is disoriented, having lost its centre, which was the constant reminder and condition of YHWH’s presence. When Moses and Aaron evoke the divine anger (v. 22b), YHWH replies by enjoining a restoration of the organization of the encampment around the Tent of Meeting—the means YHWH originally established to avoid the anger.

41. Magonet suggests that the term משכן refers to the geographical area in which the two groups have encamped themselves, since both located to the south of the Tent of Meeting, according to Num. 2.10 and 3.29; see Magonet, ‘Korah Rebellion’, p. 21.

42. See Gray, *Numbers*, p. 204. For Ashley, Korah, having brought the assembly to the Tent of Meeting, joins Dathan and Abiram at their tent; see Ashley, *Numbers*, pp. 315-16. See also Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence*, p. 78, who attributes the change of location to the editors of the story, trying to put together the different insurgents.

43. See also, for a similar point of view, Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 136. According to Milgrom, the use of the term משכן could be ironic: by confronting God himself, the rebels have substituted their own tents for the Tabernacle. Milgrom does not exclude, however, the correction הַמִּשְׁכָּן (the Tabernacle) or the addition of the tetragrammaton.

#### d. From the 'Dwelling' to the 'Tents' (vv. 25-26)

Although Moses is ordered 'to speak to the assembly' (v. 24a), he actually turns to a particular part of it: 'And Moses rose up and went to Dathan and Abiram; and the elders of Israel followed him. And he spoke to the assembly, saying: "Depart from the tents of these guilty men, and do not touch anything of theirs, lest you be swept away with all their sins"' (vv. 25-26).

Some modifications of the divine order can be noted in Moses' transmission, probably originating from a difference of sources, the divine order being attributed to P, and the content of Moses' speech to an early source.<sup>44</sup> YHWH's order was 'to go up oneself' (העלו), but Moses gives the assembly the order 'to depart' (סורו). Even though Moses' verb is more explicit, all reference to the movement of liberation initiated by YHWH, ascending out of Egypt and going up into Canaan, is lost, leaving only the act of taking distance. In addition, YHWH spoke of the 'dwelling' (משכן) of Korah, Dathan and Abiram', whereas Moses mentions 'the tents' (אהל) of these guilty men'.<sup>45</sup> The allusion to the Dwelling of Witness, through the uncommon use of the noun משכן, is no longer possible with the plural of אהל.

Even though the order gains in practicality, it loses, at the same time, its symbolic meaning: in Moses' formulation, what is required is not so much a recentralization of the encampment, but rather a geographical move. YHWH aimed to restore to Israel its true centre, its relationship with the divine. Instead, Moses focuses on the need for boundaries between the different parts of the community and for distance from Dathan and Abiram in particular. Here, the last editor of the story seems to take advantage of the discrepancies between the different sources to highlight the religious content of YHWH's order, in contrast to its transmission by Moses.

#### e. Towards a Symbolic Reorganization? (v. 27a)

The application of Moses' order follows immediately: 'And they went up themselves (ויעלו) from the dwelling (משכן) of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, from around (מסביב) (v. 27a). Curiously, the realization of the

44. See, for example, Gray, *Numbers*, p. 205, who assigns the introduction of Moses' speech to P, and its content to JE.

45. Lehming, 'Versuch zu Num 16', p. 307, attributes the change in vocabulary to a difference in the original sources: the term משכן comes from the oldest addition to the Yahwist source and אהל from a later redaction. According to Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, pp. 415-16, משכן is priestly, while אהל is the term used in JE.

order is expressed with YHWH's very words, in spite of Moses' interpretation. The use of עָלָה (niph'al) might be seen as the reintroduction of the movement of liberation proposed by YHWH. The adverb מִסָּבִיב, placed at the end of the statement, perhaps to specify the preposition, reminds of YHWH's order. The term מִשְׁכָּן, also, is an obvious reference to the divine order. The singular substantive replaces the plural אֹהֶלִים used by Moses; additionally, all three leaders of the revolt are referenced, while Moses named only Dathan and Abiram.

In the perspective of source criticism, v. 27 clearly belongs to the same priestly material as v. 24a. Once again, the literary features also make sense on a narrative level. The description of the assembly's movement suggests that the symbolic meaning of YHWH's order (v. 24) has been respected completely, despite Moses' changes. The assembly undertakes the reorganization that YHWH had called for, 'going up' from the rebels' dwelling. However, the story does not mention whether the movement is taken to its logical conclusion: the symbolic reorganization of the assembly around YHWH's Dwelling.

#### **f. Dathan and Abiram 'Standing at the Entrance of their Tents' (v. 27b)**

The narration then focuses on Dathan's and Abiram's position: 'And Dathan and Abiram had come out, standing at the entrance of their tents, together with their wives, their sons, and their little ones' (v. 27b). Once more, the rhythm of story slows to specify the spatial setting. The expression 'to stand at the entrance of one's tent' appears only one other time in the Pentateuch, in a passage reflecting the 'prophetic' conception of the Tent of Meeting, according to which the Tent stands outside the camp, not in its centre: 'Whenever Moses will go out to the Tent, all the people will rise up and stand (וַיִּצְבּוּ), everybody at the entrance of his tent (אִישׁ פֶּתַח בְּאֹהֶלֹ), and will look after Moses, until he goes into the Tent' (Exod. 33.8).<sup>46</sup>

Interestingly, this parallel occurrence deals directly with the location of the Tent of Meeting in relation to the encampment. Following the episode of the golden calf, YHWH warns Moses that he will no longer 'go up in the centre of you, for you are a stiff-necked people, lest I consume you in the way' (Exod. 33.3). Consequently, Moses will set up the Tent of Meeting 'outside the camp, far from the camp' (Exod. 33.7a). In its

46. On the different conceptions of the Tent of Meeting and of its location, see n. 33.

present form, this passage (Exod. 33.7-11) appears to be both a prediction concerning the future of the people and a consequence of what has just taken place in the narrative.<sup>47</sup> In order to preserve his alterity, directly threatened by idolatry, YHWH distances his Dwelling, which originally had been intended to be at the centre of the people (Exod. 25.8; 29.45-46).

If the parallel is exact, the position of Dathan and Abiram 'standing at the entrance of their tents' could be a consequence of the negation of the divine alterity, a situation in which the community would no longer be organized directly around the recognition of YHWH. This spatial detail would suggest that the rebels' complaints have the same consequences as idolatry, since Dathan and Abiram take up the same position as the people do after the making of the golden calf.

### **g. When the Earth Opens its Mouth (vv. 28-35)**

The narrative continues with a final speech of Moses (vv. 28-30), who foretells coming events. The destruction of the rebels is reported just after his speech: the earth opens its mouth and swallows up 'all the human beings who belonged to Korah' (v. 32). They 'went down, they and all that belonged to them, alive, into Sheol; and the earth closed over them and they perished from the centre of the group' (v. 33). The chapter ends with the flight of all Israel (v. 34) and the coming forth of a fire 'from near YHWH', consuming the two hundred fifty men offering the incense (v. 35).

The scene depicting the victims being swallowed up by the earth (v. 33) includes some interesting spatial indications. The parallel between their tragic end and what Dathan and Abiram had said in vv. 12-14 is especially striking.<sup>48</sup> The rebels twice refused to 'go up' (vv. 12b, 14b), accusing Moses of 'killing them' (v. 13). Finally, they 'go down' into Sheol, still 'alive' (v. 33). By ascribing to Egypt the same qualities as the promised land ('a land flowing with milk and honey', v. 13), they have recast a land of slavery and death as a desirable place. Their wish is now satisfied: they will neither ascend nor die, but rather go down, still alive, to the place of death: Sheol.

47. Concerning the anticipatory nature of the passage, see André Wénin, 'Dieu jaloux', in Pierre Gibert and Daniel Marguerat (eds.), *Dieu, vingt-six portraits bibliques* (Paris: Bayard, 2002), pp. 67-76 (p. 71).

48. See also Milgrom, *Numbers*, pp. 135, 137.

#### **4. Spatial Markers: A Key to the Interpretation**

The different marking points that outline the spatial progression of the text form a type of sub-text to the narrative, revealing hidden stakes of the revolt and its deeper consequences. Korah and his supporters insist upon the holiness of every member of the assembly (v. 3), which, while not completely untrue, takes no account of the specific role of the priests and the Levites as mediators. This omission is the cornerstone of Moses' argument (vv. 5-7 and 8-11). It becomes particularly significant when Korah gathers the assembly at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting (v. 19a). By taking such an initiative, Korah seems to be trying to displace Moses and Aaron. Assembling the people at the place where Moses serves as intermediary between YHWH and the people, where the investiture of the priests takes place, Korah positions himself as an alternative to the leadership of Moses and Aaron.

The divine order that enjoins the reorganization of the assembly (v. 24) answers, in a certain sense, the 'spatial' manoeuvre led by Korah. It suggests that the Dwelling of the Witness, being appropriated by the rebels, is no longer, symbolically, the people's centre: it is not organized around Moses and Aaron, but rather around the insurgent group. The position adopted by Dathan and Abiram, 'standing at the entrance of their tents' (v. 27b), confirms this disorientation and hints at the consequences of the crisis. The spatial indication here suggests a parallel with the people's situation after the construction of the golden calf. Like those who substituted an idol for YHWH, the rebels try to establish themselves at the centre of the camp, the place of the divine Dwelling. Thus, the people are no longer placed around an empty space, the sign of the recognition of YHWH and of his alterity, which actually symbolizes the freedom of the people from any idolatrous or authoritarian power. The swallowing up of the rebels gives a picture directly opposite to that promised by YHWH: not ascent into the land of Canaan, but rather descent into Sheol (v. 33).

The spatial indications in the narrative, therefore, sketch a backdrop for the main plot of the story, at the same time suggesting a deeper level of interpretation of the actions, movements, and words of the characters involved. These spatial markers are useful for the reader not only in imagining the scenes but also in grasping the specific issues involved in the protest of the rebels. Together with other kinds of criticism, the study of spatial indications offers some new directions for the interpretation of this complex story.