



Clanking Chains: Meaning of “Strange Incense” & “Strange Fire”; Importance of Doctrinal Consistency; Nadab & Abihu: The Priesthood’s 5th Column

11. The manufacture of this incense was assigned to two men, Bezalel \bez'a-lel\ and Oholiab \a-h□'li-ab\. Bezalel was the construction superintendent and Oholiab was his foreman. Assisting them were Israelites who possessed wisdom in those arts required to fulfill the mission:

Exodus 31:1 - And now the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,

v. 2 - “See, I have called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah.

v. 3 - “And I have filled him with the Spirit of God [**endowment**] in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all kinds of craftsmanship.

Exodus 31:6 - “And behold, I Myself have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach \a-his' a-mach\, of the tribe of Dan; and in the hearts of all who are skillful I have put skill, that they may make all that I have commanded you:

v. 11 - and the fragrant incense for the holy place.”

12. One of the skills which Bezalel possessed was that of perfumery. We see the requirement for this art in:

Exodus 30:35 -And you shall make incense, a perfume, the work of a perfumer

...

13. This art was common during the time of the Exodus and it is therefore not surprising that there was an expert perfumer among the Israelites:

Harris, R Laird (ed.). *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 861:

רַקָּה *raqah*. To compound ointments. There is evidence that the perfumers trade was already highly skilled by 2000 B.C. in Mesopotamia.

14. Bezalel was able to make the incense from the prescribed ingredients under the supervision of one of the perfumers:

Exodus 37:29 -And Bezalel made ... fragrant incense of spices, the work of a perfumer.

15. Aaron was the only person authorized to take the fire from the Brass Altar and a handful of incense into the Holy Place and set fire to it on top of the Golden Altar:

Exodus 30:7 - And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on the Altar of Incense; he shall burn it every morning when he trims the lamps.

v. 8 - “And when Aaron trims the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense. There shall be perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations.

v. 9 - “You shall not offer any strange incense on this altar.”

16. This word strange now needs attention. We get an explanation of what makes incense strange from:



Botterweck, G. Johannes and Helmer Ringgren. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Translated by David E. Green. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 4:55:

זָרַח *zur*. *That Which Does Not Belong*. Exodus 30:9 contains instructions for the proper use of the incense altar. Only incense is to be burned on this altar, but “strange incense” is explicitly excluded. Examination of Jewish religious ceremonial reveals that different kinds of incense were occasionally offered elsewhere and at other times, for instance, to put down a plague and as part of the ritual for the great Day of Atonement. The daily incense-offering every morning and evening, however, is entirely another matter and has its **own unique place**. Any incursion of alien practices into the sacred ceremony is out of place, **deviant**, not a part of the salubrious order. It can be dangerous, as the tradition of the death of Nadab and Abihu shows: they offered “alien fire” before Yahweh, an improper fire-offering “such as he had not commanded them.”

17. The details on how to ignite the incense had not yet been given by God. This information was revealed in the instructions on how to observe the Day of Atonement:

Leviticus 16:12 - Aaron shall take a censer full of burning coals of fire from off the altar [brass] before the Lord, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten small, and bring it within the veil [the Holy Place]:

v. 13 - And Aaron shall put the incense upon the fire before the Lord [upon the Altar of Incense], that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the testimony, that he die not.

18. The purpose of this aspect of the ritual is covered by:

Keil, C, F. and F. J. Delitzsch. *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*. Translated by James Martin. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), 2:399:

As burning incense was a symbol of *prayer*, this covering of the Mercy Seat with the cloud of incense was a symbolical covering of the glory of the Most Holy One with prayer to God, in order that He might not see the sin, nor suffer His holy wrath to break forth upon the sinner, but might graciously accept, in the blood of the sin-offering, the souls for which it was presented.

19. Here is a summary of the problem:

- (1) The incense was to be mixed from a special list of ingredients and was unique to any other concoctions of perfumery;
- (2) It was to be ignited by burning coals taken from the Brass Altar in the courtyard upon which the animal sacrifice was offered;
- (3) Aaron was the only member of the priesthood authorized to enter the Holy Place with these coals and to burn the incense;
- (4) Aaron was to ignite the incense on top of the Golden Altar of Incense by means of the fiery coals from the Brass Alter.
- (5) He was to do this each morning and each evening.
- (6) Any deviation from this procedure was considered by God to be unacceptable and would result in the death of the person or persons so involved.



20. When Nadab and Abihu performed their ill-fated trip into the Holy Place they did so in violation of what they already knew but also before learning all they needed to know:
- (1) First of all, they were not authorized to burn incense in the Holy Place;
 - (2) They entered the Tabernacle in the middle of the day, not at the time of the morning or evening sacrifice;
 - (3) They did not take fire from the Brass Altar because this requirement had not yet been revealed;
 - (4) There is every indication the incense they used was not the prescribed formula revealed in Exodus 30:34-35;
 - (5) Thus their entire operation was a deviation from the policies of God. His policies having to do with the Golden Altar and its incense were designed to teach the Israelites about intercessory prayer and how they might benefit from it.
21. The English translations call the result of Nadab and Abihu's efforts "strange fire." The salient point is that the incense burned was a deviation from the required process and procedure.
22. One of the definitions of the word for "strange" is "deviant" and it communicates the idea that the incense, the coals, and the smoke created were things "which did not belong." There is some indication that the incense used was from the recipe of some pagan culture.
23. The definition of זָרַר **zur**, the Hebrew word translated "strange," has another implication of interest:

Botterweck and Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 4:53:

Taken metaphorically, the word זָרַר **zur** suggests (spiritual and intellectual) alienation from one's own milieu, a distancing from a familiar reality (e.g., a religious tradition or a generally recognized mode of life and thought). The wicked forsake the community of their own people; the apostate break with tradition. They have become aliens, and are looked upon by the devout as untrustworthy and dangerous. This confrontation between what is native and what is alien can lead to conflicts within tribes, families, religious groups, or temples (of worship).

24. What we have learned is that Nadab and Abihu were driven by some inner desire to be the first priests to offer incense in the Tabernacle. Their father was granted that duty in Exodus 30:7-9. They are a sad case of where wrong thinking resulted in wrong motivation which influenced wrong decisions that produced wrong action.
25. Everything they did was in complete opposition to what the coals of the Brass Altar, the Golden Altar of Incense, the unique incense recipe, and its perfume once burned were designed to teach.
26. Aaron was the High Priest and was himself a type of Christ who upon ascension became our High Priest before the throne of God where "He lives forever to make intercession for us." (Hebrews 7:25b)



27. As High Priest, Aaron was instructed to manage daily activities in the Tabernacle Complex. Under him were his four sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. Their job was to run the Tabernacle in accordance with divine policies. They were in charge of insuring that the rituals, sacrifices, offerings, and feast days were carried out in accordance with these instructions.

28. The Tabernacle and the activities that took place within its walls were designed to enforce the order established by the Mosaic Covenant. This covenant was issued on Mount Sinai in three paragraphs: (1) The Ten Commandments established God's will regarding the spiritual and civil order of the Israelite commonwealth; (2) the judgments regulated public policy under the laws of divine establishment, and (3) the ordinances revealed the theological framework for the spiritual life of Israel.