

The Institution of the Priesthood

Leviticus 8:1-10:20

I. The History of the Priesthood

The priesthood was an essential element of the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel. They served as the mediators between God and the people. It was also a familiar office throughout ANE religion.

“The concept of an intermediary who served a god would thus have been a familiar concept, although the call of Israel’s priests to a holy or sanctified life in the ethical sphere would be an unknown concept among pagan religions” (Rooker, 140).

A. Pre-Mosaic Era

1. The head of a household may have functioned in a priestly role in earlier eras

- a) Noah (8:20-21)
- b) Abraham (12:7-8; 13:3-4)
- c) Jacob (28:18-22; 35:1-7)
- d) Job (1:4-5)

“In none of these cases do we really have an ordinary clan worshipping God together in an ordinary situation; but rather we have the ancestors of the covenant community or unusual situations. In none of these narratives do we have a shrine or a temple that was appropriate for families to use” (Rooker, 198).

2. Melchizedek

- a) He was king of Salem and priest of the Most High God (Gen 14:18-20)
- b) He blessed Abraham (14:19), received tithes from him (14:20), thus demonstrating him to be Abraham’s superior.
- c) Hebrews ties his typologically to the royal priestly ministry of Jesus Christ

3. Moses

- a) He is never called a priest, but seems to function in that capacity
- b) He leads Israel out of Egypt in order to offer sacrifices to Yahweh in the wilderness (Exod 8:27).
- c) He intercedes for Israel after the fiasco of the golden calf (Exod 32:11-14).
- d) He offers sacrifices for Aaron and his sons in order to consecrate them as priests for the covenant community (Exod 29:42b-46; Lev 8).

4. The Levitical Priesthood

“The main functions of priestly service were designed to bring about sanctification by making the people holy before God so that God could dwell with them and they with him” (Ross, 203).

a) Duties of the priesthood:

- (1) Seeking God’s will for important decisions for the community
- (2) Teaching the people God’s law
- (3) Offering decisions and answers to the problems of life (Deut 33:9-10; Mal 2:7; Jer 18:18; Ezek 7:26)
- (4) Making sacrifices for the people

b) Hierarchy of the priesthood

(1) The Nation

Israel as a nation functioned as a “kingdom of priests” (Exod 19:5-6) which mediated between God and the nations.

(2) The Levites

- (a) Not all Levites served as priests
- (b) They assisted the priests and cared for the sanctuary (Num 1:50; 3:28, 32; 8:15; 31:30, 47; 1 Chron 23:25-32)
- (c) They instructed the people in the law (Neh 8:7, 9; 2 Chron 17:7-9; 35:3)

(3) The Priests

- (a) Ordinary priests had to be descendants of Aaron (Exod 28:1, 41; 29:9; Lev 1:5, 7-8, 11; Num 3:10; 18:7)
- (b) They officiated sacrifices at the tabernacle/temple
- (c) They summoned the nation to war (Num 10:1-10; 31:6)
- (d) They announced Israel’s feasts

(4) The High Priest

- (a) Only one high priest ministered at a time
- (b) He must be descendants of Aaron through Eleazar
- (c) He oversaw the entire Levitical organization (Num 3:32)
- (d) He represented the entire nation and the priesthood before God (Lev 16)
- (e) The death of the high priest marked the end of an important epoch in Israelite history (Num 35:25, 28, 32)

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II. Exposition

A. The Ordination of the Priesthood (8:1-36)

1. Public ceremony (8:1-4)

- a) “Then Yahweh spoke to Moses” is a formulaic introduction throughout Leviticus which marks a new section (cf. Lev 1:1; 4:1; 5:14; 6:1, 8, 19, 24; 7:22, 28; 11:1; 12:1; 13:1; 14:1; 15:1; etc.).
- b) The reference to the various priestly garments and offerings directly reflects the instructions given to Moses concerning the ordination of the priesthood in Exodus 29. In fact, Leviticus 8 records the direct fulfillment of those instructions, and the language throughout directly quotes or alludes to those instructions.
- c) Moses, Aaron, and Aaron’s sons are the key participants in this ceremony.
 - (1) Moses acts as priest, carrying out the rituals prescribed in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 1-7.
 - (2) Aaron and his sons take up the role of laity, performing those functions usually assigned to the ordinary worshiper.
 - (3) This is necessary since Aaron and his sons are not yet ordained and thus are not yet qualified to perform these functions. They must first be cleansed, anointed, atoned, and the tabernacle purified before they can begin their roles as divine-human mediators.
- d) Twice, the text mentions that “[all] the congregation” was assembled at the entrance of the Meeting Tent.
 - (1) Some commentators suggest that only the elders or leaders of the congregation were present as representatives of the people. However, since the elders are specifically mentioned in 9:1, it may be preferable to view this as the full assembly of the people.
 - (2) The point of assembling the congregation is that the priesthood, and especially the high priest, was the most important person in the nation. For this reason, his ordination was done publically.
- e) “And Moses did as Yahweh commanded him” is an important refrain throughout chs. 8-9 and occurs in rhythmic fashion (8:4, 9, 13, 17, 21, 29, 36; 9:5, 7, 10, 21).
 - (1) This links the events with what Moses was commanded to do in Exodus 29.
 - (2) More strategically, it stresses the absolute obedience of Moses and Aaron throughout these important events.

2. Priestly garments (8:5-9)

a) Divine command (8:5)

Moses directly addresses the congregation—his focus is public. He wants them to recognize that the actions he is performing come directly from Yahweh.

b) Ceremonial washing (8:6)

Moses washes Aaron and his sons with water. Most likely, the entire body was washed with water, which was symbolic of spiritual cleansing. It was an outward rite which represented an individual's desire for inner spiritual cleansing (cf. Ps 24:4; 73:13; Isa 1:16).

c) Aaron's garments (8:7-9)

Priests were set apart from laity by a prescribed uniform which stressed the dignity and solemnity of their office (cf. Exod 28:2). In the case of the high priest, these garments were even more intricate than those of his sons, which stressed the significance of his particularly office.

The priestly garments are described in full detail in Exodus 28-29.

(1) Coat

This was actually an undergarment, like a shirt, which usually reached past the waist. This garment was worn by laymen and regular priests as well. This particular shirt was made of fine linen (Exod 28:5).

(2) Sash

The sash was made of linen and served as a belt which wrapped around the waist, binding up the shirt close to the body so that it would not hinder movement under the outer robe.

(3) Robe

The robe was the main outer garment which stretched down past the knees. It was made of blue, and was embroidered with blue, purple, and scarlet pomegranates and gold bells at the hem which allowed his movements to be heard while behind the veil in the most holy place (Exod 28:31-35).

(4) Ephod

The ephod was similar to an apron, which covered from the chest to the thighs, and attached to the body with two shoulder pieces. It was made of gold, blue, purple, scarlet, and fine twisted linen (Exod 28:6-7). On its shoulders were set in gold filigree two onyx stones on which the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were engraved so that the high priest would "bear their names before Yahweh" (28:9-14).

(5) Band

A waistband wrapped around the ephod, keeping it tight to the body. It was also made of gold, blue, purple, scarlet, and fine twisted linen (Exod 28:8).

(6) Breastpiece

The breastpiece was a piece of linen in like kind to the ephod and the waistband, roughly 9 inches square. Set in the breastpiece were four rows of

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three stones, each different, representing the names of the twelve Israelite tribes (Exod 28:15-21). The breastpiece was attached to the ephod with braided cords made of pure gold, with gold rings at the ends (28:22-28).

The breastpiece is called “a breastpiece of judgment” or “breastpiece of decision,” which indicates its purpose. Not only was it important for the high priest in bearing the names of Israel’s tribes before Yahweh, but it also held the Urim and Thummim (see below).

The breastpiece was the most important garment, and more than any other piece distinguished the high priest from the rest of the priesthood. It symbolized the unity of the nation as well as its dependence of the ministry of the high priest.

(7) Urim and Thummim

Not much is known about these items, including their size, color, or material, although they seemed to be familiar to Moses and the people. They were held in a pocket in the breastpiece, and apparently were used to determine the will of God on matters that were beyond human knowledge.

The best example of their use appears in 1 Samuel 14:36-42 where they are used to identify Jonathan as the one who broke Saul’s orders. The best evidence indicates that their use in such matters began to wane after the Davidic period, when prophetic oracles became more common.

(8) Turban

The turban was perhaps more of a turban-like headband which wrapped around the forehead, made of wrapped linen.

(9) Gold plate

The gold plate was attached to the turban with blue cord so that it was positioned over the forehead. It was engraved with the phrase, “Holiness to Yahweh” (Exod 28:36-37). In Exodus 29:6 and Leviticus 8:9 it is called “the holy crown” or “holy diadem,” and was particularly important in that it symbolized Aaron’s acceptable representation of Israel before Yahweh (28:38).

3. Priestly anointing (8:10-13)

Anointing with oil was an act by which something or someone was “consecrated”—set apart—to divine service (cf. Lev 8:10). The term is the same as what is commonly translated “made holy” or “sanctified,” and indicates the transfer of something to a state of holiness for dedicated use before God.

a) Anointing of the tabernacle (8:10-12)

Moses first anoints the tabernacle and everything in it, including the altar, the utensils, and bronze basin, etc. By doing so, the tabernacle was made a holy place

where no common individual could enter, and whose utensils could only be utilized by those who were likewise consecrated and thus in a state of holiness.

b) Anointing of Aaron (8:13)

Next, Moses poured the anointing oil over Aaron's head, setting him apart for special service. Psalm 133:2 captures the joy of national and brotherly unity in the depiction of this momentous occasion.

The anointing oil was also heavily connected theologically with the empowering ministry of the Holy Spirit (1 Sam 10:1; 16:13; Isa 61:1; Zech 4:1-6).

c) Garments of Aaron's sons

Moses then fits Aaron's sons with their priestly garments. These were similar to Aaron's clothing, but lacked some of the vestments that distinguished the high priest from the others.

4. Sin offering (8:14-17)

The sin offering is offered in accordance with the instructions given in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 4. However, some peculiarities occur.

- a) Moses acts as priest, while Aaron and his sons fill the role of the laity.
- b) Aaron and his sons laid their hands on the bull's head, and Aaron slaughtered it.
- c) Unlike the sin offering for the high priest, Moses applies the bull's blood to the horns of the altar of burnt offering rather than the altar of incense.
 - (1) Perhaps this is due to the fact that the contamination of sin had not yet penetrated into the holy place.
 - (2) Most likely, the altar had to be purified before a burnt offering could be offered.
- d) The blood of the bull was applied to "purify"—literally, "de-sin" the altar, decontaminating it from impurities, which is consistent with the function of the sin offering.
- e) The rest of the blood was then poured out at the base of the altar to "consecrate it" (i.e., set it apart) and thus "make atonement for it" (i.e., cleanse it).
- f) The fat was burned on the altar, along with the liver and kidneys.
- g) The rest of the animal was burned outside the camp, in accordance with sin offerings for the high priest and the congregation.

5. Burnt offering (8:18-21)

The burnt offering was presented in strict accordance with the regulations found in Leviticus 1. The result was that it formed "a pleasing aroma" to Yahweh. It's function, as outlined in Leviticus 1, was to atone for general sin so that Aaron and his sons would find acceptance before Yahweh.

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6. Ordination offering (8:22-30)

The premiere offering of this ordination ceremony is the ordination offering, which appears to be a special kind of peace offering.

- a) The blood of the ram was applied by Moses to the right earlobe, right thumb, and right big toe of Aaron and his sons.
- b) “The priest must have consecrated ears ever to listen to God’s holy voice; consecrated hands at all times to do holy deeds; and consecrated feet to walk evermore in holy ways” (Dillman, 465).
- c) “The application of blood to these parts covered what they heard, what they handled, where they went; it meant that in all their activities they were supposed to be set apart by the blood. Being a priest involved total sanctification of life—a holy lifestyle. This is confirmed by the sprinkling of oil and blood (8:30). There was not separation between sacred and secular; the priest was never off duty” (Ross, 213).
- d) The fat, liver, kidneys, and right thigh were placed in Aaron’s hands, along with several types of grain offerings, and presented as a wave offering to Yahweh before being burned on the altar.
- e) The right breast was taken by Moses as the officiating priest, presented as a wave offering, and eaten by him.
- f) Normally, the officiating priest would receive the right thigh and breast as his allotted portion. “On this occasion the right thigh was included in God’s portion burned on the altar (v. 25). Perhaps this distribution of the priestly perquisites represents the idea that the ordination of Aaron is carried out jointly by God and Moses” (Wenham, 142).
- g) Finally, Moses took a mixture of the blood of the ordination ram and the anointing oil and sprinkled it on Aaron and his sons’ garments in an act reminiscent of the blood of the peace offering sprinkled on the people to initiate the covenant in Exodus 24. Like the rest of the holy things sprinkled in the tabernacle, so too are Aaron and his sons sprinkled and set apart for holy use.

7. Days of fulfillment (8:31-36)

- a) The ordination of Aaron and his sons lasted for seven days, in which time they had to remain in the Meeting Tent.
- b) They boiled the meat of the ordination offering and ate it only on that day. The rest had to be burned.
- c) There is an assumption that perhaps an ordination offering was presented on each of the seven days in order to provide Aaron and his sons with food throughout the period.
- d) Seven days of purification were also required in cases of skin diseases and bodily discharges (Lev 14:8ff; 15:13-14, 28-29).

- e) “A man may defile himself in a moment, but sanctification and the removal of uncleanness is generally a slower process” (Wenham, 144).

B. Inauguration of Sacrificial Worship (9:1-24)

With the ordination ceremony complete, Aaron and his sons are now fully ordained priests able to carry out their mediatory responsibilities. Chapter 9 is another momentous event where they execute their first official sacrificial offerings. The details in this chapter are purposely repetitive. They reemphasize the fact that Aaron and his sons performed everything according to the regulations detailed in chapters 1-7.

1. Moses’ instructions to Aaron and the elders (9:1-7)

- a) The eighth day marks the end of the ordination period for Aaron and his sons. They have been confined to the Meeting Tent for seven days.
- b) Moses’ instructions pertain not only to Aaron, but to the people as a whole. The animals to be offered (bull, ram, goat, calf, lamb, ox, grain offering) represent every category of sacrificial animal mentioned in chapters 1-7 except for birds.
- c) “Jewish commentators have long noted the irony of this command to Aaron. The first sacrifice he has to offer is a calf, as if to atone for his sin in making the golden calf (Exod. 32), while the ram for the burnt offering recalls the same animal offered by Abraham instead of Isaac (Gen. 22)” (Wenham, 148).
- d) Aaron is instructed to present offerings for himself and for the people. The interesting thing is that his offerings not only atone for him, but for the people as well. His role as high priest was so important that his own atoning sacrifices effected the atonement of the people (9:7).
- e) The purpose of these offerings is stated twice: “so that the glory of Yahweh may appear to you” (9:4, 6). These offerings came with a promise that God would make his presence known to his people. *This reinforces the central significance of the priesthood and the sacrificial system. Both allowed God’s manifest presence to dwell with his people.*

2. Aaron presents his offerings (9:8-14)

Even though sin offerings and burnt offerings had already been presented on Aaron’s behalf during his ordination, now Aaron and his sons must make their own offerings. “His action in carrying out these sacrifices served as a public admission of his own sinfulness and need for forgiveness” (Wenham, 149).

a) Aaron’s sin offering (9:8-11)

Aaron and his sons participate in offering the sin offering. Once again, the sin offering here appears to be a composite ritual of the sin offering for laity and priest. While the blood applied to the horns of the altar of burnt offering (rather than the altar of incense; see the note on the sin offering for 8:14-17), the carcass of the animal was burned outside the camp.

b) Aaron’s burnt offering (9:12-14)

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The burnt offering was executed exactly as prescribed in chapter 1. Aaron manipulated the blood while his sons butchered the animal.

3. Aaron presents the people's offerings (9:15-21)

Having presented offerings on his own behalf, Aaron now presents the sacrifices for the people. Every type of offering is presented except for the guilt offering, which was restricted to specific transgressions. They involved almost every category of sacrificial animal.

“This indicates that the purpose of these sacrifices was not to atone for specific sins, but for the general sinfulness of the nation, to dedicate the whole people to the worship of God according to his appointed means, and to pray for God's blessing on them” (Wenham, 149).

a) The people's sin offering (9:15)

The first sacrifice offered for the people was a sin offering, which functioned to purify the altar and the tabernacle. The phrase, “and offered it as a sin offering” literally reads, “and decontaminated with it.” The details of how it was offered are not stated, but the text explains that it was done “like the first one,” meaning Aaron's sin offering (9:8-11).

b) The people's burnt offering (9:16)

A very brief explanation is offered for the people's burnt offering. The inclusion of the phrase “according to the rule” intentionally emphasizes the obedience of Aaron to perform this sacrifice in accordance with the instructions outlined in chapter 1.

c) The people's grain offering (9:17)

The grain offering proceeded following the burnt offering, as it regularly served to complete the meal offering by accompanying the meat of the burnt offering with bread. The exact details are abbreviated, but the reader understands that all has been done in accordance with the sacrificial regulations in chapter 2.

d) The people's peace offerings (9:18-21)

Two peace offerings are presented, consisting of an ox and a ram—certainly not enough to feed all the people. But the point of these particular peace offerings is not to provide a meal but to emphasize the fellowship that the people have with Yahweh. Special detail is provided for how Aaron and his sons burned the fat and offered the right breast and thigh as a wave offering.

4. Yahweh appears to the people (9:22-24)

The intended goal of presenting these sacrifices is that Yahweh might appear to the people and make his presence known to them (9:4, 6). The chapter ends by emphasizing that the details executed throughout this event and the obedience of Aaron and his sons had the desired effect.

- a) After presenting the people's offerings, Aaron blesses the people while still in his elevated position where he stood to set the sacrifices on the fire.
- b) "The announcement of blessing upon the people by the priest is part of the mediating role performed by the priests for the nation of Israel" (Rooker, 153).
- c) The contents of his blessing are not provided, but many commentators suggest that Numbers 6:23ff provides a likely basis for his blessing of the people.
- d) After he descended from the altar, he entered into the Meeting Tent with Moses, presumably to entreat Yahweh to appear to the people as his promised. The significance of this is that it "demonstrated that the role of mediating for the people was being passed from Moses to Aaron" (Rooker, 154).
- e) Moses and Aaron exited the Meeting Tent and together they blessed the people—the second occurrence of blessing in two verses.
- f) Yahweh's glory appeared to the people in the form of fire that went out from the Meeting Tent (lit., "from the presence of Yahweh") and completely consumed the burnt offering that was still burning on the altar.
- g) The people responded with shock, shouting out in utter surprise and falling on their faces in fear. This response is similar to other times when God consumed offerings the offerings with supernatural fire (Judg 13:15ff; 2 Chron 7:1ff; 1 Kgs 18:38ff).
- h) This divine response underscores the overall point of chapter 9—that Aaron and his sons performed their priestly duties exactly as they were commanded—and prepares the reader for the shocking events to unfold in the very next chapter.

C. The Judgment of Nadab and Abihu (10:1-20)

In ch. 10, several important elements come together to culminate and conclude this important section on the installation of Israel's priesthood. First, the initial incident involving Aaron's sons and its aftermath demonstrate that even Israel's own representatives before God—the priests—are not immune to sin or judgment. Second, the chapter clarifies several critical aspects of priestly responsibility to the people and to God. Third, there is encouraged in this text that despite the failings of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's status as high priest is reaffirmed—all is not lost.

1. The judgment of Nadab and Abihu (10:1-7)

a) Their sin (10:1)

- (1) The syntax of opening phrase connects the events of 10:1-7 with the immediately preceding section. In fact, based on Moses' instructions in 10:12-18 concerning the priestly portions to the grain and peace offerings, it seems that the incident in 10:1-2 may have happened immediately following Aaron and Moses' blessing of the people and the subsequent appearance of Yahweh's fire in 9:24. In other words, Nadab and Abihu proceeded with their firepans and incense before Aaron and his sons even had a chance to eat their priestly portions.

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- (2) This verse demonstrates a highly composed literary and rhetorical strategy:
- (a) The first half of the verse utilizes words used throughout chs. 8-9 to denote priestly activities—“took” (8:15, 16, 23, 25; 9:2, 15), “put” (8:15, 24; 9:9), “placed” (9:20; cf. 8:8-9, 26), “offered” (8:18, 22; 9:2, 9, 15, 16, 17).
 - (b) When the phrase “unauthorized fire...which he had not commanded them” appears, it diverges dramatically from the established pattern of Aaron and his sons’ full obedience established throughout chs. 8-9.
 - (c) “Every step they take is in obedience to a divine command directly given or mediated by Moses. Both chapters open with such a word (v. 2). But the action in ch. 10 commences without any divine directives. In language very reminiscent of ch. 8 we learn of Nadab and Abihu taking the initiative themselves. The alert listener or reader at once senses that there is something wrong. This scene does not begin like the previous two. It is structured differently” (Wenham, 134).
- (3) Nadab and Abihu were Aaron’s two eldest sons (Exod 6:23). They had accompanied Aaron and Moses up Mount Sinai (Exod 24:1), and had just been ordained as priests. In fact, that morning they had literally just completed their seven-day period of consecration as priests.
- (4) The two priests took their “censors” (or “fire pans”), which were specific priestly vessels used for carrying burning embers and ash during tabernacle service. They put on these burning coals incense, which was a mixture of aromatic spices and oils which were vaporized by the heat from the glowing embers.
- (5) Offering incense before Yahweh was a priestly prerogative.
- (a) The priests presented incense on the altar of incense in the tabernacle, and its use in the tabernacle came under specific regulations, including the recipe used and the times it was offered (cf. Exod 30:7-10).
 - (b) In Num 16:16-19, Moses used censors and incense to distinguish the true priestly line of Aaron from the Korahites, who were challenging the legitimacy of the Aaronic priesthood.
 - (c) In Num 16:46-49, Aaron used his censor and incense to stop a devastating plague that was sweeping through the congregation after they sided with the Korahites.
- (6) However, in this instance, the text indicates that Nadab and Abihu offered “unauthorized fire...which he had not commanded them.”
- (a) “Unauthorized” is the term זָרָה (zārāh), which literally means “strange”. It appears 80x in the OT and can refer to unauthorized persons such as non-Aaronites, non-Levites, or non-Israelites, or to that which is prohibited or illegitimate.

- (b) The negative statement comes as a shock after the repeated emphasis on the obedience of Aaron and his sons.
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EXCURSUS: What was the sin of Nadab and Abihu?

It is safe to say that no adequate explanation has yet been given to explain the nature of Nadab and Abihu's sin. The meaning of the phrase "strange fire" remains one of the most elusive and debated interpretive issues in OT studies. Ancient Jewish rabbinic interpreters identified no less than 12 possible explanations, revealing that the text's difficulties go back far before the advent of modern historical critical scholarship. Of course, not all of these explanations have endured exegetical scrutiny, but several still remain as recurrent explanations.

1. *They offered incense at the wrong time of day*

Exodus 30:7-8 instructs the high priest to burn incense on the altar in the tabernacle every morning and evening. Perhaps Nadab and Abihu were judged because they offered incense at an unauthorized time.

2. *They offered the wrong kind of incense*

Exodus 30:9 prohibits the use of any "unauthorized incense." This same term is used in 10:1, providing a strong connection between Exod 30:9 and Lev 10:1. The specific blend of spices burned on the altar of incense is detailed in Exod 30:34-38, and was used exclusively in the tabernacle. It may be that Nadab and Abihu brought a foreign or unauthorized blend of incense to burn before Yahweh.

3. *They attempted to enter the Most Holy place*

Leviticus 16:1-2 specifically references the deaths of Nadab and Abihu before instructing Aaron not to enter the Most Holy place at any time. Leviticus 16:12-13 discusses how the high priest used his fire pan to bring coals into the tabernacle and burn incense on the altar of incense before proceeding behind the veil. This suggests that the deaths of Aaron's sons may have involved their attempting to enter into the Most Holy place, a privilege reserved solely for Israel's high priest (Lev 16:32).

4. *They tried to usurp the high priest*

Both the offering of incense in the morning and evening (Exod 30:7-8) and entering the Most Holy place were privileges belonging to the high priest, as was entering behind the veil into the Most Holy place (Lev 16:32). The two had just witnessed Aaron and Moses leave the tabernacle and bless the people, and had seen the fire of Yahweh appear in response and consume the sacrifices. They saw the people respond and fall on their faces in fear and worship. Perhaps they took up their own fire pans and incense and attempted to meet with Yahweh in a similar manner, in order to elicit a similar response. By doing so, they would be usurping a privilege belonging solely to their father. "If these two priests had succeeded in exalting themselves over their father and brothers, they would

have created a deep rift in the priesthood that would have tarnished the true worship of Yahweh at its very inception” (Hartley, 133).

5. *They used the wrong kind of coals*

The text specifically references “strange *fire*” as the issue involved in Nadab and Abihu’s sin. Thus, after referencing their deaths in Lev 16:1, Aaron is instructed to use coals from the altar of burnt offering (16:12) before entering the tabernacle and going behind the veil. Thus, perhaps the coals used by Nadab and Abihu came from an unauthorized source—somewhere other than the altar of burnt offering.

Each of these potential explanations has contextual and intertextual support. Judging the motivations of Nadab and Abihu (4) is difficult, as the text gives no hint of their intentions. Nonetheless, the preface to the instructions in ch. 16 seem to have 10:1-2 as a background, giving weight to (3) and (4). Meanwhile, the appearance of “unauthorized” in both Exod 30:9 and Lev 10:1 undergirds (2). Of all these views, (1) seems to be the least likely candidate. In fact, (1) and (2) suffer from one major flaw: they focus on the *incense* used when the text of Lev 10:1 clearly focuses on the *fire* used, which makes (5) perhaps the most likely candidate.

Nonetheless, the ambiguity of the text makes any decision extremely tentative. In fact, it could be that several of these options—the source of the fire, the location, and the motivations the priests—combine to explain what happened.

b) Their deaths (10:2)

- (1) The phrase “and fire came out from before the LORD and consumed” first appeared in 9:24 signaling Yahweh’s acceptance of the sacrifices appears here. But here, the fire of Yahweh appears as in judgment and consumes the two disobedience priests.
- (2) A similar event occurs in Num 16:35, when Yahweh executed the 250 men who had offered incense during the Korahite rebellion.
- (3) Although Nadab and Abihu were “consumed” by the fire, they were not completely burned, as is evident in 10:4 when their bodies are carried away still in their priestly garments.
- (4) The OT describes Yahweh as a “consuming fire” whose jealousy provokes him to judge those who break his covenant (Deut 4:24) but equally works for the good of his people against their enemies (9:3).
- (5) Hebrews 12:25-28 admonishes readers to respond in faith to God’s message of salvation, which gives grace to render acceptable worship to God, warning that “our God is a consuming fire” (12:29).

c) God’s explanation (10:3)

- (1) Moses’ words give the divine explanation for what has occurred.

- (2) Helpful paraphrases of this verse:
 - (a) “Those who have the privilege of being nearest to God must bear special responsibility to exemplify His holiness and glory” (BKC).
 - (b) “The closer a man is to God, the more attention he must pay to holiness and the glory of God” (Wenham, 156).
 - (3) The actions of Nadab and Abihu required Yahweh to demonstrate his holiness through the immediate execution of these priests. They had not treated him as holy, so God demonstrated his holiness to all. And when God demonstrates his holiness—as he did in this event—it results in all the people giving him glory.
 - (4) Yahweh’s holiness and glory are theologically linked in the OT. Hertrich writes that God’s “holiness is his hidden, concealed glory.... But his glory is his holiness revealed” (quoted by Wenham, 156). Similarly, see Isa 6:3, where the intrinsic holiness of God (“holy, holy, holy...”) results in his glory filling the earth.
 - (5) “If we reflect how holy a thing God’s worship is, the enormity of the punishment will by no means offend us. Besides, it was necessary that their religion should be sanctified at its very commencement; for if God had suffered the sons of Aaron to transgress with impunity, they would have afterwards carelessly neglected the whole Law. This, therefore was the reason of such great severity, that the priests should anxiously watch against all profanation” (Calvin, 2:431).
 - (6) Aaron’s response was appropriate and significant. He remained silent rather than crying out in horror or anger.
2. God’s instructions to Aaron and his sons (10:4-20)
- a) Instructions concerning the burial and mourning of Nadab and Abihu (10:4-7)
 - (1) Lev 21ff prohibited priests from contact with corpses, which would defile them. In circumstances where the dead was a close relative, such as a parent or a sibling, a priest (except the high priest) could personally attend to the corpse.
 - (2) However, in this instance, Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, Aaron’s cousins, to remove the bodies of Nadab and Abihu and bury them outside the camp (10:4-5). The sobering fate of these two priests are that their bodies are disposed of in the same manner as the carcasses of the animal sacrifices—outside the camp, the place of uncleanness.
 - (3) Aaron, Eleazar and Ithamar were not permitted to mourn the deaths in the customary ways. The high priest was never allowed to dishevel his hair or tear his garments (21:10), but such restrictions usually did not apply to other priests (10:6a).

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- (4) In this case, not even Aaron's sons were permitted to mourn, most likely because such action could be perceived by the people as sympathy for the deceased and a questioning of Yahweh's justice.
 - (5) Moses warns Aaron and his sons that mourning would result in their deaths as well, which would place the entire nation in jeopardy (10:6b). This statement, once again, underscores the centrality of Israel's priesthood for the life and vitality of the nation. Without the priesthood, the nation could not stand before Yahweh.
 - (6) At the same time, the text displays a beautiful grace. While Aaron and his sons must maintain their holiness as anointed priests and so not leave the tabernacle to participate in the burial and mourning (10:7), the congregation was allowed to mourn for the deceased on their behalf. In other words, while Aaron and his sons continued in their intercessory on the people's behalf, the people mourned for Aaron's sons on Aaron's behalf. Both parties did what the other couldn't do.
- b) Instructions concerning the priestly responsibilities (10:8-11)
- (1) Reassurance of Aaron's high priesthood (10:8)
 - (a) This is the only instance in Leviticus in which Yahweh directly addresses Aaron without Moses' mediation.
 - (b) By doing this, any question regarding Aaron's legitimacy as high priest is answered. Yahweh is directly reassuring Aaron that the disobedience and death of his sons did not dissolve his role as priest.
 - (2) Responsibility to maintain sobriety (10:9)
 - (a) When a priest was on duty at the tabernacle, he was responsible to remain sober-minded, which involved abstaining from wine and strong drink.
 - (b) Wine refers to beverages made of fermented fruit juice. Strong drink most likely constitutes something like barley beer rather than distilled alcohol, which was not produced in ancient Israel.
 - (c) There is no indication that alcohol was outright prohibited. Wine was a staple of the ANE. Several NT preachers have attempted to use this verse to indicate that all priests were prohibited from drinking alcohol, but the text clearly indicates the circumstances when this command was applicable.
 - (d) Nevertheless, the intoxicating effects of alcohol are well discussed throughout the OT, and the Bible is replete with warnings regarding its use.
 - (e) In the case of priests, their intercessory role necessitated clear thinking. In fact, imbibing alcohol while "on duty" would result in their death.

- (f) Many commentators, including Jewish rabbinical traditions, have suggested that this command flows out of the events of 10:1-2. Perhaps Nadab and Abihu had become intoxicated, clouding their judgment and leading to their disobedience.
 - (g) The command to abstain from alcohol constituted a permanent statute in Israel. However, the syntax of 10:10-11 indicates that 10:9b acts as a hinge transitioning to the next two priestly responsibilities. Another way of translating this would be, “It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, as well as to distinguish...and to teach...”
- (3) Responsibility to have discernment (10:10)
- (a) “Distinguish” literally means “to divide, separate, or make a distinction.” Such a responsibility naturally builds off of the need for sober thinking (10:9).
 - (b) The priests had the important responsibility of distinguishing between two classes and two conditions:
 - (i) Holy vs. common
Holy and common describe the *status* of a person, place, time, or object. Whatever is holy has been dedicated to Yahweh’s service. Whatever is not holy is common. To treat a holy person or thing as if it were common was to *profane* it. Conversely, something common could be made holy by *consecrating* it.
 - (ii) Clean vs. unclean
Clean and unclean describe the *condition* of a person, place, or thing. Cleanness can be viewed as the default “normal” condition. Something clean could be *defiled* and become unclean. Conversely, something unclean could be *purified* and thus made clean.
 - (c) Understanding and navigating these categories was a matter of everyday life for Israel. The purity laws (chs. 11-15) and holiness code (chs. 17-25) provide the details on how these categories intersected with life, and they taught the people important spiritual and theological lessons about covenant life in a fallen world.
 - (d) The priest had the responsibility of recognizing these distinctions and helping the people distinguish them as well.
 - (e) Ezekiel 22:25 notes that the priests of Jerusalem before the exile “made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean.” Their abdication of this central priestly responsibility was one of the contributing factors for the coming judgment against Judah.

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- (4) Responsibility to teach the people (10:11)
 - (a) The priests were also responsible for instructing the people so that they clearly understood the laws and statutes that governed them as the covenant community.
 - (b) Lev 14:57, Deut 24:8, Neh 8:2, 8, 9, Ezek 22:25; Mal 2:7 indicate that one of the widespread responsibilities of the priests were to instruct in the moral and ceremonial aspects of the law. The people needed to understand how to live in righteousness and holiness, as well as how to remain in a ceremonially clean condition, or how to pursue purification when needed.
- c) Instructions concerning the priestly portions of the offerings (10:12-20)
 - (1) Moses' instructions concerning the grain and peace offerings (10:12-15)
 - (a) Both the grain and peace offerings referenced in this section refer to those offerings that were part of the inauguration of the sacrificial system on the eighth day following the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests.
 - (b) This means that the events of ch. 10 occurred on the same day as the events of ch. 9, so close to the conclusion of those sacrifices that the priests had not yet eaten their portions.
 - (c) Priests were to offer up a handful of the grain offering on the altar as its "memorial portion" (4:2). The rest belonged to them as their portion (4:3). Only the priest and his sons (who were also priests) could eat it, and only in a holy place (i.e., beside the altar) since it was holy (10:12-13). The rest of his family (e.g., wife, daughters, etc.) had not been consecrated and thus were common and could not eat what was holy.
 - (d) The fat of the peace offering was offered on the altar as Yahweh's portion, while the right breast and thigh were given to the priest as his portion (7:31-35). Unlike the grain offering, all of the priest's family could partake of the peace offering meat, as long as they consumed it in a clean place (10:14-15).
 - (e) The catastrophe of Nadab and Abihu had apparently interrupted the normal progress of the sacrifices. Since Aaron and his sons had not yet eaten their portions, Moses instructed them to eat them as the law prescribed. In other words, since they were still on duty, they needed to continue their priestly responsibilities.
 - (2) Moses' admonition concerning the sin offering (10:16-20)
 - (a) Moses then inquired about the portions of the sin offering belonging to the priest. When he learned that Aaron's sons had burned all of its flesh on the altar (10:16), he became angry, as it was a violation of the sin offering regulation.
 - (b) When a priest carried the blood of a sin offering inside the tabernacle to apply it to the horns of the altar of incense, the entire animal except for the

fat had to be burned outside the camp. None of the meat could be eaten (6:30). But if the blood was not taken into the tabernacle, but only applied to the horns of the altar of burnt offering, then the meat minus the fat belonged to the priest, who was to eat it in a holy place (6:26).

- (c) Thus, Moses was rightfully angry to discover that Aaron's sons had strayed from these regulations, and explained to them that since the blood of this particular sin offering had not been brought into the tabernacle, then its meat belonged to them (10:18). They could not allow this tragic incident to deter them from their priestly duties.
- (d) Aaron's explanation for their diversion from the regulations is somewhat enigmatic, and has garnered a few explanations:
 - (i) Aaron was afraid to eat the meat since it was "most holy." They had just presented a sin offering and burnt offering in order to avert Yahweh's wrath, but nevertheless, judgment had come upon Aaron's family. He was understandably reluctant to eat the "most holy" things after that (Wenham, 160).
 - (ii) Aaron was concerned to eat the meat, since the sin had involved the priesthood. Thus, "Aaron wondered if the LORD would have been pleased if they ate" (Ross, 237).
 - (iii) Aaron felt that it would be inappropriate to enjoy the food from the sin offering, since he was in grief over the loss of his sons. Even though his actions technically violated the law, his attitude didn't betray obstinate disobedience like Nadab and Abihu. He was simply doing what Israel's priests were supposed to do—distinguishing the holy and the common and the clean and the unclean (Rooker, 163; Hartley, 137).
- (e) Whichever view is correct, Aaron's explanation was enough to satisfy Moses (10:20). "The remarkable feature of this account is that the lesser figure, Aaron, persuaded the greater figure, Moses" (Harley, 137).