

שמיני 10:1-2 Leviticus Shemini

Context: Chapter 10 follows the ordination of Aaron and his sons along with the appearance of God’s presence. It begins with a short story in which a fire from God kills Nadab and Abihu, Aaron’s eldest sons. In this tragic story, Nadab and Abihu offer a ritual fire that God did not command. Mary Douglas reminds us that Leviticus consists mostly of laws. This short story in chapter 10 is the first of only two times that Leviticus is interrupted by narratives. Douglas

proposes that the two narratives are analogous to the screens that divided the tabernacle into three parts and also parallel the tripartite projection of Mount Sinai (Mary Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature*, 195). The story brings up possible themes of fear, God’s power and following the rules of sacrifice. The story, however, leaves the reader uncertain as to what exactly constituted the transgression of Aaron’s two sons (TAWC, 620).

that God did not command of them. The text does not specify the offense committed by the two young priests; it merely states that they brought an offering that had not been specifically ordained...Various suggestions in the midrashim produce a composite of several possible offenses. In *Leviticus Rabba* we read: “Because of nearness (*kirvah*)- for they penetrated into the innermost section [of the sanctuary]. Because of ‘sacrificing’ (*kirvah*) for they brought an offering they were not enjoined to bring. Because of ‘alien fire’- they brought coals inside [the sanctuary] which came from an oven (and not from the sacrificial altar).” (Levine, 58-59)

Questions for Discussion

1. After reading both the text itself and the commentaries, how would you explain what constitutes the transgression of Nadab and Abihu? Why?
2. Based on your answer to the first question, what do you think we can learn from the story of Nadab and Abihu?

וּיקְחוּ בְנֵי־אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ
 וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְרֶת וַיִּקְרְבוּ
 לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם: וַתֵּצֵא
 אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי
 יְהוָה:

The sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan and gave in them fire and they put on incense and they caused to bring forth a strange fire before God that God did not command of them. A fire came forth from before God and consumed them and they died before God.

Commentary: Pans for incense offering are mentioned in the Priestly account but in the case of Nadab and Abihu, the text also specifies “each his pan,” in other words, it was their private possession and not that of the sanctuary...The nature of Nadab and Abihu’s sin is contained in the words “unauthorized coals.” The adjective “unauthorized” provides the clue. “Unauthorized coals” implies that they were not the right kind.

This can only mean that instead of deriving from the outer altar, the coals came from a source that was “profane” or “outside,” such as an oven. The possibility must also be recognized that the coals were invalidated because they may have been placed on the personal pans of Nadab and Abihu instead of on those of the sanctuary; still, that the sin is specified as “unauthorized coals” and not “unauthorized pans” makes this alternative less likely. (Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Continental Commentary*, 93-94)

Commentary: Given the chiasmic design so prominent in this book and its complex symmetries and piled-up equivalences, we must take note of the triple return of fire for fire. First in chapter 9 the Lord made the gift of good fire that sanctified and consumed the offering on the altar, then in chapter 10 came the bad fire offered by Aaron’s sons, negative reciprocity, a return of bad for good. Third, the fire from the Lord settled the score by burning the wrongdoers. It seems to be complete in itself, in classical narrative form, A-B-A, which we will recognize again and again. However, the names of the sons of Aaron give us the hint to read the fire stories together across Exodus and Leviticus. Nadab means ‘willingness’, Abijah means ‘God is my father’ (Abihu, ‘He is my father’). This suggests that their deaths are a sequel to an earlier burning story in which their father was involved. (Douglas, 201-202)