

Honor in the Cult: Leviticus 10 in Socio-Rhetorical Perspective

Andrew Heyd

University of Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Andrew Heyd, University of Pretoria, Lynnwood Rd, Hatfield, Pretoria, 0002, South Africa.

Email: heydak@gmail.com

Abstract

Walter Houston's article on the death of Nadab and Abihu is one of the few attempts to bring a social science model of honor and shame to bear on the Pentateuch. This article will argue that he did not go far enough in tracing how honor and shame bring coherence, not just to the Nadab and Abihu incident but also to all of Lev. 10. In particular, honor also explains the speeches of Yhwh and Aaron, the transition from the prohibition of mourning to Aaron's grant of interpretive authority, and the overall narrative tension and resolution of the chapter's narrative. This article will briefly review and critique Houston's article and then argue that Lev. 10 contains a rhetoric of honor that coordinates relationships between Yhwh, priests, and people in a way that brings greater coherence to the chapter as a whole.

Keywords

Nadab and Abihu, Honor, Rhetoric, Social-science, Leviticus 10, Cult, Aaron, Moses

Introduction

Leviticus 10 contains a number of interpretive cruxes,¹ which have generated a myriad of interpretive approaches. It is therefore remarkable that two major studies by Nihan (2007) and Watts (2013) have similar analyses² of the chapter's unity, structure, narrative dynamics, and emphasis on establishing priestly interpretive authority.³ This paper will build on some of their presuppositions about the unity and structure of the chapter, but instead of focusing on priestly power, I will argue that honor illuminates the speeches of Yhwh and Aaron that anchor each half of the chapter, provides a complementary reading of the narrative tension and resolution, and better situates priestly status relative to Yhwh's honor.

This paper will also build on Walter Houston's (2000) work that previously suggested the lens of honor to read Nadab and Abihu's actions as an honor challenge. However, I will argue that he did not go far enough in articulating how honor operates within and brings coherence to the entire chapter. The paper will proceed by giving an overview of social-scientific approaches to honor in reading biblical texts, reviewing and critiquing Houston's argument, and then providing a socio-rhetorical reading of Lev. 10.

Reading through the lens of honor and Walter Houston's approach to Lev. 10

The use of social science models focused on honor to read biblical texts has a vast body of literature,⁴ but a common starting point is Malina's (1981: 25–50) Mediterranean model.⁵ This model posits that honor is an assertion of worth and acknowledgement of that worth and that it governs relational transactions according to the relative status of those involved. That status is largely determined by family status or heroic achievement,⁶ but the status quo could be challenged and the results of the 'challenge-riposte' could increase or diminish the honor of each party in the eyes of the community.

Malina built his model on the work of anthropologists in the Mediterranean region in the 1960s (Peristiany, 1966), and it needs to be emphasized that the model's ease of use is based on the assumption that anthropologists' nuanced study of a particular time and place can be generalized and applied to contexts far removed in time and space from the model's source. Herzfeld (1980) provides an important caution that even within the Mediterranean cultures studied, there were competing views of honor, which makes a one-size-fits-all model a source of potential distortion in understanding any particular culture. This warning has often gone unheeded in biblical studies (Chance 1994; Wu 2016: 20–21) even as awareness of Herzfeld's argument became prominent in the methodological conversation about the use of the Mediterranean model (Elliot 1994: 45–48). Recent scholarship⁷ has sought to avoid this danger by using the model 'abductively,' that is, understanding the model as a heuristically useful construct and not as a deterministic frame that enables entry into a text using a 'plausible but partial account' (Schwartz 2010: 24–25). Similarities between the model and the text may help a reader hypothesize how honor shapes relational transactions, but differences are also noted, and the particularity of the text is allowed to critique the model where needed. The goal is to see whether the model's highlighting of both similarities and differences can provide a coherent, thick reading that makes sense of the particularities of the message of the text relative to cultural presuppositions.⁸

Houston (2000) uses the Mediterranean model to engage the notorious crux⁹ regarding the nature of Nadab and Abihu's crime in Lev. 10.1–3. He follows Milgrom's proposal that they used an unauthorized pan and incense¹⁰ but interprets the significance of their violation and Yhwh's response as an honor challenge (Houston 2000: 34). Nadab and Abihu's actions dishonor Yhwh¹¹ (10.1), so Yhwh responds to assert his honor (10.2). Houston, like Milgrom, reads the niph'al verbs of 10.3 as reflexive and כבוד as signifying honor, so Yhwh's speech clarifies his action as asserting his honor in response to being challenged. Houston then briefly considers the rest of Lev. 10 from the point of view of Aaron as a tragic hero and tracks the negative effect that Nadab and Abihu's actions have on him and how this text mitigates community jealousy of his position.¹²

Although I am in agreement that this passage begins with an act of dishonor toward Yhwh and that applying a broader body of theory related to honor can be fruitful, my approach will differ from Houston's in several crucial ways. First, in contrast to Houston's limited use of honor to analyze 10.1–3 and his speculation about community

jealousy of Aaron's honorable position, I will argue that honor shapes social transactions throughout the chapter.

Second, while Houston limits his narrative focus to the character of Aaron as a tragic hero, I will argue the narrator uses honor to develop a layer of narrative tension and resolution.

Third, Houston views the chapter without reference to its structure, whereas I will find significance in the chapter having a roughly concentric structure:¹³

- A. Ambiguous Ritual Failure/Judgment and Aaron and Moses' response (1–5)
- B. Moses instructs Aaron, Eleazar, and Ithamar (6–7)
- C. Yhwh's instructions to and authorization of Aaron (8–11)
- B'. Moses instructs Aaron, Eleazar, and Ithamar (12–15)
- A'. Ambiguous Ritual Disagreement and Aaron and Moses' response (16–20)

The concentric structure is a form of repetition that both allows for comparison and contrast of the ambiguous cultic situations framing a central grant to Aaron and accentuates the tension and resolution of the chapter.

Finally, Houston falls into the trap of applying the model deductively to the text without allowing the particularity of the text to provide feedback to the model. In particular, in arguing that the text is an honor challenge,¹⁴ he does not address the obvious point that Nadab and Abihu are not trying to challenge Yhwh in an agonistic struggle for honor among equals; rather, they are not showing honor within the established hierarchy. Furthermore, the text is cultic, and the question of honor is intertwined with the distinctions of holiness addressed in the text but not by Houston. My reading will use the model of honor but seek to allow the text to guide how honor functions in the cultic context. Because Lev. 10 has *prime facie* evidence of the conceptual use of honor, I will read the text with sensitivity to honor and evaluate whether this is a good assumption based on the coherence – in this case, narrative coherence – of the reading it produces. We now turn to this reading.

Lev. 10.1–5 and honor

The first and obvious question that confronts the reader of Lev. 10 is why Nadab and Abihu are killed by Yhwh. Although the punishment is clear, the narrative only reports they did what was 'not commanded' without specifying the particulars of the violation. The multifaceted interface between the beginning of Lev. 10 and the end of Lev. 9¹⁵ strongly suggests that 'not commanded' is in contrast to the repetition of 'just as Yhwh commanded' throughout Lev. 8–9 (Watts 2013: 525–6). While there have been numerous attempts to 'solve' the specifics of the crime,¹⁶ Milgrom's (1991: 597–8) being the most commonly cited, the text resists attempts to determine what Nadab and Abihu did wrong.¹⁷

The lack of narrative detail about the violation is arguably intentional and indicates that the rhetorical interest lies elsewhere (Watts 2013: 506, 513, 517). Although Nadab

and Abihu's punishment is partially explained by the phrase 'not commanded,' the lack of clarity regarding what went wrong creates a need to know what happened and why. In

contrast with Watts (2013), who thinks Yhwh's response is also ambiguous,¹⁸ I will argue that the report of Israel's patron deity is designed to provide clarity in shaping the listeners' response and undergirds the tension and resolution of the entire chapter. Yhwh's answer is presented by Moses in a bicolon of synthetic parallel lines:

"This is what Yhwh has said:

‘Among those who are near to me
I will be sanctified, (קדש, niphals)
and before all the people,
I will be honored (כבוד, niphals).’” (10.3)

The two main verbs in parallel – קדש and כבוד – are niphals that can be interpreted as passive or reflexive. Nihan (2007: 92), for example, argues that כבוד is passive, implying Yhwh should be ‘honored’ by the people. Milgrom (1991: 602) argues that the niphals are reflexive and that God is acting to sanctify and glorify himself: “The death of God’s intimate priests, Nadab and Abihu, performs the function of sanctifying God – providing awe and respect for his power...” The result of “awe and respect,” is not so dissimilar from Nihan’s argument for honor. The only difference is the emphasis on the agency of Yhwh to ensure he is honored among the people. The passive option makes 10.3 a principle that stands in reflection of the action in 10.1–2, and the reflexive option makes 10.3 an interpretation of the intention behind Yhwh’s action. Although the two views assume different agents, the result is the same – God is to be set apart and honored.¹⁹ In terms of Malina’s Mediterranean model, Yhwh claims status and demands its recognition from Israel. Nadab and Abihu’s ill-advised approach fails to recognize the honor of Yhwh, so Yhwh acts to assert his honor and calls for honor from the community.²⁰

As noted previously, the particularities of the passage must not be forced to fit into a model; rather, the model should provide entry into the text, whose particularities provide feedback as to how honor operates. Here we must note that the context is cultic, which is an area that the anthropologists proposing the Mediterranean model have admitted is a weakness.²¹ However, both the parallelism of Yhwh’s statement in 10.3 and the narrative coherence can guide us. Namely, the parallelism places honor in relationship with holiness, which alerts the reader to honor’s intersection with the distinctions of clean/unclean that holiness requires. The parallelism also highlights the relationship between the priests and people. Milgrom attempts to express this relationship in his observation, ‘if such things happen to his intimates, others will all the more so have cause to fear.’²² This highlights that Yhwh acted in response to priests but has all of Israel in view in his response. I will develop this insight further by arguing that the כבוד of Yhwh and the response of honoring him in the cultic context underlie much of the passage and coordinate the relationship of the priesthood and people.

Lev. 10.1–5 and narrative tension

Seen through a narrative lens, Lev. 10.1–3 initiates a crisis that resolves over the course of the chapter (Nihan 2007: 574–77). Watts (2007: 143, 2013: 512–3) argues that the setting of Nadab and Abihu’s actions (‘not according to the command of Yhwh’) against

the backdrop of priestly obedience raises the possibility of priestly unreliability in the narrative. However, over the course of the chapter, in a twist, this judgment actually enhances trust in priestly reliability and prestige. In a case of ‘the exception that proves the rule,’ the beginning of the narrative reveals dire consequences for *any* disobedience, which implies that the normal functioning of the priesthood indicates priestly reliability in a dangerous context (Watts 2013: 514).

The tension arising from this possible unreliability begins to be relieved through notes of priestly obedience in v. 5 and 7. Respect for priests is then dramatically reinforced when Yhwh authorizes Aaron with interpretive authority in 10.8–11, and then Aaron exercises that authority over Moses in a way that Moses accepts. The overall effect is to demonstrate priestly reliability in the face of a dangerous job, which reinforces Watts’s more general argument that the priests are writing to “provide prescriptive and descriptive justification for the Aaronides’ monopoly over Israel’s priesthood and cult” in post-exilic Yehud where the status of the priesthood and cult were contested (Watts 2013: 505–6).

While Watts (2013: 509–10, 514, 531) roots the crisis of priestly unreliability in the narrator’s assessment of ‘not commanded’ (10.2), he downplays the report of Yhwh’s assessment related to honor (10.3) as ambiguous. I will argue below that Yhwh’s statement in 10.3 provides a crucial frame for the rest of the chapter and suggests a complementary reading that foregrounds the immediate threat of death related to honor that is extended from priest to people. This reading is complementary in that it also acknowledges the role of priestly status but does so in light of Yhwh’s foregrounded honor, which was also contested in post-exilic Yehud.²³

Lev. 10.6–7: Aaron demonstrating honor undergirding holiness

After the initial crisis, the narrative continues smoothly with the bodies of Nadab and Abihu being removed by their cousins and Moses forbidding Aaron and his remaining sons from following after in grief (10.6–7). But then Yhwh grants Aaron cultic interpretive authority (10.8–11), which many²⁴ see as such an abrupt interruption that it can only be explained as a later insertion. However, 10.6–7, often treated briefly by commentators, illustrates the relationship between holiness and honor (10.3) in making purity distinctions; it serves as a fitting transition to Aaron’s grant of interpretive authority in 10.8–11.

Cultically, the command to not mourn in 10.6–7 coheres with instructions about mourning for priests in Lev. 21.10–12. There, those with anointing oil should not dishevel hair, tear clothes, or approach any dead person because they are anointed and in a state of holiness and these actions would profane the sanctuary (Watts, 2013: 533–7).²⁵ *Culturally*, the command prohibits what would naturally take place after the death of two sons. From a social-science perspective, mourning the dead involves aspects of both honor and shame. Mourning honors the dead (or memory of the dead) and the remaining family (Brichto 1973: 27–33). Westerners today retain this sense by describing visits to the funeral home as ‘paying respects’ and at a national level through elaborate state funerals for fallen national heroes with flags flying at half-mast. Olyan (2014: 271–279) has dem-

onstrated through his creation of a taxonomy of burial rites found in the Hebrew Bible that ancient Israel also signified respect (or lack thereof) based on how the dead were buried and mourned.

While mourning honors the dead, ritual mourning, such as the tearing of clothes and dishevelment, involves acts that dishonor the self. In social-science models, the head is the part of the body associated with honor, and garments are external manifestations of status, so dishevelment of the head and the tearing of clothes are acts of self-humiliation (Malina 1981: 35; Peristiany 1966: 25; Pederson 1926: 227). Medina (2008: 194–21) argues from Job and the myth of Ba’lu that this ritual mourning is a withdrawal from a normal mode of life and entrance into a liminal state in which the mourners are stripped of clothes that are symbolic of a normal life of purity (life being ‘in place’) and enter into a state of impurity (‘out of place’), ritual identification with death, and potential contact with the dead.²⁶ This understanding is strengthened by noting the parallels between the prohibition by Moses in Lev. 10 and the instructions for people with a skin disease a few chapters later. The word for tearing of clothes (פרים) in 10.6 is extremely rare, occurring elsewhere only in the priestly instructions on mourning in 21.10 and in instructions for

people with skin disease in Lev. 13.45–46, wherein people with skin diseases also follow the pattern of tearing their clothes, disheveling their hair, and calling out ‘unclean’ outside the camp (Wenham 1979: 200). The camp, being the place of normal life, is contrasted with life outside the camp – the place of death – accompanied by actions that symbolize impurity, including the verbalization of their impure state. The parallel of dishevelment and tearing clothes between the mourners and the skin-diseased persons further suggests that the former also enter into a ritually unclean state.

With this understanding of ritual mourning as both honoring the dead and the entrance into a liminal (and unclean) state associated with death involving self-humiliation, Moses’ commands to avoid ritual mourning (10.6) illuminate the relationship between holiness and honor in 10.3. Because the priests are in a state of ritual holiness, it is inappropriate to enter into a ritual state of impurity associated with mourning the dead. But maintaining ritual holiness and not mourning violates family and communal expectations about mourning and signals that Aaron and his sons have chosen to honor Yhwh above his family. Aaron’s silence in 10.3 may already foreshadow his willingness to honor Yhwh before instruction is given.²⁷ The cultic system of distinctions of holy/common and clean/unclean are kept when Yhwh is honored above all (cf. 10.3). In contrast to those who see 10.8–10 as a jarring intrusion, Aaron’s honoring of Yhwh by guarding the sancta against impurity leads directly to Yhwh honoring Aaron²⁸ by authorizing him to make distinctions and teach the difference between the holy and profane, pure and impure. Indeed, Aaron exemplifies the maintaining of the distinctions of holiness in a difficult situation, which makes it fitting for him to teach others how to uphold these distinctions in the midst of life’s varied circumstances, which characterize the many aspects of life that the purity instructions cover in Lev. 11–15.

This honorable authority that Aaron is granted has parallels to the ordination of the Levites after the golden calf incident. In Lev. 10.6–7, 32.25–29, following cultic failure, the sons of Levi choose to honor Yhwh over family in ‘joining Yhwh’s side’ and slaugh-

tering other sons of Israel, for which they are ordained to serve as Yhwh's representatives. The pattern of cultic failure followed by Aaron's honoring of Yhwh over family in Lev. 10 suggests a basis for his honorable granting of cultic authority that follows. Thus 10.6–7 illustrates the parallel nature of holiness and honor in 10.3 and anticipates 10.8–11. Although Houston (2000: 34) suggests that Aaron is dishonored in the chapter, in fact, Aaron ultimately ends this chapter with honor granted because he has honored Yhwh in contrast to Nadab and Abihu.²⁹ Aaron's honoring of Yhwh also prepares the reader to understand Aaron's exercise of cultic interpretative authority later in the chapter, when he again allows the honoring of Yhwh to guide his decisions.

Lev. 10.6–7 and narrative tension

The threat of death in the presence of Yhwh is illustrated in the example of Nadab and Abihu, but Yhwh's assessment, presented in parallel lines, extends the requirements of holiness and honor from the priests to the people. Lev. 10.6–7 also heightens the tension of life and possible death in the presence of Yhwh. The command to not mourn is motivated by 'lest you die, and wrath come upon the congregation' in verse 6, and obedience is compelled with the threat 'lest you die', repeated in verse 7. This threat not only heightens narrative tension developed in 10.1–5 but also extends the threat to the people, as priestly disobedience will have consequences for the entire congregation. While this tension rises, we note that the tension of priestly reliability begins to be mitigated by notes of priestly obedience in verses 5 and 7 (Watts 2013: 508).

Lev. 10.8–11: purity and tension

Lev. 10.8–11 present a unique address from Yhwh directly to Aaron – one of only two times this occurs in the Pentateuch³⁰ – that grants him the interpretive authority to distinguish between the holy and common, pure and impure, and the responsibility to teach Israel. As noted above, this authorization occurs directly in the middle of the narrative and divides the chapter into two parallel parts – each of which has an ambiguous cultic situation involving Aaron's sons. The uniqueness of this address and centrality of it within the passage lend credence to the argument that the chapter emphasizes the priestly authority granted to Aaron which he exercises even over Moses in the second half of the chapter. In Aaron's acceptance of a dangerous job, Aaron's ongoing achievement in the cult and his successful exercise of that authority build confidence for both him and his sons.

In my reading, this section flows smoothly from Aaron's honoring of Yhwh in maintaining purity in the sancta (Lev. 10.6–7) to the honor of his authorization (Lev. 10.8–11). This section also continues to develop the relationship between priest and people and raises the worrying possibility of death in the presence of the Holy One. This possibility of death illustrated in the priesthood before the people (Lev. 10.1–3) is heightened by the repeated reference to death (מוֹת) 'lest you die' in Lev. 10.6–7 and extended from both priest to people and continues here implicitly as the *raison d'être* of what Aaron is to teach the people. The purity instructions that follow in Lev. 11–15 essentially conclude in 15.31, wherein priests must help the community maintain purity in approaching the tabernacle 'lest they die (מוֹת)' by approaching the sancta in a state of impurity. The chapter,

which began with Nadab and Abihu's punishment, has steadily developed the necessary relationship between priests and people along with the potential threat of death extended from both priests to people (esp. Lev. 10.6 and 10.11 vis-à-vis 15.31).

Although the narrative and Yhwh's oracle increase his awe and honor before the people, the threat of death that has arisen could potentially paralyze those intending to draw near. This threat is heightened by the necessity of adjudicating black-and-white regulations when they come into contact with the ambiguous circumstances that arise in daily life (e.g., how fresh does the fresh water for washing need to be Lev. 14.5). I raise this issue not out of some common sense caveats concerning the practicalities of maintaining purity, but because of the way the remainder of the chapter unfolds with Aaron exercising his authority to make a purity 'judgment call.' How does the text address the need to make judgment calls when the situation is ambiguous? Bibb (2001: 95, 2009: 111–31) suggests that systems of law appear complete but actually have gaps, and Nadab and Abihu fell into such a gap, which necessitated the additional legislation that follows in Lev. 11–15. While such a strategy is attested by the Mishnah's twelve tractates of purity distinctions in the *Tohorot*, I find it unlikely that Nadab and Abihu naively fell into a gap,³¹ and it is telling that Bibb's (2001: 96) argument moves from the ambiguity of Nadab and Abihu to the purity instruction (that fills some gaps) in Lev. 11–15, while skipping over the conclusion of the chapter, which contains another ambiguity. In contrast to Bibb's paradigm, the solution to ambiguity in the second half of Lev. 10 is not additional legislation but authorized interpretation (so Watts) aimed at honoring Yhwh (my emphasis). Complementing Watts, I will now argue that the issues are not just priestly reliability and reestablished obedience but confidence that the priest can offer acceptable adjudication in ambiguous situations and provide confidence to approach Yhwh in the face of potential death.

Lev. 10.12–15, 16–20

- A. Ambiguous Ritual Failure/Judgment and Aaron and Moses' response (1–5)
- B. Moses Instructs Aaron, Eleazar, and Ithamar (6–7)
- C. Yhwh's instructions to and authorization of Aaron (8–11)
- B'. Moses Instructs Aaron, Eleazar, and Ithamar (12–15)
- A'. Ambiguous Ritual Disagreement and Aaron and Moses' response (16–20)

I will treat the final two sections of the story (B', A') more quickly, keeping in mind how they build on Aaron's authorization found at the center of the concentric structure (C) and how they compare and contrast with the parallels found in the first half of the chapter (A, B). Verses 12–15 parallel verses 6–7 most obviously in that Moses commands the same three people, namely, Aaron, Eleazar, and Ithamar, and in each case, gives instructions about how to deal with the aftermath of Nadab and Abihu's death. But in contrast to their obedience in v. 6–7, the remaining sons of Aaron do not follow Moses' instructions to eat the grain offering in the holy place. This introduces a situation parallel to Lev. 10.1–2, where two sons of Aaron do something or, in this case, do not do something, for reasons the text does not make clear. The narrative ambiguity in the 'act of commission' in v. 1–2 raises the question, *what* command did they break? Here the commands of

Moses are very clear, so the ‘act of omission’ begs the question of *why* the sons ignored them. Like the ambiguity in Nadab and Abihu’s actions, there is no shortage of attempts to ‘solve’ the problem.³² While I agree with Watts’s idea that the lack of narrative detail addressing the particulars suggests that the rhetorical interest lies elsewhere, I disagree with him about what that interest is. Watts (2013: 509–10, 514, 531) suggests Aaron’s response is ambiguous, and that it is not what Aaron says that is important, but it is the fact that he is the one saying it and asserting cultic interpretive authority over Moses that has the rhetorical effect. However, in contrast to Watts, who suggests both the situation and Aaron’s response are ambiguous, it is more natural to see the ambiguity of the cultic situation leading to Aaron’s statement as a clarifying response. While Aaron doesn’t resolve the ambiguity by stating his cultic reasoning (just as Yhwh did not specify which command was violated in 10.3), Aaron’s statement clearly reveals *how* he arrived at his conclusion, which I will argue resolves the tension of interpreting holiness distinctions in relationship to ambiguous situations that could lead to death.

¹⁹ And Aaron said to Moses,
“Behold, today they have offered their sin offering and their burnt offering before Yhwh,
and yet such things as these have happened to me!
If I had eaten the sin offering today,
would it be good in the eyes of Yhwh?”

In response to Moses’ anger for not complying with his command, Aaron speaks. This speech contrasts with his silence in the first half of the narrative (Lev. 10.3) and demonstrates his newly granted authority (Lev. 10.8–11). However, it also verbally expresses honor in continuity with his actions that honored Yhwh in Lev. 10.6–7 which in turn led to his authorization. The first half of Aaron’s statement rehearses Nadab and Abihu’s failed offering and glosses over their death relative to his grief. Against this background, he presents a rhetorical question indicating that his consideration of eating the sin offering is made in light of what would be good in the eyes of Yhwh. The implied answer to the rhetorical question is that it would not be *good in the eyes of Yhwh*, and the narrative uses this catch phrase to state this was *good in the eyes of Moses* (v. 20). Aaron’s rhetorical question demonstrates he has given weight (read: honor) to Yhwh’s perspective and implies it would not be good. The concluding verse is voiced by the narrator who reports Moses’ approval in response to Aaron’s judgment, thus affirming Aaron’s interpretation that honored Yhwh and also honoring Aaron’s interpretive authority.

Aaron’s statement in 10.19 parallels Yhwh’s statement in 10.3 in that they do not clarify the precise cultic particulars that may interest us but instead direct our attention to whether Yhwh was honored. Aaron’s giving weight to the wishes of Yhwh repeats his honoring of Yhwh in Lev. 10.6–7 and aligns with Yhwh’s call to be honored in Lev. 10.3. Honor undergirds Aaron’s navigation of the cultic distinctions of holiness, and in an ambiguous situation when legal compliance is hard to discern, honor is accepted. This acceptance by Yhwh provides relief from the increasing tension created by the ‘lest you die’ statements throughout the first half of the chapter. The clear contrast is between

Nadab and Abihu, who did not honor Yhwh and died, and Aaron, whose actions and interpretation honor Yhwh. The rhetorical effect is to enhance the honor of Yhwh upon pain of death but not paralyze listeners. Honor is both necessary and enables navigation through the distinctions of holiness even in the face of ambiguity. This, in turn, confers status upon the priesthood in relationship to the honor of Yhwh.

Conclusions

This paper began with the thesis that a social-science model of honor could provide a suitable context against which to read Lev. 10 and facilitate a coherent reading. I have argued that Yhwh's narrated response to Nadab and Abihu's actions implies that amid the people, he will ensure his own sanctity and honor. In contrast to the dishonor of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron honors Yhwh and maintains holiness by avoiding mourning which is culturally expected, but ritually impure. This in turn explains why Yhwh honors Aaron in Lev. 10.8–11 by granting him authority to make and teach these distinctions, which he in turn exercises later in the chapter using honor as his guide. Besides illuminating how verses 1–5, 6–7, and 8–11 are more tightly linked than commonly presumed, honor also provides insight into the tension and resolution within the chapter. Namely, the first half of the chapter raises the possibility of death for disobedience in Lev. 10.1–3, which is extended to the listener in 10.6–7 explicitly and then implicitly in Lev. 10.8–11/15.31. However, Aaron's interpretation in the second half illustrates how honor enables the system of holiness distinctions to be navigated, even in the face of life's ambiguities, in a way that affirms the status of the priesthood, ultimately in light of their honor of Yhwh. This reading accents the oracle of Yhwh (Lev. 10.3) and speech of Aaron (Lev. 10.19) instead of minimizing their content as ambiguous.


The results of this study affirm the predominant view that Lev. 10, although complex, is organized into a coherent narrative that affirms priestly authority. However, it establishes this priestly status, not on the basis of the implied reliability of the priesthood in undertaking normal operations in a dangerous context but rather on the basis of the honor of Aaron granted in response to his honoring of Yhwh. Honor more tightly coordinates the status of the priesthood relative to the supreme status given to Yhwh in the chapter. Watts argues that the rhetorical interest focuses on elevating the status of the priesthood in a post-exilic setting when cultic authority was contested. However, within this setting, the honor of Yhwh was also in question,³³ and this threatened the cult (Mal 1.6ff), as a cult will only function if the deity is honored.

The rhetorical effect of the chapter is to uphold the honor of Yhwh and demonstrate the necessity of honor in approaching Yhwh in his holiness upon threat of death. Simultaneously it demonstrates how priests, through honoring Yhwh, can interpret ambiguous life circumstances when they come into contact with the distinctions of holiness, which relieves the tension of death and gives confidence that Yhwh may be approached in his holiness through honor. Aaron's honoring of Yhwh leads to the honorable authority bestowed upon him which leads to his interpretive act that explicitly honors Yhwh. Thus, honor undergirds the maintenance of distinctions in the system of holiness and coordinates the status of Yhwh, priests, and people.

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ORCID iD

Andrew Heyd  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7686-3281>

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Notes

1. It contains two ambiguous cultic disagreements and a unique grant of authority to Aaron, occupies a key location within Leviticus, and intertextually relates to several texts about priestly conflict.
2. Watts himself notes the similarity between their positions in his later commentary (Watts, 2013: 503–552, esp 510). Of course each has unique emphases. Nihan (2007: 576) argues that Lev. 10 is the last chapter to be added to Leviticus and through inner-biblical exegesis ties up a number of loose threads. Watts (2007: 129; 2013: 510–17) disagrees that Lev. 10 can be separated out as later than Lev. 8–9. Watts approaches the text rhetorically and emphasizes how ambiguity about some cultic details intentionally points the reader toward priestly authority.
3. Both assume that Lev. 10 has a prehistory that is unrecoverable because of how coherently the text is structured, both see a similar concentric structure, and both interpret that structure relative to a narrative of tension and resolution; cf. Nihan (2007: 576–9); Watts (2013: 509–11). Finally, both see the text as a critical turning point for priestly interpretive authority of the Mosaic law. Cf. Nihan (2007: 60–3); Watts (2013: 505–7).
4. Wu (2016: 4–57) has a recent, extensive, and laudable overview of the literature.
5. Elliot (1993: 17–18) offers an overview of how biblical studies became more rigorous in appropriating social science methodologies throughout the 1970s. Malina's (1981) work launched the Context Group within SBL and has had an enduring influence, as documented by Elliot (2008).
6. More extensively, Malina (1981: 25–50) articulates honor as both a claim to status and acknowledgement of that status by others, built on values such as lineage, wealth, moral standing, and social class. It was largely ascribed through family status and maintained by means of community standards in areas such as morality and purity. Honor could be achieved through heroic deeds and increased or diminished through challenge-ripostes. Pursuit of honor along these lines was agonistic because a gain in honor by one came at the expense of another who then experienced shame or a loss of honor. Finally, the model proposes that individuals had anti-introspective and dyadic personalities, so that individual status was measured by the external assessment of the community and was tied to the status of that community. This status can be seen as a symbol through blood or name.
7. Elliot (1993: 69–70) demonstrates the methodological problems with deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive approaches flatten the particularities of the text and make it fit the model. Inductive models claim to start with the text but implicitly have a model in mind when distinguishing what counts as honor. Elliot calls for an abductive approach that allows a feedback loop between model and text. Schwartz (2010: 23–26) does not interact with Elliot but similarly argues that models are heuristically useful if not forced onto a text and if texts are allowed to 'break' the model. Finally, Wu (2016: 21–31) agrees with Elliot and Schwartz and further clarifies the conversation in terms of emic and etic perspectives and articulates a model that takes into account the researcher.
8. Stone, building on the work of Geertz, calls this 'thick interpretation.' See Stone (1996: 49) and Geertz (1973: 3–30).
9. For a survey of the numerous rabbinic approaches to this crux, see Kirshner (1983). For a broader survey, including more recent attempts, see Jacob Milgrom (1991: 633–35).

10. Milgrom (1991: 597–8) argues that the report of Nadab and Abihu using ‘his pan’ (10.1) suggests a personal and unauthorized pan instead of the official sanctuary pan, which he infers from the designation ‘the pan’ in Lev. 16.12 and Num. 17.11. Similarly, they offered incense (קטרת), which Milgrom suspects is different from the perfumed incense (קטרת סמים) that was authorized at the twice-daily offering and ‘finely ground perfumed incense’ (קטרת סמים דקה) offered on Yom Kippur. This background allows Milgrom to interpret the transgression described as אש זרה as ‘strange coals’ in a way parallel to Korah’s rejected offering in Num. 17.5, wherein ‘strange’ indicates unauthorized. Milgrom argues they are unauthorized, because instead of deriving from the outer altar (e.g., 16.12; Num. 17.11), the coals came from a source that was “profane” (*Tg. Onq.* on 16.1) or “outside” (*Tg. Yer.*), such as an oven.
11. In the cultic context, Yhwh being dishonored, or treated lightly, may be understood in light of Malachi 1, where Yhwh’s honor is explicitly compared to the honor due a parent by a child. The dishonor is shown through defective sacrifices in contrast to Yhwh’s expectation that his name is to be great among the nations. Similarly 1 Sam. 2 (esp v. 30) addresses Yhwh’s honor (כבוד) in a cultic setting and demonstrates how Eli and his sons treat Yhwh lightly, without the כבוד he is due. Although honor is anthropologically derived, it does appear Yhwh sometimes ‘plays the honour game’ in his concern to be acknowledged by Israel and the nations and his instructions given due weight (Wu 2016: 97). However Stiebert (2012: 166–7) notes that Yhwh ultimately defines honor and ‘stands outside’ and may deconstruct social arrangements of honor.
12. Briefly, Houston posits that Lev. 10 originally appeared shortly after the failure of Aaron in Exod. 32–34 and therefore reads the text against the failure of fathers and sons throughout the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Eli, David). He concludes that these types of stories were told because rival families were jealous of the honor given to Aaron’s family yet dependent on the success of the family in their crucial role. Finally, from Aaron’s perspective, it diverts attention away from his actions at the golden calf to descendants who have been blotted out, leaving his other descendants in the clear (Houston 2000: 32–33, 38–39).
13. Nihan and Watts both offer chiasmic structures. Watts (2013: 509) has a slightly more detailed chiasm. My chiasmic structure is simpler and closer to Nihan’s (2007: 577). For arguments for the chapter’s coherence, see Nihan (2007: 574–75) and Watts (2013: 511).
14. Houston (2000: 34) asserts, “The event is thus characterized in a manner modelled on the competition of honour among males, which was a marked feature of Israelite society, as of other Mediterranean (and many other) societies.” However the model explicitly states that a superior can safely ignore the challenge of an inferior without damage. Malina (1981: 36) summarizes, “Only equals can actually challenge another in such a way that all perceive the interaction as a challenge. Only an equal – who must be recognized as such – can impugn a person’s honor or affront another. The reason for this is that the rules of the honor contest require that challengers stand on equal status.”
15. Verbal links include ‘as Yhwh commanded’ to ‘not commanded’; Yhwh consuming the sacrifices with fire from his presence (9.24) to Yhwh consuming Nadab and Abihu with fire from his presence (10.2); Yhwh’s כבוד appearing to the community (9.23) versus Yhwh glorifying (כבוד) himself according to 10.3. The community shouts (9.24) while Aaron is silent (10.3). See Nihan (2007: 94–95) and Watts (2013: 512–13).
16. See footnote 4.
17. Bibb (2001: 87) notes that “the facts in the story do not provide an unassailable basis for [Milgrom’s] reading. Much of [Milgrom’s] argument rests on precise expectations for the way that the language ought to appear but does not.” See also Gary A. Anderson (2015).

18. Watts makes a connection between Aaron's statement in v. 19 and Yhwh's oracle in v. 2 and then comments, "Both statements are obscure, perhaps potentially so." See Watts (2013: 509–10, 514, 531).
19. There are several initial reasons to consider that honor might be intended. The language of כבוד and קלל are the most commonly used words for honor and shame in the Hebrew Bible. While כבוד is used here, קלל is used in the story that parallels this story (Lev. 24.10f) that also deals with Yhwh's honor. However, the best argument for appealing to the notion of honor is the coherence it brings to the rest of the chapter. The best overview of the usage of כבוד and קלל can be found in Jumper (2013: 55–74).
20. Crook (2009: 599), in a critique of the Mediterranean model, suggest that honor should begin with the community that arbitrates honor and labels this the public court of recognition (PCR). The PCR perspective reminds us that at any point in time, more than one PCR may be active. From this vantage point, Yhwh acts to ensure the PCR in Israel recognizes the honor it should give him in relationship to his holy presence in its midst.
21. Years later, Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers (2005: 2), the anthropologists upon whom Malina's model was built, admitted that they had "been blind to [honor's] intimate connection with the realm of the sacred."
22. Milgrom (1991: 603) cites Bekhor Shor; cf. *b. Zebah*. 115b.
23. Cf. Mal 1.6–2.9 and Ezek 36.20, 23, 24; 39.7.
24. Noth (1997: 86) comments, "quite unrelated to this context." See also Milgrom (1991: 617) and Knohl (2007: 51–52).
25. For the issue of why Aaron's sons were also prohibited, see Nihan (2007: 589–90).
26. Medina reads Job's tearing of his clothes, dishevelment, and verbalized grief (Job 1.20–21) against the background of the *Descent of Ishtar* and the myth of Ba'lu. In the latter, 'Ilu and Anatu' tear their clothes and put dust on their heads in response to the death of Ba'lu and verbalize in their lament that they have ritually descended into Sheol. (*KTU* 1.5 VI 11–25, 1.5 VI 30–1.6 I 9). On tearing garments, see also Morris Jastrow, Jr. (1900: 23–29).
27. In this context, Aaron's silence in 10.3 may already anticipate the commands and obedience to not mourn in 10.6–7 and may be a more culturally and textually fitting motivation than Watt's (2013: 524) modern description of 'professionalism.'
28. Jumper (2013: 146–7) expounds well how the honor for honor and shame for shame may also be found in the cultic context of 1 Sam. 2.29–30 as well as Mal. 1.6–2.9.
29. Watts (2013: 508) also notes that many (including Houston) read this text in terms of the theme of errant sons through the Hebrew Bible. But in this case, Aaron does not suffer his sons' fate.
30. Yhwh also addresses Aaron in Numbers 18 (v. 1, 8, 20). In Numbers 16–18, priestly authority is contested and an inappropriate approach with censers full of incense also lead to death. This leads to speculation that Lev. 10 also addresses priestly power, although it is unclear exactly how. See Esias Meyer (2013: 1–7).
31. While Bibb (2001: 88–9; 2009: 112–123) suggests Nadab and Abihu innocently fell into a gap in the system, the tight connection between the end of Lev. 8–9 and the beginning of Lev. 10 (cf. note 12 above) suggests 'not commanded' stands in continuity and contrast with the repeated notes of compliance 'according to the command of Yhwh' in Lev. 8–9 and denotes disobedience.

32. It is possible that Aaron and his sons didn't want to eat because they were fasting while mourning. However, given the way this section parallels Lev. 10.6–7, which proscribe mourning while in a state of holiness, it seems unlikely they would participate in one aspect of ritual mourning while eschewing others. More likely the priests thought that despite starting the ritual according to the regulations for an individual sin offering, the circumstances warranted following the instructions for the communal sin offering (cf. Lev. 4.11–12, 21, as opposed to 6.18ff). Or perhaps they thought the strange fire that resulted in corpse defilement had defiled the altar, (Lev. 5.2–3, cf. Lev. 21.11, Num. 6.9, 19.14) and the offerings on it. For a helpful, succinct overview of options, see Mark A. Awabdy (2019: 260).
33. Israel was still in servitude to foreign powers. Ezekiel reports (Ezek. 36.20, 23, 24; 39.7) that Yhwh's name has been defiled among the nations by the actions of the people, damaging his reputation. See Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann (2001: 486–7), Jacob Milgrom (2007: 69–81). Simultaneously, in an ancient worldview, the reputation of a deity is manifested in the strength of a nation (Trimm 2017: 553f).