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MINISTRIES

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Strange Fire: When Sincerity is Not Enough

YHWH is holy. That truth is central to how we are called to live and worship. Throughout Scripture, God reveals that not all worship is acceptable to him. Worship is not sanctified by sincerity alone. It must be grounded in what he has commanded.

This teaching will examine the biblical difference between holy fire and strange fire, focusing on examples such as Nadab and Abihu and the golden calf incident. Both examples show that worship, even when sincere, can be rejected or severely judged if it is done outside of YHWH's instructions.

Holy Fire: Worship as Commanded

After the tabernacle was completed and the priesthood was consecrated, YHWH confirmed his presence by sending fire from heaven to consume the first communal offerings (Leviticus 9:24). Several days earlier, while Moses was still giving the priests their instructions, YHWH had already commanded that [“the fire on the altar shall be kept burning ... it shall not go out”](#) (Leviticus 6:12-13). When the divine fire descended on the eighth day, that flame became the altar-fire the priests were to feed with wood and guard continually. After YHWH sent fire from his presence (Leviticus 9:24), that altar-fire symbolized his presence and was the source from which the priests kindled their offerings, in line with Leviticus 6:12-13.

Leviticus 9:24

[And fire came out from before the LORD \[YHWH\] and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.](#)

This fire came directly from YHWH. It was not manmade. It signified his approval of the worship that had been offered according to his specific instructions. The priests were commanded to preserve this fire and keep it burning continually.

Leviticus 6:12–13

[The fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not go out... Fire shall be kept burning on](#)

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Strange Fire: Unauthorized Access and Worship

Immediately after the account of YHWH sending holy fire to accept the offering, we are told about Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, who made a grave mistake in their priestly service.

Leviticus 10:1–2

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD [YHWH], which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before YHWH and consumed them, and they died before YHWH.

The Hebrew word for “unauthorized” (זָר, *zâr*) means foreign or profane. The issue was not that they were worshiping a false god, they intended to serve YHWH, but that they approached him in a way he had not authorized. This was not a minor deviation. It was a direct violation of holiness boundaries that had just been established.

Leviticus 16:2 later clarifies the reason for their death:

Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil... so that he may not die.

YHWH used this incident to make a point about reverence and boundaries:

Leviticus 10:3

Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘This is what the LORD [YHWH] has said: “Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.”’

In other words, YHWH is not only holy in essence, but also in how he is to be approached. The death of Nadab and Abihu was not merely about the fire being unauthorized, it was about entering a restricted area at a restricted time with unauthorized fire, showing disregard for the set-apartness of YHWH's presence.

Their actions blurred the line between holy and common, violating both priestly boundaries and divine order. Even though they were priests, and even though they were worshiping YHWH, they did not do so according to his instruction. and that was enough to warrant judgment.

Leviticus 10:3

Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘This is what the LORD [YHWH] has said: ‘Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.’

YHWH was making a critical point: even well-intentioned worship is unacceptable if it does not reflect his holiness and his instructions. His holiness, his set-apartness, means he alone decides how he is to be approached.

The Golden Calf: Worshiping YHWH the Wrong Way

Another powerful example of this principle appears in the golden calf incident in Exodus 32.

When Moses delayed returning from Mount Sinai, the people became anxious. Moses, their visible leader and mediator, had been gone for forty days. Believing he might be dead, they demanded a new way to relate to YHWH.

Exodus 32:1

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, ‘Up, make us Elohim [God or gods = translator decision based on assumed context] who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’

The Hebrew word *elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) is grammatically plural but is often used to refer to the one true God, depending on context. Many English translations render it as “gods” here, but the context shows that Israel was not turning to foreign deities, instead they were trying to worship YHWH through a visible image, as they had seen in Egypt.

This is confirmed by what Aaron says next:

Exodus 32:4–5

And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, ‘These are your gods [elohim], O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD [YHWH].’

They did not say the calf was Baal or some Egyptian god. They credited YHWH with bringing them out of Egypt, and they declared a feast to YHWH. But they did so through an image he had not commanded, and in direct contradiction to his earlier instruction:

Exodus 20:4–5

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above... You shall not bow down to them or serve them...

Even though their intentions may have been to worship YHWH, he called it corruption:

Exodus 32:7–8

And the LORD [YHWH] said to Moses, ‘Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them.’

They may have been motivated by fear and uncertainty, but their actions introduced a form of worship that was not commanded.

Stephen later confirms this interpretation:

Acts 7:39–41

Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt...

And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.

The golden calf was not open rebellion against YHWH, it was unauthorized worship, which is still rebellion. It was an attempt to worship the true God in the wrong way.

What These Accounts Teach Us

Both Nadab and Abihu and the people of Israel at Sinai intended to worship YHWH. Yet in both cases, their worship was rejected, and judged, because it was not according to what YHWH had commanded.

This reveals a crucial truth: Dedication to YHWH does not sanctify a practice he did not authorize.

We are not to add to or take away from his instructions:

Deuteronomy 12:32

Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.

What About Traditions?

It is important to recognize that not all tradition is wrong. Yeshua himself observed traditions that were not commanded in the Torah:

- He attended synagogue regularly (Luke 4:16).
- He likely participated in the Feast of Dedication (John 10:22).
- These traditions were not rebuked because they did not conflict with or override YHWH's commandments.

However, Yeshua did sharply rebuke traditions that nullified the Word of YHWH, the Torah:

Mark 7:6–8

This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.

Traditions become *strange fire* when they lead us to disobey, ignore, or alter what YHWH has commanded. If they reinforce obedience, they may serve a helpful purpose. But if they replace his instructions, they must be discarded.

Conclusion: Holy Fire or Strange Fire?

Holy fire is worship done exactly as YHWH has commanded.

Strange fire is anything offered in worship that YHWH has not commanded, even if it is well-meaning, even if it is directed toward him.

The golden calf was dedicated to YHWH. Nadab and Abihu were priests of YHWH. But both

introduced unauthorized elements into worship, and were judged for it.

YHWH is holy. He defines what is acceptable in his presence. Our role is not to create new ways to worship him, but to trust the ways he has already given.

Let us be a people who offer only what he has asked for. Let our worship be holy, not because we are creative or enthusiastic, but because we are obedient.

We pray that this teaching has blessed you. And remember, continue to test everything.

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