

# A COMMENT ON NADAB AND ABIHU

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Nadab and Abihu, the eldest sons of Aaron (Ex. 6:23; Num. 3:2), had been consecrated to serve as priests in Israel (Ex. 28:41-43, 29:4-9, 40:12-16; Lev. 8:1-36). Leviticus 10:1-3a states:

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, *which he had not commanded them*.<sup>2</sup> And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.<sup>3</sup> Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD has said: 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.'"

We know this particular offering of incense to God was sinful because the two men were incinerated for having made it. A key to identifying the sin is the clause at the end of v. 1 that explains why the offering was "unauthorized" or "strange" fire (*'ēš zārâ*): it was an offering "which he had not commanded them." They were not killed for violating an express command but for presuming to worship God in a manner he had not indicated was acceptable. They worshiped as they saw fit, not as God had instructed, and paid with their lives for that failure to sanctify and glorify God.

As Gordon Wenham comments in *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 155, "What really mattered is [that] it was fire *which he had not commanded them*. The whole narrative has led us to expect God's ministers to obey the law promptly and exactly. Suddenly we meet Aaron's sons doing something that had not been commanded." John D. Currid states in *Leviticus* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2004), 125, "The point is simple: Nadab and Abihu drew near to God in an aberrant manner, one that is not in accordance with his Word. It is, therefore, a deliberate disobedience. In place of God's Word they thrust self-will and personal caprice." The point is echoed by Timothy R. Ashley, *Numbers*, NICOT, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 53:

Nadab and Abihu offered incense in an improper manner before Yahweh and were consumed by fire from God's presence. The problem was not that they offered incense when they were not qualified to do so. Chapter 8 relates their ordination as priests with all the rights and privileges of the priesthood. The problem was that they offered incense "that Yahweh had not commanded them" (Lev. 10:1). They made this offering on their own, of their own free will, not in response to God's command. Thus the fire was *unacceptable* or "unauthorized" (*zārâ*).

Precisely what they did that God had not commanded is obscure and has been debated by Jewish and Christian scholars for millennia. Many think the most likely explanation is that Nadab and Abihu placed in their fire pans (censers) coals from a source other than the altar of burnt offering in the courtyard of the tabernacle. That rendered their fire "unauthorized" because

Lev. 16:12 specifies that the coals for burning incense in the tabernacle must come from the altar of burnt offering. I am not convinced this is correct.

First, as Jay Sklar notes in *Leviticus*, ZECOT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023), 294, the word "fire" in the phrase "unauthorized fire" (*'ēš zārâ*) is a synecdoche that stands for the incense offering as a whole. Baruch A. Levine likewise notes in *Leviticus*, JPSTC (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 58, "Hebrew, *'esh zarah*, 'alien fire,' refers to the incense itself." It was thus the incense offering rather than the fire specifically that was unauthorized, so *'ēš zārâ* does not imply that something is wrong with the coals.

Second, Lev. 16:12 refers to the use of incense in conjunction with Aaron's entrance into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. It does not address, at least directly, the source of coals for incense offered by priests in other places on other occasions. If the text implies it was impermissible to use coals from any other source for any incense offering, then doing so would be an offering *contrary to* what God had commanded them. It would not be an offering "he had not commanded them."

And third, it seems unlikely that Nadab and Abihu would seek coals for their incense offering from a source other than the altar of burnt offering, especially if that source was understood to be the only one authorized by God. The priests were well aware that the altar was a reliable source of coals (Lev. 6:12) right next to the sanctuary proper, so why would they seek fire elsewhere? That only makes sense if one imputes to them a premeditated defiance that has no support in the text. Their sin was presumptuous irreverence that failed to respect God's glory (10:3), not premeditated defiance.

Others think the most likely explanation is that Nadab and Abihu offered incense that was not formulated in accordance with the dictates of Ex. 30:4-8. But if that were the case, one would expect the phrase "unauthorized *incense*" (*qēṭōret zārâ*), as in Ex. 30:9, instead of "unauthorized *fire*." Moreover, it is difficult to imagine what would motivate such defiance, and positing a violation of a specific prohibition is again hard to square with the statement theirs was an offering "he had not commanded them."

I think Ex. 30:1-8 and Lev. 16:1-2 are key to understanding what Nadab and Abihu did that God had not commanded, but this requires some unpacking. Exodus 30:1-8 specifies that Aaron is to burn incense on the golden altar of incense in the Holy Place twice daily, at morning and at twilight. Many are convinced this duty was restricted to Aaron (and subsequent high priests) and only later, perhaps in the shift from the tabernacle to the temple, became something in which all priests could participate. But it seems to me that John L. Mackay is correct when he says of Ex. 30:7 in *Exodus* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-Shire, Great Britain, 2001), 503-504, "While the high priest no doubt performed this duty on the most important days in Israel's religious calendar, '*Aaron*' here stands for the priesthood as a whole, and these duties might ordinarily be delegated to others." Just as Ex. 30:7-8 speaks only of Aaron dressing and setting up the lamps in the Holy Place, and yet Ex. 27:20-21 refers to "Aaron *and his sons*" as tending the lamp in the tent of meeting, so the command to Aaron in Ex. 30:7-8 to offer the incense on the altar implies the inclusion of his sons.

That Aaron here represents a group is hinted at by the fact Ex. 30:9, immediately on the heels of commands addressed to Aaron, says, "You [plural] shall not offer unauthorized incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering, and you [plural] shall not pour a drink offering on it." That could refer only to successor high priests, but other evidence makes me think it includes all priests.

Exodus 28:42-43 states, "You shall make for them linen undergarments to cover their naked flesh. They shall reach from the hips to the thighs; <sup>43</sup> and they shall be on Aaron and on *his sons* when they go into the tent of meeting or when they *come near the altar to minister in the Holy Place*, lest they bear guilt and die." This assumes that Aaron's sons will be ministering at the altar of incense in the Holy Place. 1 Chronicles 6:49 states, "But Aaron *and his sons made offerings* on the altar of burnt offering and *on 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" (see also, 1 Chron. 23:13). In 2 Chron. 26:16-18, King Uzziah "entered the temple of the LORD *to burn incense on the altar of incense*," but he was thwarted by the courageous action of Azariah and eighty other priests. They told Uzziah (v. 18), ""It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, *but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense.*"

The ancient Jewish theologians whose judgments are reflected in the Mishnah were convinced that the daily incense offerings on the altar of incense could be made by ordinary priests (*Tamid* 5.2; *Yoma* 2.4). Since there was no word from God changing the regulation after the time of Ex. 30:7-8, the Mishnah presumably represents Jewish understanding of the original command. That understanding is also reflected in the New Testament in Lk. 1:5-9 where Zechariah, an ordinary priest of the division of Abijah, was chosen by lot to burn incense in the temple. Hebrews 9:6-7 states, "These preparations having thus been made, *the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties*, <sup>7</sup> but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people."

The instruction to Aaron (and implicitly to other priests) in Ex. 30:7-8 was to offer incense on the altar in the Holy Place twice daily, at morning and twilight. Leviticus 16:1 says, "The LORD spoke to Moses *after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died.*" In the very next verse, the Lord commands Moses to tell Aaron not to come into the Most Holy Place "at any time" (*bēkol- 'ēt*), but since the next verse requires Aaron to enter the Most Holy Place at least sometimes, the meaning is that Aaron is not to come into the Most Holy Place *at any time he pleases*. This meaning is made clear in NKJV, NAB, NRSV, CJB, HCSB, NJB, CEB, NABRE, NIV, NCB, CSB. The fact the incident involving Nadab and Abihu is mentioned immediately before the instruction to warn Aaron not to enter the Most Holy Place whenever he feels like it suggests that Nadab and Abihu had entered the Holy Place to burn the incense at a time of their own choosing, a time other than the morning and twilight as commanded in Ex. 30:7-8. Their incense offering was therefore unauthorized, being made at a time "which he had not commanded them," and constituted an affront to God's glory.