

Num. 16:28 Moses said, “By this you shall know that it was the LORD who sent me to do all these things; that they are not of my own devising: ²⁹ if these men die as all men do, if their lot be the common fate of all mankind, it was not the LORD who sent me. ³⁰ But if the LORD brings about something unheard-of, so that the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men have spurned the LORD.” ³¹ Scarcely had he finished speaking all these words when the ground under them burst asunder, ³² and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah’s people and all their possessions. ³³ They went down alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them; the earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the congregation. ³⁴ All Israel around them fled at their shrieks, for they said, “The earth might swallow us!”

Num. 16:35 And a fire went forth from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense.

RASHI: **But if the LORD brings about something unheard-of.** Literally, “a creation,” something entirely new. If He causes them to die in a way that no human being has ever yet died: — The Hebrew of the verse literally begins with “if a creation—let the Lord create” [וְאִם־בְּרִיאָה יִבְרָא יְהוָה]. By this the Sages understand Moses to mean, “If the earth has already had the mouth with which it will swallow up these men since the six days of Creation—wonderful. And if not, let the Lord create it now!”

RASHBAM: **If the LORD brings about something unheard-of.** Literally, “if the Lord creates a [new] creation” on earth. Compare “for the LORD has created something new on earth” (Jer. 31:22). This will be something new, not like the deaths of Nadab and Abihu.

IBN EZRA: **Something unheard-of.** The Hebrew word is often understood as “a creation,” since some take this root to refer to the coming into being of something that did not previously exist. But (as I explained in my comment to Gen. 1:1) the usage in Ezek. 23:47, “Let the assembly pelt them with stones and *cut them down* with their swords,” demonstrates that the verb can be used for cutting material that already exists into a new form. Certainly many places on earth had previously split open and swallowed their inhabitants alive into Sheol. Moses is requesting that God decree a new such “splitting” of the earth.¹

¹ In the Hebrew idiom, a decree is also “cut.” It is not clear whether Ibn Ezra means that Moses (in this phrase) is requesting that the earth be split, that the orders to have the earth split should be cut, or both.

Baruch Levine, Numbers (Anchor Bible)

³⁰“But if YHWH creates a [special] creation and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up, as well as all aligned with them; so that they descend live into Sheol—then you must acknowledge that these persons have rejected YHWH.”

30. *a special creation.* The form *berī’āh* is a hapax, serving as a cognate accusative.

BDB: † **בְּרִיאָה** n. f. a creation, thing created, as preternatural, unparalleled; acc. cogn. “אִם־בְּרִיאָה יִבְרָא יְהוָה” **Nu 16:30.**

HALOT: **בְּרִיאָה**: | ברא —1. something new, something unheard **Nu 16₃₀**; —2. **creature** Sir 16₁₆ (בריות), cj. (rd. לְבְרִית) Ps 74₂₀. †

His compassion appeared to all of his creatures and his light and glory he has apportioned to humanity.

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DCH: **בְּרִיאָה** 1.0.16 n.f. creation, creature

Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (JPS Torah Commentary)

30. brings about something unheard-of Literally, “will create a creation,” that is, something unprecedented that did not exist before (e.g., Jer. 31:21). However, a preferable rendering is “makes a great chasm,” ⁶⁵ corroborated by the fulfillment passage (vv. 31–33), as follows:

Verse 30

1. But if the Lord makes a great chasm
2. So that the ground opens its mouth
3. and swallows them up with all that belongs to them,
4. and they go down alive into Sheol.

Verses 31b-33a

1. the ground under them burst asunder
2. and the earth opened its mouth
3. and swallowed them up with their households . . .
4. They went down alive into Sheol.

⁶⁵ Ibn Ezra; P. D. Hanson, “The Song of Heshbon and David’s Nir,” HTR 61 (1968): 297–320; a meaning attested for the Piel pattern of *bara’* (see Josh. 17:15, 18; Ezek. 21:24; 23:47).

H. E. Hanson, “Num. XVI 30 and the Meaning of *bārā’*,” VT 22 (1972): 353-359

A few instances of Piel forms of *bārā’* exist in MT. When used in this conjugation the sense of the verb is “to cut”, “to hew down”, etc. Cognates of *bārā’* in other Semitic languages express the imagery of cutting. In Arabic, *bārā’* means “form, fashion by cutting, shape out, pare a reed for writing, a stick for an arrow”. The possibility that the Biblical usage of *bārā’* in the Qal stem expresses the idea of formation by cutting deserves consideration. Num. xvi 25-35 depicts the scene of the earth splitting apart beneath Dathan and Abiram. If the basic meaning of *bārā’* is “to cut”, it would be a suitable word to employ in the description of the event. The verse might be literally translated: ... ‘But if the LORD splits open a crevice, and the ground opens its mouth, and swallows them up ...’

NAHMANIDES: If the LORD brings about something unheard-of. See Ibn Ezra’s comment. But in fact this root does refer to creation ex nihilo. We have no other Hebrew verb that expresses this concept. The “splitting” of the earth is certainly not a new creation; but for the earth to open its mouth and swallow them up is indeed new, something that had never before occurred. For when the earth splits open—which often happens as the result of an earthquake—the cracks remain open, eventually filling up with water. But for the earth to open and close immediately—like a man opening his mouth, swallowing some food, and closing his mouth again—was so unheard of that its occurrence on that day was the equivalent of something being created out of nothing. For indeed “the earth closed over them” (v. 33), clearly explaining what had happened in vv. 31–32. The rabbinic tradition that the mouth of Gehenna came here specifically in order to swallow them would likewise be referring to something specifically created to happen at this moment.

<https://www.thetorah.com/article/korah-and-the-documentary-hypothesis> [TABS editors]

In the Datan and Abiram narrative, in the J source, these two men refuse to listen to Moses, since Moses—really God—reneged on the promise to bring them to the Promised Land following the scout incident. Moses goes to them and commands the earth to swallow them alive, which it does.

In the Korah narrative, part of the P source, Korah leads a group of Levites and 250 elders to challenge Moses’ appointment of Aaron as high priest. Moses tells the 250 chieftains and Korah to show up with fire-pans filled with incense and light them, Aaron will do the same and God will choose. Korah’s band does this and God reacts by burning them all, thereby establishing Aaron as God’s chosen.

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