

## Explanation of the Text

### 1. A Tragic Example of Priestly Unfaithfulness and Its Aftermath (10:1–11)

#### a. The LORD's Judgment on Two Unfaithful Priests (10:1–5)

These events occur the same day as those of ch. 9 (see comments at 10:16). Indeed, the original Hebrew had no chapter divisions, so the first hearers or readers would have joined the two chapters closely, especially since the verbal form that begins 10:1 carries on the story of 9:24.<sup>3</sup> And while this verbal form allows for several hours to have passed between 9:24 and 10:1,<sup>4</sup> the smooth transition gives the impression that the Israelites are still shouting for joy in the background as Nadab and Abihu begin their fatal deed.

#### (1) The Judgment (10:1–3a)

##### (a) The Reason for the Judgment (10:1)

The oldest of Aaron's four sons, Nadab and Abihu (Exod 6:23) were named in Exod 24 as those who went with Moses, Aaron, and the seventy elders to a special feast before the LORD (24:1–2, 9). This shows they had an authoritative role, which made any wrong they committed all the more serious.

As the story begins, “each took his firepan, and they put fire in them,” that is, live coals,<sup>5</sup> “and placed incense on [the fire].”<sup>6</sup> Burning incense was a common form of worship in the ancient

Near East in general and in the Old Testament in particular.<sup>7</sup> Nadab and Abihu presumably used the fragrant incense made of various spices (Exod 30:34–36), which was specially designated for use in the sanctuary. Incense functioned as a type of offering, since it sent up a “pleasing aroma” to the LORD, thus serving as an act of worship and a means of seeking his favor.<sup>8</sup>

In this case, however, Nadab and Abihu “presented before the LORD unauthorized fire that he had not commanded them.” The word “unauthorized” (זָרָה) elsewhere describes that which is foreign to what the LORD prescribes, such as incense that differs from the holy mixture (Exod 30:9) or, in this case, “unauthorized” fire he has not commanded.

It is unlikely this refers to the “unauthorized incense” mentioned in Exod 30:9, for the simple reason that we would expect to read of “unauthorized incense,” not “unauthorized fire.” The most likely explanation is suggested by the LORD's instructions in Lev 16 for the Day of Atonement ceremony. That chapter begins with a reference to this story (16:1); the LORD then warns that Aaron must not “go at any time he pleases into the [Most] Holy Place<sup>9</sup> behind the curtain before the atonement lid that is on the ark, lest he die, for I appear in the cloud over the atonement lid” (16:2). These verses imply that Nadab and Abihu's sin was trying to barge into the Most Holy Place at a time of their own

3. It is a *wayyiqṭōl* and carries on the chain of *wayyiqṭōls* that began in 9:22.

4. A *wayyiqṭōl* indicates the action came at some point after the preceding one, not necessarily immediately after.

5. Cf. Num 17:2[16:37].

6. Hebrew “on it”; the “it” is f.s. and refers to the fire (cf. Lev 16:13).

7. For the ancient Near East, see Nielsen, *Incense*, 3–33; for the Old Testament, see Exod 30:7–8; Num 17:11–12[16:46–47]; Ezek 8:11; 16:18.

8. Cf. comments at Lev 1:9.

9. See 4:5–7, n26 for translation.

choosing. If we remember the tabernacle was like the LORD's palace, where he sat enthroned over the ark,<sup>10</sup> then Nadab and Abihu had not simply come to the palace unannounced; they had tried to barge into the very throne room of the heavenly King without invitation. As 10:3 indicates, this showed utter disregard for the LORD. Indeed, to approach a king so disrespectfully in some ancient Near Eastern cultures was an offense punishable by death (cf. Esth 4:11)—which is exactly what occurs here.

In short, Nadab and Abihu presented an offering “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).”<sup>11</sup> The word “fire” thus stands for the incense offering as a whole,<sup>12</sup> which was “unauthorized” for the reasons just stated. Whereas Moses and Aaron did everything in the tabernacle “as the LORD had commanded” (8:9, 13, 17; 9:10; etc.), Nadab and Abihu did things “he had not commanded them,” showing utter disregard for the LORD's holiness and glory.<sup>13</sup>

(b) *The Judgment Itself (10:2)*

“Then fire came out from before the LORD,” that is, from within the Most Holy Place,<sup>14</sup> which Nadab and Abihu had tried to enter on their own accord and where the LORD had manifested his presence in a special way (16:2). This fire “consumed them,” that is, burned them to death. Their bodies were not totally consumed, as evidenced by the fact that their cousins had to carry them away (10:4).<sup>15</sup>

Several commentators have suggested the fire might have been comparable to a lightning strike.<sup>16</sup>

The irony is tragic. The previous chapter ends with joyful shouts of praise as fire comes from the LORD's presence to consume the Israelites' offering, thus showing he has accepted them with favor (9:24). Two verses later, fire comes from the LORD's presence to consume those making an illicit offering, thus showing he has rejected them in judgment.<sup>17</sup> He is a “consuming fire” (Deut 4:24) and must be revered, something Nadab and Abihu utterly failed to do.

(c) *The LORD's Explanation of the Judgment (10:3a)*

“Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘This is what the LORD declares.’”<sup>18</sup> Moses now provides the LORD's explanation for this judgment on Nadab and Abihu, which serves as a warning to priests in particular. It is made up of two parallel lines:

“Among those who draw near to me	I will show myself to be holy,
and in the presence of all the people	I will display my glory.”

“Those who draw near to me” are the priests, who draw near to the LORD to perform various sacrificial rites on the Israelites' behalf.<sup>19</sup> “It is among these priests,” the LORD declares, that “I will show myself to be holy.” In Leviticus, the LORD's holiness refers especially to the fact that he is distinct from

10. See the introduction, §3.a., and at 16:2.

11. Sklar, *Leviticus*, 156–57.

12. This is a literary device known as synecdoche, where the whole is referred to by one of its parts.

13. See further comments at 10:3a.

14. See 9:23b–24a, p. 283n32.

15. Note how an English speaker can say “fire consumed the house,” even if a burned out shell of the house remains. Cf. Amos 1:4.

16. Cf. Exod 9:23–24.

17. Cf. Num 16:35.

18. I take this to be a “performative” perfect, which is “especially common with verbs of saying” and is translated as a present (Joüon §112f).

19. See Lev 9:7; 21:6; Ezek 40:46; 43:19; 45:4.

all others in his purity, love, and power.<sup>20</sup> Power is in view here. This miracle of judgment shows he is a God of astounding power and thus to be revered. (Indeed, the verb “to show oneself to be holy” [שׁוֹמֵר] occurs frequently in the context of a miracle that demonstrates the LORD’s power and authority.<sup>21</sup>) In short, if the priests fail to revere him, the LORD’s miraculous judgments will show he is indeed the God of all power and authority and therefore to be deeply revered.<sup>22</sup>

The LORD underscores and builds on this thought in the second line. He will not do this only “among the priests” but also “in the presence of all the people,” so they will see these miraculous deeds and recognize his magnificence. Such a display will make clear he is a God of great might who is worthy of glory and honor and praise (“I will display my glory”).<sup>23</sup>

### (2) Aaron’s Response to the Judgment (10:3b)

Having heard this explanation, “Aaron was silent (שָׁמַט)” (or “Aaron was still”);<sup>24</sup> he accepted the LORD’s decision without complaint. This reading finds support in the verb’s use depicting a person being “silent/still” when receiving a difficult yoke from the LORD (Lam 3:28). It is also in keeping with many passages where the LORD gives a word of judgment or allows a negative event and people

respond with acceptance (1 Sam 3:18; 2 Kgs 20:19; Job 1:20–22; 2:10). In short, Aaron hears Moses’s explanation and accepts the LORD’s judgment as just. This does not mean he is indifferent; we would in fact expect him to be heartbroken. But Aaron acknowledges by his silence that this was an act of justice against those who had defamed the most holy King.

### (3) Addressing the Results of the Judgment (10:4–5)

As noted at 10:1–2, Nadab and Abihu had tried to barge into the Most Holy Place, from which fire came forth to consume them.<sup>25</sup> This implies their ritually defiling<sup>26</sup> corpses were now lying in the Holy Place. The bodies thus had to be removed immediately, which Moses orders their cousins,<sup>27</sup> Mishael and Elzaphan, to do.

The two immediately obey and carry Nadab and Abihu “by their tunics”<sup>28</sup>—perhaps to avoid touching the corpses of those slain by the LORD?—“to [a place] outside the camp,” where dead bodies were presumably taken to avoid spreading defilement within the camp. This would have been an incredibly tragic scene: Aaron watching silently as his nephews carried his dead sons out of the tent, through the courtyard, and off into the distance, never to return.

20. See the introduction, §3.b.ii.

21. See esp. Ezek 28:22; see also Num 20:13; Isa 5:16; Ezek 20:41; 28:25; 36:23–24; 38:16; 39:27. This is its consistent use in the context of miracles (making the passive translation, “be treated as holy,” unlikely). For the middle-reflexive sense of the *niphal*, see Joüon §51c.

22. As noted above, the LORD’s power goes hand in hand with his absolute purity and love; his power is not that of a tyrant but of a benevolent king (see the introduction, §3.b.ii).

23. For similar contexts where the LORD’s miraculous judgment leads to people recognizing his glorious power, see Exod 14:4, 17–18; Ezek 39:13; and esp. Ezek 28:22, where “display my glory” (גָּבַד) is used in parallel to “show myself to be holy” (שָׁמַט), each verb having a middle-reflexive nuance. The paral-

lelism between the two phrases in our verse is best maintained when a middle-reflexive nuance is used both times in English. Cf. comments at n21.

24. This verb (שָׁמַט) has both ranges of meaning. For “to be silent,” see Ps 31:18[17]; Ezek 24:17; for “to be still,” see Exod 15:16; Josh 10:12, 13.

25. For the translation “[Most] Holy Place” in 10:4, see 4:5–7, n26.

26. Numbers 19:11–13.

27. The word אָחַי often refers to other types of relatives beside brothers (BDB 26.2).

28. Or perhaps “in their tunics,” though elsewhere אָחַי means “to carry *by means of*” (Exod 25:28; Num 13:23).