

27. Nadab and Abihu

Lev 10

Anointing is how a priest confers sacredness on a king. There is also a more modest anointing, which merely confers a *personal* blessing:

Psa 23:5b. Thou hast anointed my head with oil,
my cup runneth over.

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 anoints 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 . . .

El is the god of Canaan; and fragrance is a Canaanite offering. Its counterpart is the sweet smell of the burnt animal sacrifices which much pleased Yahweh, as we saw in the Noah story (§9): “And Yahweh smelled the sweet savor.”

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 there came a time when such mixed worship came to be forbidden. Representing that change, we have:

Lev 10:1. And Nadab and Abihu, 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 is in some way technically wrong;¹ incense *as such* is “strange:” it belongs to the alien religion of the Canaanites.²

What we are also seeing here is a power struggle between rival groups of 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.

The Aaron line won these early confrontations, but King David, cannily manipulating the priestly rivalries, would replace them with Zadokites (§47).

¹Wenham (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.

²Heb *zab* means “strange,” “of another family,” “alien,” “foreigner.” (BDB 266)