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OT 505 - Pentateuch and Early Prophets

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Exegesis Paper on Leviticus 10:1-7

Final translation of Leviticus 10:1-7

¹And Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his censer and they put fire in them and they placed incense upon it and they presented strange fire before the LORD which he had not commanded them. ²Then fire came out from before the LORD and it devoured them and they died before the LORD. ³Then Moses said to Aaron, "It is what the LORD spoke saying, 'By those who approach me I shall be treated as sacred,' and in addition, 'Before all the people I will be honored.'" And Aaron was silent. ⁴Then Moses called to Mishael and to Elzaphan, sons of Uzziel Aaron's uncle, and he said to them, "Come here. Carry your brothers from before the tabernacle to the outside of the camp." ⁵And they came and they carried them by the tunics to the outside of the camp as Moses had spoken. ⁶And Moses said to Aaron and to Eleazar and to Ithamar his sons, "You shall not uncover your heads nor shall you rend your garments so that you will not die and he be angry at all the congregation, but your brothers, all the house of Israel may bewail the burning which the LORD burned. ⁷And from the entrance of the Tent of Meeting you shall not go out lest you die because the oil of the consecrated portion of the LORD is upon you." And they did according to the word of the LORD.

Historical Background and Literary Context

In terms of the general historical background, the events of Leviticus occurred between the first day of the first month of the second year (Exodus 40:17) and the first day of the second month of the second year (Numbers 1:1) after the LORD had rescued the people of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. Their spectacular deliverance had been brought about by God's awesome display of power through the ten plagues, the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, and the destruction of Pharaoh's army. The people had recently received the Law through Moses at Mount Sinai and had just completed the construction of the tabernacle and the preparation of the priestly garments according to the instructions of the LORD. They were still in the wilderness having yet to reach the promised land of Canaan but they had been initiated into a relationship with the God who had delivered them from death and Egyptian servitude, had revealed himself to them at the giving of the Law, and was making his glorious presence continuously known to them through the cloud and pillar of fire which covered the recently completed tabernacle.

In terms of the immediate historical background of Leviticus 10, the LORD had recently (within the past two weeks?) given instructions concerning the different types of offerings and sacrifices that were to be made by the people at the tabernacle (chapters 1-7). Chapter 8 informs us of the priestly ordination of Aaron and his four sons according to the instructions given by God to Moses in Exodus 29. (This seems to be an expanded version of what is found in Exodus 40:9-16). Chapter 9 tells us of the beginning of the official priestly ministry which was begun by Aaron as he offered his first sacrifices eight days after his ordination. The chapter ends with the successful completion of all the sacrifices and the joyful worship of the people as they saw the glory of the LORD consume "the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar" (9:24).

By the end of Leviticus 9 all the preparations for instituting the sacrificial system had come to fruition as the tabernacle had been constructed and consecrated, Aaron and his sons had been appropriately purified, clothed, and anointed, and Aaron had successfully

completed his first official duties. The reward for their obedience in all these things was the approval of the LORD as seen when he sent fire to consume their offering. The LORD's approval in 9:24, however, is starkly contrasted with the LORD's disapproval and swift, deadly judgment concerning the behavior of Nadab and Abihu (two of Aaron's sons who were also ordained in chapter 8) in 10:1. It seems best to see the initial events of chapter 10 as occurring if not immediately after (Gordon Wenham understands it as being the same day) then at least within a very short time of the events of chapter 9. This seems possible partly because there is no specific indication within the text of any time elapsing and because of the *waw* consecutive which begins 10:1. This understanding need not be pushed as an absolute requirement for orthodoxy, however, because the most time that could have elapsed would have been about three weeks anyway, and the author (Moses) could have compressed the reader's perception of the passing of time in order to stress the contrast between the two events. Be that as it may, there are definite literary or thematic connections between the two periscopes: 1) The characters are the same (the LORD, Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu), 2) the place is the same (the tabernacle), 3) the time is the same (at worst within three weeks of each other), 4) the events involve priests making offerings, and 5) the results involve fire which reveals the LORD's acceptance or rejection of the offerings. More will be said of some of these elements later but for now suffice it to say that these connections reveal that the thought of this passage is closely related to the larger literary context of instructions regarding the proper behavior of the priests who were to serve God in the tabernacle.

Textual matter

There are no major textual variants in Leviticus 10:1-7, however, there are eleven minor ones in four of the seven verses as was discovered by using the critical apparatus of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS). None of the variants significantly affects the meaning of the text. The variants can be arranged into two groups: those variants that merely involve the spelling of proper names and those variants that display variations in other elements of the text. Variations in the spelling of proper names can

be found in verse 1 where the Septuagint (LXX) has “Abioud” instead of “Abihu”; in verse 4 where LXX has “Misadai” instead of “Mishael”; in verse 4 where the Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch, LXX, and the Syrian version of the OT (Peshitta) all have added a *yod* between the lamed and the *sade* of “Elzaphan”; in verse 4 a reading of one or several Hebrew manuscripts from the Cairo Geniza omits the *yod* in “Uzziel” and LXX B (Codex Vaticanus) reads “Azial” instead of “Uzziel”. That these are simply variants in spelling can be seen in the example that LXX reads “Abioud” instead of “Abihu” in all of the other instances where “Abihu” occurs as well.

Concerning the other variants: in verse 1 the Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch, the Syrian version of the OT (Peshitta), and the Aramaic Targums read “upon them” instead of “upon it” which may have been changed in order to harmonize with “in them” and thus also change the referent from “fire” to “censer” (viewed collectively as in “in them”). In any event, the change would not significantly affect the meaning of the text. “Upon it” would probably be the original reading, however, because it is easier to explain how a scribe might change “upon it” to “upon them” rather than the other way around. Also in verse 1, “strange fire” is absent in one or several Hebrew manuscripts from the Cairo Geniza. This omission would not change the meaning of the text but one would expect a direct object after the Hiphil form of “come near” which has the sense of “bring near” or “present”. The “weight” of textual evidence from the Cairo Geniza alone would not amount to much considering that the manuscripts found there were apparently considered to be “worn or faulty” and were waiting to “be disposed of formally”¹.

The last variant in verse 1 involves the phrase “he had not commanded them”. LXX adds “Lord” as the subject of the phrase. This addition only serves to make explicit what was implicit, namely, that the LORD was the one who had not given the command and thus was the one who was disobeyed. Also, the Vulgate puts the verb in

¹ Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (1979), p. 13.

the passive giving “it had not been commanded them” which seems to have been another attempt to deal with an implicit subject. In this translation, “it” would refer to the offering of incense that Aaron’s two sons made, but there would still remain an implied “commander” who would be understood to be the LORD. The one textual variant in verse 5 comes from the Cairo Geniza which adds a *yod* between the *resh* and the *beth* of “come near”. This addition would change the verb tense from a Qal to an Hiphil but would not change the sense of the verb. What was said earlier about the Cairo Geniza should be noted once again here. The last three variants are found in verse 6. The Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch adds an *aleph* between the *waw* and the *lamed* of both “Eleazar” and “Ithamar” which simply creates a different yet synonymous preposition before each name. This change can be explained by the fact that the new preposition would be identical to the preposition before the name “Aaron” and would also be in harmony with the forms found in verse 12 where the present situation is referred back to. Possible harmonization with verse 12 can also be seen in another textual variant here in verse 6 where LXX and (the Syrian version of the OT [Peshitta]) add “to the ones who remained” after “his sons”. It is easier to explain the addition of these items on the basis of possible harmonization with verse 12 than it is to explain why a scribe might omit them.