

AARON'S ROLE IN THE EXODUS

BY LEON HYATT

Southern end of the wilderness of Paran. While the children of Israel were camped at Paran, Korah led a rebellion against Moses and Aaron. They claimed Aaron had no claim to the priesthood and Moses had no claim to be their leader. The ground opened, swallowing the leaders. Fire came from heaven and destroyed the 250 who were part of the rebellion.

Right: Incense stand from Hazor, Israel.

When God called Moses to go to Egypt and demand that Pharaoh let the Israelites go free, one of Moses' fears was that he was not a good speaker. The Lord told Moses He was going to send his older brother Aaron to help him speak (Ex. 4:14-15). God kept His promise, and a long but sometimes troubled relationship began between the two brothers.

A Willing Assistant

While Moses was on his way to Egypt, the Lord spoke to Aaron and told him to go into the wilderness to meet Moses. Aaron gladly accepted the assignment and left immediately. When they met, Moses told Aaron everything the Lord had told him; and Aaron accepted every word (vv. 27-31). Back in Egypt, Moses and Aaron assembled Israel's elders. Aaron explained what God had said and performed the signs as God had directed (vv. 27-30). Aaron and Moses next appeared before Pharaoh. Although the Lord told Moses to use the staff as a sign that He was going to work a miracle or send a plague, Aaron was the one who actually held up the staff (4:1-5; 7:9,10,19). Afterward, Aaron eagerly stood alongside Moses in almost everything Moses did until Israel arrived at Sinai.

A Weak Leader

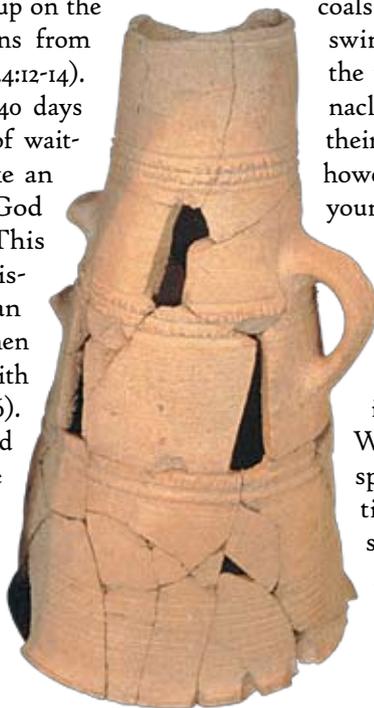
At Sinai, Israel agreed to enter into a covenant relationship with the Lord. Then, Moses went back up on the mountain to receive further instructions from God, leaving Aaron and Hur in charge (24:12-14). Moses remained on the mountain for 40 days and nights, and the people grew tired of waiting. They demanded that Aaron make an idol, a physical representation of the God who had brought them out of Egypt. This action was a blasphemous, syncretistic mixing of Yahwistic with Egyptian religion. Aaron weakly complied. He then stood by while the people celebrated with pagan rites around the golden calf (32:1-6). When Moses returned, Aaron offered the feeble excuse that he had thrown the people's gold in the fire and the calf had popped out (vv. 22-24). Moses' urgent intercession with God brought him the revelation that rebels against God's covenant can be restored to God through

His grace (vv. 31-35; 34:5-10). In tragic contrast, Aaron's weakness as a leader had encouraged Israel's rebellion.¹

A Committed Worship Leader

In spite of Aaron's failure, God told Moses to proceed with plans to construct the tabernacle, where Aaron and his sons were to serve as Israel's first priests (40:1-16). After the tabernacle was erected, God gave Moses a series of instructions concerning the offerings the Israelites were to offer on the tabernacle altar. Then He told Moses to anoint Aaron and his sons to be priests. Part of the ceremony required Aaron and his sons to remain at the entrance to the tent portion of the tabernacle for seven days, probably for prayer and study in preparation for their holy service (Lev. 8-9). On the eighth day, they officiated over their first offerings at the altar. Sadly, tragedy struck immediately.

Aaron's two oldest sons, Nadab and Abihu, evidently in mistaken enthusiasm over their new authority, put coals and incense on their censers and began to swing them in an unauthorized ceremony before the tabernacle.² Fire burst forth from the tabernacle and killed them. Moses commanded that their bodies be taken outside the camp for burial; however, he instructed Aaron and Aaron's two youngest sons to remain at the tabernacle. The ceremonies for the offerings over which they were officiating were not yet finished, and they were not to desert those responsibilities even for the funeral of Nadab and Abihu. They stayed at the tabernacle as instructed and remained true to their duties.³ While the burial was taking place, the Lord spoke directly to Aaron and gave him instructions about his service as a priest (10:8-11). His speaking directly to Aaron was evidence that Aaron had passed the test of faithfulness and God still intended to use him in the important position of high priest.⁴





Left: Sunrise over the Nile. Aaron's role in the exodus began early; he was the one to stretch Moses' staff over the waters and to strike its surface. When he did, the water became blood (Ex. 7:19-20).

Below: The small white dot atop the mountain in the distance is the shrine of the tomb of Aaron at Jebel Harun, translated the "Mountain of Aaron." The tomb is located near Petra in modern Jordan.

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An Able Interpreter of the Law

After Nadab and Abihu were buried, Moses encouraged Aaron to complete the ceremonies of the grain offering and the presentation offering. Moses discovered though that the ceremonies of the sin offering had been completed already.⁵ He became upset because they had not been completed exactly according to the instructions God had given. The meat of a sin offering for the congregation was supposed to be eaten by the priests in the courtyard of the tabernacle, to show they had been restored to God's service. Instead, Aaron's two younger sons had incinerated the meat (vv. 12-18). Aaron replied to Moses, "Since these things have happened to me, if I had eaten the sin offering today, would it have been acceptable in the LORD's sight?" (v. 19b, HCSB) He meant his heart would not have been in the eating, and the Lord would not have been pleased if he ate the offering in the wrong spirit. So, he had had his sons substitute a ceremony that was authorized for a sin offering offered by a priest (4:3,11-12). Moses accepted Aaron's explanation, and neither Aaron nor his sons were punished. Aaron's interpretation revealed two great truths about the altar offerings—first, the Lord would accept a small deviation from the normal ceremony if the priest had a legitimate reason. Second, in the Lord's offerings, the condition of the heart was more important than the performance of the ceremony.⁶ Aaron's interpretation was a brilliant warning against dead legalism.

A Jealous Offender

After the Israelites left Sinai, the people fell into the habit of complaining and criticizing Moses. Sadly, Moses' sister Miriam and brother Aaron joined in the criticism (Num. 12).⁷ The specific occasion for their criticism was Moses' marriage to a Cushite woman.

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However, Moses' marriage was only the occasion. Their real criticism was because only Moses gave instructions about God to everyone. They were jealous, because God spoke to them as well. The Lord called the three before the tabernacle and declared that He spoke to Moses in a distinctly different way. He spoke to Miriam and Aaron as prophets through visions and dreams, but he spoke to Moses "mouth to

Right: Chapel of the Prophet Aaron (right) is built on Aaron's Hill. This site, located near the foot of Jebel Musa (Mount Sinai), marks the traditional site where the children of Israel worshiped the golden calf.

Lower right: Bronze figurine of Apis the bull. Dated to the 26th Dynasty. Ceremonies honoring Apis date back to about 2900 B.C. Priests would care for the live bull that represented Apis for 25 years, at the end of which they would drown the bull. Partial remains of the bull would then be embalmed and buried in a special bull vault called a serapeum.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (17/40/5)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G. HOWELL, JR./ MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS/ BOSTON

it was time for Aaron to die (20:22-29). Moses, Aaron, and Aaron's oldest living son Eleazar went to the top of the mountain. Moses took the high priest's clothes off of Aaron and placed them on Eleazar, signifying that he was assuming Aaron's responsibilities. Aaron died on the mountain at the age of 123 (33:37-39). Afterwards, the Israelites mourned Aaron's death for 30 days, honoring the life and ministry of a great servant of God.¹⁰ Aaron's life was over. The exodus and Aaron's priestly influence, however, would continue. **B**

mouth," directly and openly. God was angry that they questioned the superiority of what He spoke to Moses. God did speak to them, but what He spoke to Moses was greater. They were messages that would ultimately become a part of the living truth of the Bible.⁸ The Lord was describing the difference between the way He revealed Himself to Miriam and Aaron and the way He revealed Himself to Moses—one of those special few who received His perfect inerrant Word. What a difference that distinction means for us today!

Aaron learned from that experience, because later a Levite named Korah raised a similar complaint against Moses. This time Aaron stood with Moses, while the earth opened up under the feet of Korah and his followers and they went alive into Sheol (16:1-33).⁹

An Honored Hero

Near the end of their wilderness journeys, the Israelites came to Mount Hor. The Lord told Moses and Aaron

1. Edward Mack, "Aaron" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:1.
 2. F. Meyrick, *Leviticus in The Pulpit Commentary (PULPIT)*, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, n. d.), 4:149-50.
 3. *Ibid.*, 150.
 4. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, n. d.), 1:482.
 5. In Leviticus 1-7, God gave Israel instructions concerning five types of offerings to be offered on the tabernacle altar on different occasions. Three of those offerings are mentioned in this passage. The names of the offerings are translated differently in different English translations. The translations used in this article are those used by the Holman Christian Standard Bible.
 6. Henry, 1:484.
 7. Aaron's tendency to weakly follow the leadership of others is shown again in this event, in that Miriam obviously was the instigator and leader of this rebellion.
 8. R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, vol. 3B in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 204-205; R. Winterbotham, *Numbers in PULPIT*, 5:132-33; Henry, 1:615.
 9. Cole, 268-69; C. F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1, *The Pentateuch*, ed. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 722-25.
 10. Mack, 2.

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