

## 28. Nadab and Abihu

Lev 10

*These two supposed sons of Aaron offer an alien (that is, a Canaanite) sacrifice, and are immediately killed.*

Anointing with oil is how a priest confers sacredness on a king. Why oil? Because oil, and the fragrance often mixed with it, are an offering suitable to a god. Jacob wakes from dreaming of heavenly angels while he was sleeping on a certain stone. He realizes that he is in the presence of the sacred, and he pours oil on the stone, thus honoring the deity of that place:

**Gen 28:18.** And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. [19] And he called the name of that place Beth-El . . .

or “House of El.” El is the god of Canaan; fragrant oil is a Canaanite offering.

In the Jerusalem Temple there was at one point a separate incense altar, where offerings of that kind were made to Yahweh. There was also a place to display the other Canaanite offering, the “showbread” – cakes representing the fruit of the fields, as the incense represented the produce of the trees.

But later there came a time when that sort of mixed worship was forbidden, and representing that change, we have an invented story:

**Lev 10:1.** And Nadab and Abiháu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his censer, and put fire therein, and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before Yahweh, which he had not commanded them. And there came forth fire from before Yahweh, and devoured them, and they died before Yahweh.

Why is their fire “strange?” Not because it was not commanded,<sup>1</sup> but because incense *as such* is “strange” – it belongs to the alien religion of the Canaanites.<sup>2</sup>

What we are seeing here is a power struggle between the would-be priests. The stakes were high. Compare the fate of the Korahites in Numbers:

**Num 16:32.** And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men that appertained unto Korah, and all their goods. [33] So they, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed upon them, and they perished from among the assembly.

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The Aaronites won these early confrontations, though King David, cannily manipulating the priestly rivalries of his time, replaced one with a Zadokite. The losers became Temple assistants (Levites) or singers (the Sons of Korah).

<sup>1</sup>Wenham (1979) 154 “not commanded;” Gerstenberger (1993) 115 “without authorization;” Milgrom (2004) 93, “unauthorized;” Sklar (2013) 155 “had not commanded.” None of this captures the specific offense of Nadab and Abihu.

<sup>2</sup>Hb *zub* means “strange, of another family, alien, foreigner.” (BDB 266)