

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

The method I have advocated for philosophy leads to Biblical theism. It is the method of which Protagoras gained an uncertain and partial glimpse when he spoke of man being the measure of all things. The German Jacobi gave brilliant expression to its underlying principle when he said, *Man anthropomorphizes in representing God, because God theomorphized in creating man.* Both of them were anticipated and excelled by the writer of those wonderful words in the Book of Genesis, "God created man in his own image; in the image of God created he him." D. W. SIMON.

THE FOUR NEPHEWS OF MOSES.

LEVITICUS X.

It is not easy to find any new incident in the life of a man so great and famous as Moses, "the man of God." Nevertheless, two incidents are recorded of him in this Chapter which will probably be new to most readers of the Bible: one of them is certainly new even to many students of the Bible. And, I suppose, these facts are comparatively unknown because the Book of Leviticus is but infrequently read. For since this book is, for the most part, a mere chronicle of rites and ordinances long obsolete, it is not unnatural that the historical fragments imbedded in it should be commonly overlooked.

Such a fragment is contained in the Chapter before us. It narrates two incidents, in both of which Moses and his nephews played a part, both of which happened in a single day, and that the very day on which Aaron and his sons were consecrated to the service of

Jehovah. On that day they assumed their splendid priestly vestments, and offered sacrifice on their own behalf and on that of the whole people. It was a solemn day, a day long and much to be remembered in Israel; for when the sacrifices were laid on the altar, and Aaron lifted up his hands to bless the people, fire flashed out from the Shekinah behind the veil, and consumed the sacrifice, in order to assure both priest and people that their offering was approved, that Jehovah had accepted their atonement and forgiven their sins. How this culminating point in the solemnities of the day impressed the popular imagination we may infer from the traditions which have gathered round it. The Jews believed, and still believe, that the sacred fire, thus miraculously kindled, was miraculously sustained through all the wanderings and vicissitudes of the Tabernacle; that it was kindled afresh when Solomon dedicated the Temple to the service of Jehovah; that during the centuries of the Captivity it burned on amid the darkness of a deep and secret cavern in which it was concealed; and that it was brought back again to the altar when, on their return to Jerusalem, a second Temple was erected on the hallowed site:—in short, that it was never suffered to expire until they were finally scattered to the ends of the earth.

Both of the incidents recorded in this Chapter connect themselves with the solemnities of that great Day of Dedication; while the first of them connects itself closely and immediately with the culminating point of these solemnities—the kindling of the sacred fire. When that fire “came out from before the Lord,” we are told,¹ “all the people shouted, and fell on their

¹ Lev. ix. 24.

faces" before the Lord. Inspired and elated by the joy of the moment, two of the newly-consecrated priests—Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, nephews of Moses—thinking, I suppose, at once to express and elevate and hallow the joy of the Congregation of Israel, seized their censers, put fire into them, heaped incense on the fire, and waved them toward the veil behind which the Shekinah burned. And for this offence they were smitten with instant death.

In what exactly their offence lay, it is difficult to determine. All we are told¹ is that "they offered *strange* fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded." It may be that these two young men had no right to burn incense—that this function was reserved for Aaron, the *high* priest. It may be that they burned it at the wrong time, or in the wrong way—in unhallowed vessels, for example. It may be that the incense was not compounded of the delicate and costly ingredients which had been prescribed, or that they did not kindle it with the sacred fire. Whatever the form of the offence, its essence seems to have been that they were inventing, *improvising*, forms of worship for themselves, instead of observing the forms prescribed for them; following the impulse of their own will, instead of obeying the will of God: in fine, walking in a way "which he commanded them not."

Now the ritual given through Moses had a Divine intention and significance in it, a Divine authority behind it. It was nicely adapted to the moral and religious needs of the men to whom it was given, adapted to quicken in them the conception and love of righteousness. It was of no use to ordain a law so minute

¹ Lev. x. 1.

and elaborate, so exquisitely adapted to the needs of the time, and then suffer it to be set aside with impunity. If it was a good and wholesome law, it must be maintained and enforced; and, above all, enforced at the outset, that its sanctity might be recognized and respected. And, of course, the priests, who were to administer it, were of all men bound to observe it, observe it strictly and punctiliously, and thus to uphold its authority and to set an example of obedience.

However thoughtlessly they acted, therefore, however devout and kindly the impulses by which they were impelled, we can see that Nadab and Abihu committed a real offence against the law under which they lived; an offence which it was necessary to rebuke, if the authority of that law was to be maintained. From Verses 8-11, which forbid the priests to take wine or strong drink while ministering in the Sanctuary, lest they should be unable "to distinguish between holy and unholy, clean and unclean," some have drawn the cruel inference that Nadab and Abihu were exhilarated and confused by wine when they burned their "strange fire" before the Lord. But there is no need for a conclusion so strained and harsh. It surely was offence enough that, under a system so rigid, under a rule so exact and exacting, they should abandon themselves to their own impulses, and violate the prescriptions of the law. And no just man will hastily or willingly conclude that, on an occasion so solemn and august, on the very day on which they were admitted to stand and minister before the Lord God of their fathers, and while they were still engaged in his service, they fell into a sin so gross as drunkenness. On the other hand, no just-minded and experienced man will deny

that religious excitement often breeds a craving for physical excitement, or that it was a wise precept which bade the priests drink no wine when they were occupied in the service of the Tabernacle.

Whatever the offence of Nadab and Abihu, it was visited with an instant punishment of intolerable severity. The very fire which had consumed their sacrifice, now consumed *them*. All the joy of the time was darkened with sudden horror, as the sacred flame, which had just announced God's acceptance of the national offering, announced his anger against the violators of his law. It may have been necessary that the law, in obedience to which lay the life of the world, should be girt about with terror, that these two young priests should die in order that the whole people should not perish, or lose their name and place as the depository of the Divine Will. But, none the less, as the dead priests were carried out in their white tunics from the forecourt of the Tabernacle, the whole Congregation might well "bewail the burning which the Lord had kindled."

But Aaron and the two sons who were left him were forbidden (Verses 6 and 7) to join in the general lamentation. They were priests—men consecrated to a Divine service. Great honours and privileges are not to be had for nothing. Those who aspire to them must be prepared to pay a price. The price *they* had to pay was the suppression of natural emotion. They had just seen what evil might come to men who abandoned themselves to natural impulses without pausing to reflect whether those impulses moved in harmony with the Divine Will. And if they should now break out into passionate lamentations, their lamentation

would be taken as a protest against the severity of God, as impugning the justice of the doom He had inflicted. *They*, priests for men and examples to the flock, must not do that. The doom, cruel as it might seem, was nevertheless just. The inner meaning and intention of it was not hard to find. "This," said Moses to Aaron (Verse 3), "is that which Jehovah spake, saying, *I will sanctify myself in them that draw nigh to me, and will glorify myself before all the people.*"

Moses had a tender and a loving heart; and was, probably, as deeply moved with awe and grief at the loss of his nephews as Aaron was by the death of his sons. But he was of a firmer and larger nature than Aaron, who seems to have possessed the sensitive and impulsive temperament common to most great orators, what we may even distinguish as the specifically *oratorical* temperament. And, moreover, Moses had a far quicker and more piercing insight into the Divine meaning of events. In the doom of his nephews he instantly recognized an illustration of two great principles: (1) that those who are called to stand near God, to work with Him and serve Him, are especially exposed to judgment, since, if they do not sanctify Him, He must sanctify Himself in and through them; and (2) that men thus privileged and distinguished, even if they suffer for their own sake, also suffer for the sake of others—in order that God may be glorified by and before the people, *i. e.*, in order that his good and righteous will may be made known to the world. And as Aaron listened to the interpretation put upon the doom of his sons by his wiser and more firmly-knit brother, we are told in a brief but singularly pathetic phrase, *And Aaron held his peace.* Whatever his

grief and misery, he had nothing to allege against the righteousness of the judgment which had bereaved him. And that the eloquent *Aaron* should hold his peace, that he should deny himself the relief of uttering his passionate emotion, and crush back the bitter words which came rushing to his lips, was nothing short of a moral feat; it shewed a self-mastery not common with him, and proves how profoundly he had been impressed by the words of Moses and the visitation of God.

And, indeed, the words of Moses *are* very impressive. They enunciate principles which hold good to this day, and which concern us no less than the Hebrews. The first principle, that nearness to God exposes men to his severer judgment, or, to state it more generally, that as our spiritual privileges increase our moral responsibility increases, pervades the Bible from end to end, and is obviously in accord with reason and justice. Thus, for example, Solomon affirms, "Whom the Lord loveth he correcteth, even as a father the son in whom he delighteth."¹ Amos represents Jehovah as saying to Israel, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; *therefore* I will punish you for all your iniquities."² St. Peter declares that "judgment must begin at the house of God;"³ and in the Epistle to the Hebrews we read, "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth."⁴ Love is, and must be, solicitous for the highest welfare of its objects, and will neither spare to endure pain, nor to inflict it, if pain be the only road to perfection. So that the nearer we draw to God, and the more He loves us, the more certain it is that He will correct whatever is wrong in us; that He will be,

¹ Prov. iii. 12.

² Amos iii. 2.

³ 1 Peter iv. 17.

⁴ Heb. xii. 6.

if we may so express it, the more impatient of what ever detracts from our welfare and peace. Could we wish to have it otherwise? Is it not our great blessedness, if we really long to become righteous and good and kind—and all *that* is included in drawing near to God—that He will not suffer any sin in us; that He will not withhold any discipline by which we may be made what we most of all desire to become?

And if it be right and reasonable that God should chasten and correct us because He loves us, is it not most tender and gracious of Him so to order the discipline by which *we* are made perfect as that *others* may be benefited by it as well as we ourselves? *That* is the second principle which Moses discerned in the doom of his two nephews. They died for their sin; but they also died in order that God might be “glorified *before all the people*”—in order that the people might learn how steadfastly his will was bent on righteousness, and on making them righteous; in order that they might see how determined He was to exact from men that obedience in which their true freedom and blessedness consist.

Of course to those who think that these two young priests were *damned*, as well as slain, for their hasty and impulsive offence against the Divine law and order, their doom must remain inexplicable—as indeed, so far as I can see, must their *God*. But to as many as believe that men are often punished in the flesh that they may be quickened in the spirit, often die in order that they may more truly live, that doom is but a new instance of the mercy, as well as of the righteousness, of God. And so soon as, in some better world than this, Nadab and Abihu perceived that they had suf-

ferred, not only for their sin, but also for the glory of God and the good of man—not only because they had violated the Divine law, but also that the people might learn to keep that law—all the sting of their punishment, all sense of injustice and disproportion in it, would die out of their hearts; and they would rejoice that they were counted worthy to suffer such things for ends so noble and so high.

And this is a consolation which, if we are wise, *we* shall take to ourselves when we suffer; yes, and even when we suffer for our sins. What God means by chastening and afflicting us is not only to correct us for sins, and to deliver us from them, not only to make us righteous, and perfect in righteousness; but also to lead other men to a knowledge and pursuit of righteousness—in other words, to “glorify” Himself before them. And who that loves God and man will not take his sufferings all the more patiently and cheerfully when he knows that, by thus enduring them, he is not only suffering the due reward of his iniquities, not only being taught the beauty of righteousness and confirmed in his love for it, but also promoting the glory of God, by promoting the highest welfare of his fellow-men?

These are the lessons of the first incident recorded in this Chapter. But it records a second incident. And if, in the first, we have an illustration of the wisdom of Moses in reading events, and of a fidelity to the will of God which makes him repress natural human emotions, and look somewhat cold and stern; in the second, we may find an illustration of his tenderness, and see him putting natural human affections even before an exact observance of law.

On the evening of the day on which the fire fell from heaven to consume both the sacrifice and the priests who offered it, Moses appears to have suspected that the burning of strange fire before Jehovah was not the only irregularity which had occurred in the Tabernacle service. It was part of the law of sacrifice that *the flesh* of the sin-offering should be eaten by the priests in the holy precinct. The motive of this enactment seems to have been a gracious desire on the part of Jehovah to assure his people that their offering had been accepted, that their sin was really and wholly taken away. For, as Philo acutely remarks, God would not have bidden his ministers partake of *a feast*, unless He had first granted a perfect forgiveness; if the offering for sin had not taken sin away, He would not have expected them to eat and drink and make mirth before Him. The eating of the flesh of "the goat of the sin offering" was therefore an essential part of the sacrificial service; without this, it was not complete.

Now, on the evening of this day of blended mercy and judgment, Moses suspected—we are not told why—that this sacrificial feast had been omitted. Perhaps as he passed through the sacred precinct, instead of seeing the priests sitting at the feast, he found it empty and deserted. Naturally, therefore, he inquired what had become of the goat. To his surprise and indignation he found that, instead of being reserved for the use of the priests, it had been consumed upon the altar. It would seem (Verses 12-15) that the two surviving nephews of Moses, Eleazar and Ithamar, were charged with the duty of preparing this offering; and, in neglecting to reserve and eat the flesh of it, they had been guilty of as grave an irregularity as that burning of

strange fire for which Nadab and Abihu had suffered earlier in the day. If the latter had added to the ritual what the Lord had not commanded them, the former were taking away from it what the Lord had commanded. Moses is "angry" with them; and, for a moment, it seems not improbable that, on this single disastrous day, Aaron may lose all four of his sons. But he pleads with Moses for his sons, and for himself, for of course it was his duty as high priest to see that they did their duty. He assigns two reasons for their neglect of their proper priestly function. First, he pleads (Verse 19) that, on that very day, his sons, by presenting a burnt offering and a sin offering, had shewn how much they felt that they, no less than the people, stood in need of an atonement; and that therefore it was not very wonderful if, with this sense of sin upon them, they had deemed themselves unworthy to eat the solemn meal which declared a perfect forgiveness and a perfect reconciliation with God. And then, in a pregnant and pathetic phrase, he pleads, "*And such a thing has befallen me to-day!*" referring, of course, to the judgment which had swept away two of his sons from his side: *i. e.*, he virtually pleads, "Would it have been well-pleasing to the Lord if I and they, with our stunned and saddened hearts, had eaten of this joyful feast, and pretended to make great mirth before Him?"

The appeal is, as we see at once, to moral and natural emotions as against the stringent requirements of the ceremonial law. This law required¹ that the priest, in the discharge of his functions, should rise superior to all human feelings and affections—that he

¹ Deut. xxxiii. 9.

should not see his father or mother, nor acknowledge his brethren, nor recognize his children, but observe the word of the Lord. But even priests are but men. And Aaron appeals to his humanity and that of his sons in excuse for their neglect of priestly functions. He pleads that the sense of sin had been too strong in them to permit them to assume that they were wholly at one with God, although the fire had fallen on their sacrifices; for had not the fire also fallen on two of his sons? And he pleads that men who had suffered the sudden and terrible calamity through which they had passed that day were in no fit mood for joy and thanksgiving. Was it not enough that they had not mourned and wept, that they had submitted in silence to the stroke which had fallen on them? Would God still further demand that they should make mirth before Him? Would it have been acceptable to Him that they should feign to be holy while conscious of sin? or feign to be glad while their hearts were being consumed with unuttered and unutterable grief?

“And when Moses heard that, he was content”—as he well might be. And yet, as we have seen, he could be very zealous for the Divine service and law. He could read a Divine meaning in the doom, and admit the justice of a doom, that robbed him of two kinsmen whom he loved, at the very moment when they had risen to the summit of their hopes, and seemed most likely to prove helpful to him in his great and arduous task. He could suppress all outward signs of sorrow, and bid his brother and his surviving nephews go on with the service of the Tabernacle as though they had suffered nothing and lost nothing. But with all his strictness and all his zeal, Moses had that quality,

that virtue, which the Hebrews most admired, "largeness of heart;" so that, while imposing forms and enacting rites, he was no mere formalist, no mere ritualist. He could interpret the natures and actions of men with the same breadth and generosity with which he read the judgments of God. And, angry as he was that any part of the Divine service should have been neglected, he could nevertheless admit that the human heart has its claims; that a profound conviction of sin may be more acceptable to God than any formal act of reconciliation with Him; and that natural and healthy human emotions are not to be overridden and suppressed by the demands of mere ritual. "Such a thing having happened" to Aaron and his sons, it was at least pardonable that they should shrink from a ceremonial mirth and festivity.

So that if from the first incident of this eventful and tragic day we learn how stringent, how severe, are the demands of the Divine worship, from the second we may learn the supplementary lesson that worship must be sincere; that it must be a genuine expression of our moral convictions and emotions; that when inward convictions and emotions come into collision with outward rites and forces, it is the latter, not the former, which must give way. It is of no use to go through a round of external observances which have no vital relation to our spirits. It is of no use to repeat words, or whole liturgies and litanies of words, if they neither quicken nor release and express spiritual emotion. It is wrong, and not right, to attend on public worship, if we can only attend on it by neglecting some moral claim, by failing in some duty that we owe to our neighbour. "The Lord looketh on the heart." "God

is a Spirit ; and they that worship him *must* worship him in spirit and in reality." Feigning will not pass with Him, nor even a forced and spurious emotion. And if we must choose between the utterance of our sincere convictions or the expression of our sincere emotions and the claims of any outward ordinances of religion, we must let the ordinance go, in order that we may be true to ourselves and to God. If even Moses, the Giver of the Law, could admit that inward convictions and emotions were superior to outward formulas, we ought much more frankly to confess that any kind or form of worship is useful to us and valuable in proportion as it enables us to express our sincerest thoughts and desires before Almighty God, or leads us into a more perfect knowledge and obedience of his pure and kindly Will.

S. COX.

THE DOOR OF THE SHEEP.

ST. JOHN X. 7.

ACCORDING to most interpreters, the words, "I am the door of the sheep," describe the safety and blessedness of Christ's people, under a similitude drawn from Eastern pastoral life. The scene, it is said, which our Lord meant to call up was that of a flock of sheep resting at noonday. The door of the fold stands open, and the sheep are passing and repassing through the open door. The door admits them to the surrounding pasture and the neighbouring stream, and it re-admits them to the fold, when they seek for protection or repose. It was thus, it is said, a fitting symbol of "safety and abundance — the two essentials of the prosperity of a flock."