

Triennial Torah Study – 6th Year 27/06/2015



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Lev 9	Jer 37-39	Prov 21	Acts 18
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Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 9-10)

In chapter 9 Moses instructs Aaron to proceed and offer the first offerings as God's high priest. In verse 15, the offering for the people is a goat. While the animal specified as a sin offering for the congregation in Leviticus 4:14 was a bull, a goat was used for this purpose on some occasions (16:9, 5; Numbers 28-29; 15:22-26; 2 Chronicles 29:20-24; Ezra 6:17; 8:35).

At this inauguration of sacrifices, Aaron pronounces a blessing on Israel (verse 22). The specific wording of the priestly blessing that God commanded to be bestowed upon Israel is given in Numbers 6:23-26. This may be the blessing to which Leviticus 9:22 refers.

In verses 23-24 we see a spectacular event. "The sacrifices were consumed, not by fire ignited by Aaron, but by fire from before the Lord. This is the first of only five times that the Old Testament records fire from God as a sign that a sacrifice was accepted (Judg. 6:21; 1 Kin. 18:38; 1 Chr. 21:26; 2 Chr. 7:1). Since the fire on this altar was never to go out [see Leviticus 6:9, 12-13], all Israel's sacrifices from this time forward would be consumed by fire that originated from God" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 9:24). However, while certainly plausible, it is not absolutely clear that this was the case.

After Aaron's sons are later killed for bringing profane fire before the Lord, Moses explains to Aaron why God has done this and then instructs Aaron's cousins to remove the dead men from the sanctuary. God then commands Aaron and his sons to not drink alcohol before going into the tabernacle of meeting. But the account had only spoken of Nadab and Abihu bringing profane fire and incense before God—so why is this particular instruction regarding intoxicating drink given to Aaron in the midst of what had just happened? Although it is possible that God was simply relating another way that one could show disregard for him during these rituals, the text here may be indicating that the inappropriate use of alcohol had played a role in the two brothers' poor judgment and behavior.

The punishment God inflicted on the two was very severe. We know there are certainly many times where people have "worshiped" God in a way that He does not recognize or appreciate, yet for which He does not strike them down immediately. However, at the time of this account, God was playing a very visible role in the nation of Israel

and was actually teaching the people the magnitude of reverence they needed to have for Him: “By those who come near Me I *must* be regarded as holy; and before all the people I *must* be glorified” (Leviticus 10:3)—it was critical for them to understand.

What Aaron’s sons did was not in ignorance, for God had already given clear instructions through Moses on how He was to be regarded. In this situation, Nadab and Abihu’s disregard and carelessness could not go uncorrected—it was not only offensive to God, but would have fostered a careless attitude about God’s instructions among the people. When God says to regard Him as holy, He means it. The instructive nature of this event was so important that Aaron and his remaining sons were not allowed to show any outward sign of grievance—they were required to maintain their composure and to continue their priestly duties to illustrate the justice and righteousness of God’s wrath.

The NIV Study Bible notes regarding the death of Nadab and Abihu: “They are regularly remembered as having died before the Lord and as having had no sons. Their death was tragic and at first seems harsh, but no more so than that of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:111). In both cases a new era was being inaugurated.... The new community had to be made aware that it existed for God, not vice versa.”

Moses pointing out that the goat of the sin offering (Leviticus 10:16) was not to be burned but eaten by the priests shows that this particular sin offering was not for the whole congregation or priesthood (see Leviticus 4). It is thus a later offering than the one referred to in 9:15. Following the death of his nephews, Moses was rather concerned about making sure everything was being done correctly. In verse 18, he isn’t rebuking Aaron’s sons for failing to bring the blood into the holy place, but rather pointing out that, because the blood was not brought in, the offering was to be eaten, not burned (see 6:29-30).

Aaron explains that he himself did not eat of the offering because he was afraid God would not accept it. Eating of the sin offering was an act of worship symbolizing satisfaction with God’s justice, and Aaron understood the need to be in a proper and reverential frame of mind. Yet he and his sons were sorely grieved and distracted by what had happened—perhaps even unnerved and unhappy with God’s judgment for the moment.

“Aaron did not eat of the sacrificial meat because he was afraid of what more God might do. He was not being rebellious, as his dead sons had been in burning the incense. Aaron was arguing that in circumstances such as the one he faced that day, God would prefer the priest to err on the side of caution rather than presumption.... Rebellion arises from a heart that is not right toward God. Moses recognized that Aaron’s failure was not rebellion, that his argument had merit, and that Aaron could be forgiven” (*Nelson Study Bible*, notes on verses 19-20).

Another Delegation When Egypt Intervenes (Jeremiah 37:1-10; 34:8-22)

In chapter 37, Zedekiah sends another delegation to Jeremiah, asking him to pray for Judah and its leaders (verse 3). Spiritually blind people commonly think that the prayerful intervention of a known righteous person will cause God to turn a threatening situation around. They fail to realize that they need to change their behavior and that no other human being can do that for them (Acts 8:22-24).

This time, Zephaniah the priest is again sent, along with an official named Jehucal, an associate of the Passhur sent in the previous delegation (see Jeremiah 38:1, where the official’s name is spelled Jucal).

(Jeremiah 37:4 mentions the fact that Jeremiah will later be put in prison, an episode we will soon read about in 37:11-38:28.)

The current inquiry is evidently occasioned by a major change in events—the Egyptians now entering the conflict (compare verse 7). “In the late spring or early summer 588 B.C., Pharaoh Hophra led the Egyptian army into southern Palestine. The Babylonian forces withdrew their siege of Judah and Jerusalem to confront the Egyptians. Zedekiah hoped the Babylonians would be defeated” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 6-8). The “then” of verse 5 is not to denote a new time frame after the inquiry. Rather, verses 4-5 should be understood as parenthetical—giving the background to the inquiry.

The king probably wondered if Jeremiah’s message had now changed in light of the Egyptian advance: “The approach of the Egyptian forces (vv. 5, 9) seemed to contradict the message of 34:2-7; moreover, with the withdrawal of the Babylonian army, Zedekiah may have thought that Jeremiah’s predictions of doom were wrong after all... Also, Zedekiah may have been encouraged by his alliance with Pharaoh Hophra... He may indeed have doubted his own prophets, and so he wanted to get a message from Jeremiah that would please him. Thus he asked the prophet to pray for him (v. 3)—i.e., to support his actions... In other words, what Zedekiah wanted was for the Lord to make the temporary withdrawal of the Babylonians permanent. He may somehow have felt that the presence of Jeremiah, though he predicted doom, would insure God’s protection against Jerusalem’s capture. As for his regard for Jeremiah, it was tinged with superstition” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verses 2-3).

It may be that Zedekiah was thinking that God had relented because of his recent emancipation proclamation, mentioned in the latter part of chapter 34. And indeed, God may have granted the lifting of the siege for this reason—or at least as a test of the people’s resolve. Sadly, they had no resolve to continue in their commitment to God and His righteousness. (Human beings in general often try to make God into what they want Him to be —and have Him act as they want Him to. When they need help, they cry out to Him—but not to intervene when and how *He* deems appropriate, but in the time and manner that *they* think He should. And when the objective seems met, they want God to retire once again.)

Zedekiah and the rest of the nation’s hopes that Egypt would save them were in vain, as God makes clear through Jeremiah. This was a passing circumstance. Even if Egypt’s forces managed to weaken the Babylonian army, it would still return to finish its devastating work (37:6-10).

Emancipation Revocation (Jeremiah 37:1-10; 34:8-22)

After God gave the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, having freed the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, the first judgment He gave them was the maximum time of seven years that fellow Israelites could be kept in servitude (Exodus 21:1-6), whether or not these Israelites “had sold themselves into servitude for the payment of their debts, or though they were sold by the judges for the punishment of their crimes. This difference was put between their brethren and strangers, that those of other nations taken in war, or bought with money, might be held in perpetual slavery, they and theirs; but their brethren must serve but for seven years at the longest” (*Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, note on Jeremiah 34:8-22). In Jeremiah’s time, however, the people of Judah had been ignoring this law.

When Nebuchadnezzar with his armies and allies attacked the cities of Judah, and Jerusalem was under siege, King Zedekiah made a covenant proclamation to the citizens of Jerusalem that gave an appearance of repentance (34:8-9). Perhaps this was even in response to God’s warning given through Jeremiah at the beginning of the siege: “Deliver him who is plundered out of the hand of the oppressor, lest My fury go forth like fire” (21:12).

The citizens appeared repentant also since they readily responded and emancipated their Jewish slaves (verse 10). However, it soon became obvious that Zedekiah and the Jews were not truly repentant and had no real commitment to that decision. The people soon “changed their minds” (34:11)—they repented of their repentance! Zedekiah either changed his mind or at least weakly failed to enforce his proclamation. (Indeed, we will later find him obviously weak and vacillating.)

Two occurrences led to the Jews re-enslaving their servants. First was the lifting of the Jerusalem siege when the Chaldeans left to confront the oncoming Egyptian forces (37:5). Even though God knew the hypocrisy and superficiality of Zedekiah and the people of Jerusalem, He, out of His great mercy, probably orchestrated this timely reprieve for the Jews.

The second factor was the people realizing more than ever how advantageous it was to have slave labor. As soon as they got what they really wanted, deliverance from the Chaldeans, they felt they no longer needed God. Big mistake! God is not to be mocked or manipulated.

Their sin was especially egregious because they were reneging on a covenant they had made with God in His temple to right the wrong (34:15). They had even ratified the covenant with a ritual first mentioned in Scripture in Genesis 15:9-17 (Jeremiah 34:18). They “passed through the parts of the animal cut in two, implying that they prayed so to be cut in sunder (Matthew 24:51; Greek, ‘cut in two’) if they should break the covenant” (*Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown’s Commentary*, note on Jeremiah 34:18). And indeed, the punishment would be severe.

As a result of their treachery, freeing slaves only to re-enslave them, God remarks with sardonic irony that He would free *them*—from His protection. “Behold, I proclaim liberty to *you*,’ says the LORD—‘to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine!’” (34:17). God said He would bring Babylon’s army back to conquer and burn Jerusalem—killing or capturing its people.

Jeremiah Imprisoned; Zedekiah’s Wavering (Jeremiah 37:11-38:28)

The temporary lifting of the Babylonian siege from Jerusalem provides an opportunity for some movement outside the city. Jeremiah sets off for the land of Benjamin—presumably for his hometown of Anathoth, just three miles outside the capital—to, as one commentator translates verse 12, “attend to a division of property among his people there” (qtd. in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, footnote on verse 12). (The King James translation, “to separate himself thence in the midst of the people,” is incorrect.) “The presupposition is that a relative had died in Anathoth; so it was incumbent on Jeremiah to be present in connection with the inheritance” (footnote on verse 12).

But the prophet is arrested on suspicion of defecting to the Chaldeans by a captain of the guard named Irijah. His grandfather’s name is Hananiah (verse 13)—possibly, as some have suggested, the false prophet Hananiah who died at Jeremiah’s decree from God (see Jeremiah 28).

We then come to Jeremiah’s imprisonment. It is not entirely clear if our current reading encompasses two separate imprisonments or two accounts of the same one (compare 37:11-21; 38:1-28). Those who argue for two imprisonments point out that Jeremiah 37:15 mentions the prophet being cast into “prison in the house of Jonathan the scribe,” where he is thrown into a dungeon or cistern (verse 18), while 38:6 says he was “cast into the dungeon of Malchiah the king’s son” (or Malchiah son of Hammelech). The argument in favor of one imprisonment here is that the two accounts are extremely similar and that, at the end of both, Jeremiah requests of the king that he not be returned to Jonathan’s house to die (compare 37:20; 38:26). Indeed, one imprisonment seems rather likely,

which would mean that the dungeon or cistern of Malchiah was in the house of Jonathan—easily explainable if ownership had changed, if Malchiah had built the cistern, or if Malchiah was the official in charge of prisoners.

Pashhur, one of the leaders Jeremiah is arraigned before (who was part of Zedekiah's delegation to Jeremiah at the beginning of the Babylonian siege in chapter 21), is the "son of Malchiah" (38:1)—perhaps the namesake of the dungeon. With Pashhur is Jucal (same verse), the Jehucal of the delegation Zedekiah sent to Jeremiah when the siege was lifted at the beginning of chapter 37.

The officials are outraged at Jeremiah's public proclamation of what they consider to be a seditious message, and they call for his execution. Interestingly, Zedekiah declares himself powerless against these leaders (38:5). He is evidently insecure in his position. Though he had reigned for a decade, it should be recalled that many still considered Jeconiah, a prisoner in

Babylon, as the real king. Also, Zedekiah later mentions his fear of pro-Babylonian factions (verse 19). Many were likely blaming Zedekiah for having instigated the Babylonian siege.

Now that it had been lifted for a time, a coup was not out of the question. Nevertheless, Zedekiah certainly wielded a great deal of power still. He *could* have protected God's prophet, but it didn't seem politically expedient to him.

The leaders order Jeremiah thrown into the prison "dungeon" (verse 6) or "cistern" (NIV)—ostensibly, as they had called for his execution, with the intention of his dying a slow death. "The cistern of Palestine was commonly a pear-shaped reservoir into which water could run from a roof, tunnel, or courtyard. From about the thirteenth century B.C. it was plastered and its opening stopped by a suitable cut stone, large enough for protection, but sometimes quite heavy (cf. Gen 29:8-10)... [In] abandoned reservoirs there is usually a mound of debris underneath the opening, consisting of dirt and rubbish, blown or knocked in, shattered remnants of water containers, and not infrequently skeletons. These may represent the result of accident, suicide, or some such incarceration as that which Jeremiah endured, although he did not experience the usual fatal end of exhaustion and drowning in water and mud" ("Cistern," *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*, 1983, p. 129).

Jeremiah is rescued through the intervention of Ebed-Melech the Cushite, who convinces the king to have the prophet removed from the cistern (Jeremiah 38:7-10). He takes great care in helping Jeremiah out of his confinement (verses 11-13). How ironic that "a foreigner, a oncedespised Cushite [and eunuch], cared more for the prophet of God than did the king and princes of Jeremiah's own people" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 11-13). We later learn that this is because he trusts in the God of Israel—and that God will reward him with deliverance from Jerusalem's destruction (39:15-18).

Following the rescue is a dialogue between Jeremiah and Zedekiah, wherein we are afforded insight into the king's thinking. The narrative again demonstrates Zedekiah's instability—constantly wavering and giving in to the pressure of those around him. His day-to-day life was one of rebellion against God, yet there still seemed to be an ingrained fear of one of God's servants. Sadly, Zedekiah was like many leaders today—more intent on pleasing people than following the truth (38:19-20).

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus makes this comment about the king: "Now as to Zedekiah himself, while he heard the prophet speak, he believed him, and agreed to everything as true, and supposed it was for his advantage; but then his friends perverted him, and dissuaded him from what the prophet advised, and obliged him to do what they pleased" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 10, chap. 7, sec. 2).

Nations need leaders who are steadfast and not wavering. God also requires the same of His people. "Then we will no longer be like children, forever changing our minds about what we believe because someone has told us something different or because someone has cleverly lied to us and made the lie sound like the truth. Instead we

will hold to the truth in love, becoming more and more in every way like Messiah, who is the head of his body, the Assembly” (Ephesians 4:14-15, New Living Translation).

Instead of standing fast, “Zedekiah will go down in history as having made more U-turns than a learner-driver breaking in wild chariot horses” (Derek Williams, ed., *The Biblical Times*, 1997, p. 196).

Jeremiah “was stirred to his most direct eloquence. ‘And you shall cause this city to be burned with fire’ ([Jeremiah 28] v. 23). This was Zedekiah’s last chance to save the city, its walls, its warriors, its women and children. All he had to do was trust the prophet, to lift his head high, take up the flag of truce, walk past the princes and out to the Chaldean armies. This simple act of contrition could have saved the city” (*Mastering the Old Testament*, Vol. 17: *Jeremiah, Lamentations* by John Guest, 1988, p. 271).

Biblical historian Eugene Merrill writes: “Zedekiah was nearly persuaded. Only his pride of position and need to maintain a face of courage in the midst of certain calamity prevented him from acceding to the word of the man of God. That stubbornness against the truth proved to be the undoing of the king and all his people with him” (*Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 1987, p. 465). Zedekiah could not bring himself to surrender. Jerusalem was to fall.

In verses 24-26, Zedekiah commands Jeremiah to not reveal to the other leaders what the two of them had discussed—but to instead say that he had made a request of the king that he not be put back in the cistern to die. Jeremiah complies (verse 27). So did Jeremiah lie? No, for he actually did make this request as part of their discussion in 37:20—which argues in favor of the two accounts covering the same episode.

While Zedekiah consents to Jeremiah’s request that he not be returned to the cistern, the king does not completely free the prophet. Rather he commits him to the “court of the prison” (verse 21; 38:13, 28) or “courtyard of the guard” (NIV)—“a place near the royal palace where limited mobility was possible, such as in the transaction to purchase the field [mentioned in our next reading] (see 32:1-15; Neh. 3:25)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Jeremiah 37:20-21). *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* states: “The courtyard of the guard, probably a stockade (cf. Neh 3:25), was the part of the palace area set apart for prisoners. (Friends could visit them there.) The soldiers who guarded the palace were quartered there” (note on Jeremiah 32:1-2).

Jeremiah will remain in this place until the Babylonians conquer the city (38:28; 39:11-14).

Proverb 21

Second Part of Major Solomonic Collection Cont’d (Proverbs 21:9-31)

44. Final Outcomes and Judgments (21:9-19)

TYPE: INCLUSIO. “Proverbs about consequences and judgments are collected between the frame of similar proverbs on the ‘quarrelsome wife’” (NIV Application Commentary, note on verses 9-19). Verse 9, repeated in 25:24, mentions dwelling in a corner of a housetop. A roof of that time was flat. The reference is either to sleeping out in the open or in a small makeshift room set up there (see 2 Kings 4:10). Taken together, the frame verses (i.e., Proverbs 21:9, 19) illustrate that it’s better for a man to dwell all alone in discomfort than to live with a contentious wife.

? “Lessons from the Merciless (21:10-13).... These verses concern merciless behavior, and vv. 11-12 describe how one can learn a lesson by observing the punishment that befalls the evil. These four verses thus form a chiasmus [of a-b-b-a]” (NAC).

? "Reconciliation and Justice (21:14-15)." Verse 14 should not be understood as sanctioning bribery to subvert justice. Some see the verse as merely observing, without moral comment, a practice that works. But what would be the purpose of that here? Others take the verse as counseling the appropriateness of gifts in some cases to appease an offended party (compare Proverbs 17:8). Yet what of the fact that the gift is "in secret"? The idea could perhaps be to allow the offended party to save face and not be embarrassed by the public knowing he is accepting a gift. Some see the meaning as privately settling a litigation issue out of court. It may have been to deter misreading Proverbs 21:14 as condoning bribery undermining the justice system that verse 15 was placed immediately after it; contrasting the end results of justice and lawlessness.

? "Rewards for Doing Wrong (21:16-18).... These three proverbs all follow the theme of the ultimate fate of those who do wrong" (NAC)?in contrast to the rewards for doing right in the next section (verses 20-22).

Verse 17 does not mean that it is wrong to enjoy pleasure and luxuries. The point is that those who set their hearts on these things to the point of overindulging and expending resources in pursuit of them will store up no wealth. They will end up with less of what they want. Compare verse 20, which shows that the wise have luxuries, evidently as a result of diligence and restraint, in contrast to fools who squander what they have.

Verse 18 says that the wicked will be a ransom for the righteous. This could simply mean that the lives of the wicked will be given up to destruction in exchange for the peaceful and happy existence of the righteous thereafter. Put another way, the ultimate destruction of the wicked will release the righteous from evil's tyranny over their lives.

45. Rewards for Doing Right (21:20-22)

"TYPE: THEMATIC....These verses closely correspond to vv. 16-18? (NAC)?contrasting with them.

46. A Mouth in and out of Control (21:23-24) "TYPE: THEMATIC" (NAC).

47. The Sluggard's Craving (21:25-26)

"TYPE: CATCHWORD, THEMATIC" (NAC). It's interesting that many who covet things are too lazy to work for those things.

48. Trying to Fool God (21:27)

"TYPE: INDIVIDUAL PROVERB" (NAC). The first colon here is the same as in 15:8.

49: The False Witness (21:28-29)

"TYPE: THEMATIC These two verses should be read together" (NAC). The first colon of verse 28 recalls Proverbs 19, verses 5 and 9. The translation of the second colon of 21:28 is disputed. Some see it as giving credence to the false witness earning punishment (compare NIV, although the Hebrew text is altered in this translation). Others understand a person listening well to a false witness so as to counter with cross-examination. Still others read the verse to say that though a false witness perishes, those who hear his lies will pass them on even long afterward; that is, a liar's lies persist after he is gone. Yet another way to read the verse is as follows: "A false witness shall perish, / But the man who hears [i.e., heeds] this [i.e., the law or proverb, not him] will speak without end." Verse 29 seems to parallel this, though a direct parallel is not essential to the thematic relationship between the two verses here. Where the NKJV in verse 29 says the wicked "hardens his face," the NIV says "puts up a bold front." This may mark a bald-faced liar giving testimony. He firmly sets his face, but the righteous person who will not give false testimony firmly sets his way ?which, as the previous verse implies, will last forever.

50: Counterwisdom (21:30-31)

"TYPE: THEMATIC." The book of Proverbs normally uses the term "wisdom" in a positive sense?as based on the fear of the Lord. "Here, however, it speaks of a kind of human 'wisdom' that seeks understanding without first submitting to Yahweh and declares that such efforts are futile. Verse 31 gives a concrete example, from a military

setting of what v. 30 describes abstractly" (NAC). Human preparation, for war in this case, is important but carries only so far (compare 20:18). We must not place ultimate trust in such preparation. For the outcome of circumstances is in God's hands. Note elsewhere God's cautions against trusting in horses, representing military strength (Psalm 20:7; 33:17; Hosea 1:7).

Acts 18

Sha'ul leaves Athens and goes to Corinth. At this time, the Yehudim were being ordered to leave Rome and because of this a couple named Aquilas and Priscilla were fleeing there and also came to Corinth. They were Yehudite and also tent-makers and so Sha'ul and them stayed together for a while and Sha'ul was teaching boldly Yeshua Messiah in the assemblies on the Sabbaths. He had both Yehudim and Greeks believe in his proclamation of the Good News. This time, when some began to resist and blaspheme, Sha'ul became very agitated. He said from now on, he would go only to the gentiles and he washed his feet of these people.

He stayed though, at the house of the ruler of the congregation named Crispus who did believe in Sha'ul's testimony, he and all his household. They were immersed and believed and Sha'ul was able to stay with them there in Corinth. The Master appeared to Sha'ul in the night by a vision and encouraged him and told him to stay there, that He had many people there in that place. So Sha'ul did stay there and teach and preach for a year and six months.

Eventually though, some Yehudim brought Sha'ul to the authority there named Gallion to the judgment seat to be judged. When they accused Sha'ul of teaching Elohim contrary to the Torah, Gallion realized this mob was about religious matters and would be no part of it. They would have to handle it on their own.