

day – the inauguration of Israel’s public worship (cf. 10:19 with 9:8–14) – only underscores the tragic contrast.

But despite such a negative beginning, Leviticus 10 does end positively. The chapter consists of three sections. In the first, the priests Nadab and Abihu greatly disrespect the Lord in the context of worship, and experience his judgment as a result (vv. 1–7). In the second, the Lord warns Aaron, the high priest, to avoid the errors of his sons and to carry out his priestly duties faithfully (vv. 8–11). In the third, Aaron demonstrates his reverence for the Lord by faithfully following his commands in the context of worship (vv. 12–20). Thus, the negative example set by Nadab and Abihu at the beginning of the chapter is replaced by their father’s positive example at the end, emphasizing the importance of priestly faithfulness.

Comment

i. The Lord judges Nadab and Abihu with death for failing to revere him (10:1–7)

1–2. *Nadab and Abihu* were the oldest of Aaron’s four sons (Exod. 6:23). As the story begins, they bring an *incense* offering *before the LORD* in their *censers* (vessels in which incense and coals of fire could be carried; cf. 16:12). But since the Lord had not *commanded* this offering, it is described as *unauthorised fire*.⁴

Leviticus 16 provides further insight into the nature of the offence. The chapter begins by referring to Nadab and Abihu ‘who died when they approached the LORD’ (v. 1). The Lord then warns Aaron ‘not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place . . . or else he will die’ (v. 2). These verses imply that the sin of Nadab and Abihu was twofold. First, they approached the Lord’s presence at a time he had not authorized (and so Aaron is warned not to enter ‘*whenever he chooses* into the Most Holy Place’). Second, they tried to enter a place that the Lord had not authorized: the Most Holy Place itself (and so Aaron is warned not to enter ‘*whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place*’). In short, the *unauthorised fire* was an incense

4. The word *fire* here is used by way of metonymy to refer to the fire and the incense together.

offering which they presented at an unauthorized time (one of their own choosing) and at an unauthorized place (attempting to barge into the very throne room of the Lord!). This was considered a severe breach of royal protocol (cf. Esth. 4:11) and thus a sign of gross disrespect to the Lord (cf. v. 3 below).

The Lord's judgment comes swiftly. In a dramatic reversal, the *fire* that had *consumed* the offerings (9:24) now consumes those presenting the offering: Nadab and Abihu (10:2)! In a single day, the story moves from triumph (Lev. 9) to tragedy (Lev. 10).

3. To explain why Nadab and Abihu have been killed, *Moses* turned to *Aaron* and proclaimed to him a message from *the LORD* consisting of two parallel lines:

Among those who approach me,	I will show myself holy;
in the sight of all the people,	I will display my glory. ⁵

The first half of each line explains where the Lord will show himself holy and display his glory. *Those who approach* him are the priests, who approached the Lord's presence to perform various worship rites on Israel's behalf (9:7; Ezek. 40:46), while *all the people* refers to the Israelites. The Lord does not display his holiness and glory secretly, before a chosen few, but publicly, for all to see.

But what does it mean for him to 'show himself holy' and 'display his glory'? The words are used elsewhere in the context of a miracle that displays his power so clearly that it sets him apart as distinct from any other being (*holy*), and causes those who behold it to acknowledge him as the God worthy of all *glory* (cf. Exod. 14:17–18). As in Leviticus 10, such displays occur elsewhere as miracles of judgment: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "I am against you, O Sidon, and *I will display my glory* within you. They will know that I am the LORD, when I inflict punishment on her and *show myself holy* among her' (Ezek. 28:22, my trans.; cf. Exod. 14:4, 17–18; Ezek. 39:11–13). The Lord is therefore issuing a very strong warning to the entire priestly family: if you do not set me apart by your actions as the God worthy of reverence, I will use your death as an

5. My translation.

opportunity to remind all the people that I am indeed the God who is to be revered above all (cf. 16:2).

In response, Aaron was *silent*: that is, he accepted what the Lord had done (cf. Lam. 3:28). Although undoubtedly deeply grieved, Aaron recognized that there was no objection to make when the Lord brought justice to bear on those who failed to revere him properly.

4–5. Having explained to Aaron why his sons had died, Moses turned his attention to an urgent issue: removing the dead (and ritually polluting) corpses *from the front of the sanctuary*, that is, from in front of the Most Holy Place where the ark was kept.⁶ As noted above (vv. 1–2), Nadab and Abihu had tried to enter the Most Holy Place itself and had died as a result. Their bodies were now lying in front of it, so Moses *summoned* their *cousins, Misbael and Elzaphan*, to come and *carry* the bodies *outside the camp*. (Presumably, bodies were typically taken outside the camp to avoid defiling it.)

6–7. With the corpses of Nadab and Abihu gone, Moses turned his attention to the remaining priests: *Aaron and his sons Eleazar and Ithamar*. After the death of a loved one, it was normal for ancient Israelites to enter into a period of formal mourning in which they became ritually impure (perhaps because they would have had close contact with the ritually defiling corpse; 21:11). But since Aaron and his sons have had *the LORD's anointing oil* placed on them, they had been set apart into a special status of holiness (8:12, 30). This status was especially strong during the ordination period, which appears to have extended beyond the seven-day ordination ceremony (Lev. 8) to the eighth-day inauguration service (Lev. 9). The priests were therefore forbidden from engaging in the ritually defiling mourning process (21:1, 3, 4). Specifically, they were prohibited from such mourning rites as letting their hair *become unkempt* or *tearing their clothes* (v. 6; cf. Gen. 37:29; Lev. 21:10), and from leaving *the entrance* area in front of the *tent of meeting* to go and mourn (v. 7). If they did, they would face the Lord's judgment and *die*. And no wonder. To desecrate what the Lord sets apart into his holy realm is to show great disregard

6. The word translated *sanctuary* (NIV) is lit. 'the holy place' (*baqqōdēš*), and can be used, as here, to refer to the *Most Holy Place* where the ark was kept (so also in 16:2, which refers back to this event).