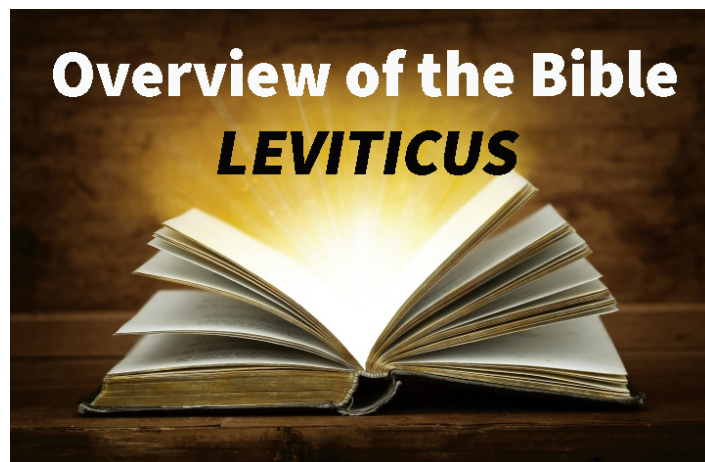


LEVITICUS:
Priestly Ordination
Leviticus 8-10 – Lesson 20
Wednesday, September 16, 2020



I have already suggested that Lev. 6:8-7:38 is not only a supplement to the information given in 1:1-6:7, but also specific instructions to the priests concerning their obligation in the sacrificial ceremonies. What is it, however, that qualifies the priest to perform his functions, and where does it all get started?

Ordination of the Priests (chapter 8)

Everything in chapter 8 takes place publicly at the *"entrance to the tent of the meeting"* (vv. 3, 4, 33, 35), the large, open courtyard area that leads up to the entrance to the inner tent. At this point the priests have not yet been ordained and so, cannot offer sacrifices, but clearly, they are not laity. The means is consecration, involving washing (vv. 5-6), robing (vv. 7-9), anointment (vv. 10-13), and then the offering of sacrifices, specifically the sin, burnt, and peace or ordination offerings; in that order (vv. 14-29). The instructions for this installation ceremony are found in Exodus 29; the ceremony is implemented in Leviticus 8.

The ordination offering is discussed in 8:22-29 with the parallel in Exod. 29:19-34. Several things are especially noteworthy. First, not only in this chapter but also in the next two, Moses is the supervisor and Aaron is the subordinate. This seems to indicate the superiority of prophet over the priest.

A second interesting fact is that again there is a more extensive use of the blood than there is in the peace offering of Leviticus 3. The blood of the ram is daubed on the tip of the priest's right ear, the thumb of his right hand, and the large toe of his right foot. Why these parts of the anatomy? Was the priest one who was to be especially sensitive to the Lord, thus able to hear God's word? Was the priest indeed the one who needed clean hands to enter the presence of God, as the psalmist suggested? Was the priest the one who, par excellence, stood in God's holy place and must walk blamelessly?

The expression for *"ordain"* appears in 8:33. The verse may be read, *"And you shall not go out from the door of the tent of meeting for seven days, until the day of the filling of the days of your filling, for within seven days he will fill your hand."* The same expression for priestly ordination appears in Exod. 28:41; 29:9, 33, 35; 32:29 etc.

To become a priest, then, meant to have one's hand filled. But what can the meaning of such a passage be? Does it refer to a salary that the priest is to receive? Is he given the right to a portion of the revenues and offerings brought to the sanctuary?

Perhaps it is impossible to discover precisely the antecedents of the Hebrew phrase. Could it be that filled hands of the priest symbolize the fact that his life was to be filled with nothing except holy things? Priesthood is a preoccupation, not a pastime. Like Jesus, the priests must be about their Father's business.

The Hebrew verb *"to fill"* is used in nonclerical contexts where the emphasis again is on total consecration to God's work. Moses says of Caleb, *"He has wholly followed the Lord"* (Deut. 1:36). The Hebrew reads, literally, *"He completely filled (himself) after the Lord."* The phrase is used again for Caleb's level of devotion in Num. 32:11-12; Josh. 14:8,9,14.

The ordination of the priest is to be a public ceremony (8:3-4). But before either Aaron and his sons are anointed

(vv. 10-13) or any sacrifices are offered (vv. 14-35), it is important that Aaron be outfitted in the proper priestly regalia (vv. 5-9). Two of the puzzling pieces are the Urim and Thummim (v.8). Whatever they are, they are mentioned again in Ex. 28:30; Num. 27:21; Deut. 33:8; 1Sam. 14:41; 28:6; Ezra 2:63; Neh. 7:65. The consensus is that there were two flat pieces, stones perhaps, that functioned as sacred lots by which the priest could receive guidance from God. The word "*Urim*" is related to the Hebrew verb meaning "*to curse*" (thus, a no from God?), and "*Thummin*" is related to the Hebrew verb meaning "*to be perfect, blameless*" (thus, a yes from God?).

Throughout ch. 8, Moses is the active one. Aaron and his sons are completely passive. Aaron and his sons are brought forward, washed, robed, anointed, have three different sacrifices offered on their behalf by Moses, are anointed again, and finally are given some concluding instructions by Moses. That is to say, before Aaron and his sons can do anything, something must be done to/for them. Before God can minister through them, God must minister to them.

The Commencement of Priestly Ministry (9)

Chapter 8 has described the seven-day-long consecration and ordination of Aaron and his sons. With this behind him, Aaron is ready for the first offering on behalf of the congregation. Aaron's ministry on behalf of others begins "*on the eighth day*" (v. 1), much as circumcision takes place on the eighth day, seven days of life outside the womb. The expression "*seven days*" occurs eighty-five times in the OT, seventy of which occur in contexts of some aspect of worship, and in many of these, the reference is to a time of restoration or to a time of separation and transition. What today, would we call a rite of passage? But that will have to wait until the second half of ch. 9. Verses 1-14 are for Aaron himself. Only in vv. 15-21 does he become celebrant.

Leviticus 9 seems to stress that the priest's ministry to others is useless unless his own relationship to God is above reproach. The chapter is also reminding the priest that although he is the occupant of a holy office and holds holy orders, he is still a flawed human being, one who needs constantly to be purified.

That there has been a sin and burnt offering at Aaron's consecration is good but insufficient (8:14-21). The whole process must be repeated before the recently ordained clergyman can become mediator. Again, he must offer the sin offering for himself (9:8-11), then the burnt offering (9:12-14).

Perhaps to make the situation even more dramatic, Moses tells Aaron to take a calf for his sin offering, and a ram for his burnt offering (9:2, 8). A calf? The last calf that Aaron had seen was the golden calf he fashioned at the foot of Mount Sinai (Ex. 32). And a ram? Was this not the substitute that God supplied for Abraham in place of Isaac (Gen. 22:13)? The calf, a reminder of recent disobedience, and the ram, a reminder of distant obedience!

Only after Aaron's own needs are met, is he able to become to the congregation all that he is meant to be. He oversees the presentation to God of four congregational sacrificial offerings: sin, burnt, cereal, and peace (9:15-21). The chapter observes at least three times that the offering of sacrifices brings the presence of God near. Not the repetition of "*for today the Lord will appear to you*" or "*and the glory of the Lord will appear to you*" in vv. 4, 6, 23. The first two are promises ("will appear"), while the last one is fulfillment ("appeared").

The order of events, then, in ch. 9 is a mandate from Moses; priestly sacrifices; congregational sacrifices; the appearance of the glory of God; worship in praise and prostration – "*and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces*" (v. 24). The glory of God, manifested in all its awe, makes a congregation fall prostrate in worship. The same happens in the life of an individual. Witness Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:28, 3:23), Daniel (Dan. 8:17), Paul (Acts 9:4), and John (Rev. 1:17).

Correct and Incorrect Procedures (10)

Chapter 9 ended with an emphasis on worship. What a jolt it is, then, to move into ch. 10, whose emphasis, at least at the beginning, is divine judgment. Two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, offered "*strange fire*" to the Lord, and for this trespass they paid with their lives. To lose two sons, both of whom are ordained clergy, is blow enough. In addition, Aaron and his two surviving sons must abstain from any public demonstration of grief or mourning over these deceased relatives (10:6).

What precisely was the nature of the sin, as sin so enormous as to merit death? A specific answer to that question escapes us. From the times of the rabbinical writings to the present, numerous suggestions have been offered. Leviticus Rabbah, homiletical commentary written in the fifth century A.D. in Palestine tries to answer the question. Were Nadab and Abihu drunk? Did they enter the sanctuary without washing their hands? Were they schemers and opportunists who said, "*when will those two old men (Moses and Aaron) die, so that we can exercise control over the community?*"

Perhaps the error was in some incorrect ritual procedure. This is the view adopted by much of modern scholarship. However, the point of the narrative is that the priest follows orders. Disobedience and departure from the divinely revealed way have catastrophic repercussions. After all the instances in ch. 8 of Moses doing what the Lord commanded, it is boldly contrastive to read about two of Aaron's sons doing something that the Lord had not commanded.

But not all trouble is past. Soon Moses finds himself in an altercation with Aaron over his two surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar (Lev. 10:16-20). Between these two scenes is the note that Aaron is to teach the people of Israel all the statutes of the Lord (v. 11). The irony is hard to miss; he is failing with his own family and is unable to teach them!

The two sons stumble over the sin offering brought to them by the people. In such a case the sacrifice is to be eaten by the priests (6:26, 29). This they refused to do (10:17). But why should such an omission lead to a heated argument?

Nadab and Abihu are incinerated for their infraction. Their two brothers, Eleazar and Ithamar, are not. Even though Moses is "*angry*" over the sin of omission of the two remaining sons, he is "*satisfied*" at the explanation that Aaron provides. Although it is difficult to determine the thrust of Aaron's explanation to Moses (the death of his two others son and their corpses polluted the sanctuary and, by extension, the sacrifice?), his words "*But such things as this have happened to me*" (v. 19) suggest that the sons' motive for disregarding ritual procedure was not defiance; rather, it was the circumstance of the moment—the loss of two siblings.