

Do Not Drink Wine or Strong Drink”: Intoxication, Priestly Discernment, and Exemplary Holiness in Leviticus 10:8–11

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ABSTRACT

Leviticus 10:8–11 records a divine prohibition against the priestly consumption of wine, yayin (יין), and strong drink, šēkār (שֶׁכָּר), when entering the Tent of Meeting. The command occurs immediately after the deaths of Nadab and Abihu for offering “unauthorized fire,” ’ēš zārā (אֵשׁ זָרָה), before Yahweh (Lev 10:1–2). Although the text does not explicitly state that the two priests were intoxicated, the abrupt placement of the alcohol prohibition within the immediate narrative aftermath of their deaths creates a significant literary and theological association between intoxicating drink and failed priestly discernment. This study argues that Leviticus 10:8–11 is best interpreted within this immediate context of threatened or impaired cultic judgment. The prohibition protects the priestly capacity “to distinguish,” hābḏīl (הַבְּדִיל), between the holy, qōdeš (קֹדֶשׁ), and the common, ḥōl (חֹל), and between the unclean, tāmē’ (טָמֵא), and the clean, tāhōr (טָהוֹר). Yet the theological force of the command extends beyond cognitive competence. Because priests were also commissioned “to teach,” ləhōrōt (לְהוֹרֹת), Israel Yahweh’s statutes, their conduct necessarily functioned representationally and pedagogically. Priestly sobriety therefore becomes an embodied expression of holiness. Through historical-grammatical exegesis, literary-contextual analysis, lexical study, controlled comparison with ancient Near Eastern priestly regulations, engagement with alternative interpretations, and critical interaction with Seventh-day Adventist theology, this article contends that the immediate concern of Leviticus 10:8–11 is intoxication as a threat to priestly discernment, while its wider theological implication is the exemplary character of priestly sobriety. The priest must possess the clarity to distinguish holiness and embody the distinction that he teaches.

Keywords: Leviticus 10; yayin; šēkār; Nadab and Abihu; intoxication; priestly discernment; holiness; sobriety; Seventh-day Adventist interpretation

INTRODUCTION

Leviticus 9 concludes at the theological summit of Israel’s newly inaugurated priestly ministry. Aaron completes the prescribed sacrifices, blesses the people, and, together with Moses, enters and emerges from the Tent of Meeting. The glory of Yahweh appears to the congregation, and fire comes out from before Yahweh and consumes the burnt offering and the fat upon the altar (Lev 9:22–24). Israel responds with acclamation and prostration. Divine fire signifies acceptance. The sanctuary, sacrificial system, and Aaronic priesthood appear to stand under Yahweh’s visible approval (Milgrom, 1991; Wenham, 1979).

The opening verses of Leviticus 10 deliberately disturb this scene. Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, take their censers, place fire and incense upon them, and offer before Yahweh what the narrator calls ’ēš zārā (אֵשׁ זָרָה), “unauthorized,” “foreign,” or “strange fire” (Lev 10:1). The narrator immediately adds the interpretive qualification ’āšer lō’ šiwwā ’ōtām (אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה לָאֵשׁ), “which he had not commanded them.” Fire again proceeds millipnē YHWH (מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה), “from before Yahweh,” but its function has dramatically changed. The fire that consumed the offering in 9:24 now consumes the offerers in 10:2. As Bibb (2001) observes, the episode is marked by interpretive gaps; those gaps should neither be ignored nor closed too quickly.

The literary correspondence between Leviticus 9:24 and 10:2 is difficult to miss. In chapter 9, divinely accepted worship is consumed by fire; in chapter 10, priests who transgress the divinely ordered sphere are consumed by the same divine fire. The narrative concern is therefore not fire in the abstract but priestly action in relation to sacred boundaries, command, and divine holiness (Heyd, 2022; Kiuchi, 2007; Meyer, 2013).

It is within this immediate narrative environment that Yahweh speaks directly to Aaron and prohibits *yayin* (יַיִן, “wine”) and *šēkār* (שֵׁכָר, “strong drink”) in connection with entry into the Tent of Meeting. The prohibition is followed immediately by two priestly responsibilities: *hābdîl* (הִבְדִּיל), “to distinguish,” and *lāhôrôt* (לְהוֹרֹת), “to teach” (Lev 10:10–11). The placement of this command has generated a persistent exegetical question: why does Yahweh introduce intoxicating drink precisely here?

Some interpreters have regarded the command as indirect evidence that Nadab and Abihu consumed alcohol before their fatal cultic violation. Others rightly caution that the narrative never explicitly states that the brothers were intoxicated. Recent scholarship demonstrates the need for a disciplined mediating position. Awabdy and Häner (2022) note that the prohibition in Leviticus 10:9, following immediately after 10:1–3, may insinuate negative influence from alcohol, while Bibb (2001) warns against filling narrative gaps too confidently. The exegetical challenge is therefore to avoid two opposite errors: transforming an inference into an explicit textual statement, or severing verses 8–11 from their literary location and treating the wine prohibition as an unrelated fragment.

This article argues for a contextually stronger but textually cautious reading. Leviticus does not explicitly identify intoxication as the historical cause of Nadab and Abihu’s action. Nevertheless, the placement and rationale of Leviticus 10:8–11 establish a deliberate literary-theological association between intoxicating drink and precisely the kind of failed differentiation displayed in 10:1–2. Nadab and Abihu act in a sphere where exact obedience and sacred differentiation are indispensable; the divine command that immediately follows prohibits intoxicants so that priests may *hābdîl*—distinguish.

The central thesis is therefore twofold. At the level of immediate context, the prohibition addresses intoxicating drink as a threat to priestly discernment. At the level of priestly theology, sobriety acquires an exemplary function because those commissioned to distinguish and teach Yahweh’s holiness must embody in their own lives the ordered holiness they communicate to Israel. The priest is not merely a ritual technician. He is a visible interpreter of sacred boundaries. The theological movement of the passage may therefore be summarized as follows: intoxicating drink threatens discernment; impaired discernment endangers differentiation; compromised differentiation corrupts instruction; and corrupted instruction distorts Yahweh’s holiness before Israel. Conversely, sobriety protects discernment, discernment enables faithful differentiation, differentiation grounds instruction, and embodied instruction displays holiness.

Statement of the Problem

The interpretation of Leviticus 10:8–11 involves an interconnected set of exegetical, literary, grammatical, and theological problems.

The first is the problem of narrative causality. The prohibition of *yayin* and *šēkār* follows immediately after the deaths of Nadab and Abihu. This proximity has historically encouraged the conclusion that the priests entered sacred service while intoxicated. Such an interpretation possesses contextual plausibility but faces an obvious textual limitation: Leviticus 10:1–2 never explicitly mentions drinking, drunkenness, or intoxication. A responsible exegesis must therefore distinguish between explicit narration and contextual inference (Bibb, 2001; Awabdy & Häner, 2022).

The second is the problem of literary integration. If verses 8–11 are interpreted independently of verses 1–7, the wine prohibition risks becoming an isolated piece of priestly legislation. Yet the final form of the chapter places the prohibition precisely between the fatal cultic failure of Nadab and Abihu and subsequent discussions concerning correct priestly handling of sacred food. Recent literary and socio-rhetorical studies of Leviticus 10

reinforce the need to read the chapter as a coherent discourse about priestly conduct, authority, and sacred order (Heyd, 2022; Meyer, 2013).

The third is the problem of stated purpose. Yahweh does not merely prohibit wine and strong drink. The command is followed by two purpose-related priestly responsibilities: *hābdīl*, “to distinguish,” and *lāhōrōt*, “to teach.” The text itself therefore directs interpretation away from an abstract debate concerning alcohol and toward the effect of intoxicating drink upon priestly discernment and instruction.

The fourth is the problem of comparative context. Leviticus emerged within an ancient Near Eastern world in which temple personnel were commonly regulated by exacting rules concerning bodily cleanliness, sexual conduct, food, sacred property, ritual timing, and access to divine space. Yet comparison must avoid both isolation and parallelomania: the relevant Hittite and Mesopotamian materials illuminate a shared concern for disciplined cultic service, but they do not supply a precise analogue to Leviticus 10:9 or prove Israelite dependence.

The fifth is the problem of theological extension. The temporal construction *bābō ‘ākem ‘el- ‘ōhel mō ‘ēd* (בָּבֹאְכֶם אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד), “when you enter the Tent of Meeting,” explicitly situates the prohibition in relation to sacred service. The exegete must resist erasing this cultic qualification. Nevertheless, because priestly teaching and representation were not reducible to a momentary ritual act, the wider theological question remains whether the text generates a principle of exemplary sobriety for those who represent Yahweh’s holiness.

Previous interpretations frequently resolve these questions too quickly. One approach states categorically that Nadab and Abihu were drunk, thereby converting literary inference into narrated fact. Another limits the text so narrowly to sanctuary entrance that the explicit connection with discernment and teaching receives insufficient theological attention. Still another moves directly to contemporary abstinence without first reconstructing the priestly logic of the Hebrew text. This study addresses these problems by following the sequence of cultic failure, death, alcohol prohibition, differentiation, and teaching. The immediate concern is intoxicating impairment as a threat to discernment; the broader principle of exemplary sobriety emerges from the representational and pedagogical nature of the priesthood.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to Levitical scholarship in four principal ways.

First, it offers a contextually controlled interpretation of the relationship between Nadab and Abihu and the prohibition of intoxicating drink. Rather than asserting intoxication as an explicitly narrated cause, the study identifies it as a serious literary-theological inference generated by the sequence and rationale of Leviticus 10. This approach takes the immediate context seriously without violating the narrative gaps identified by Bibb (2001).

Second, the study foregrounds the Hebrew infinitives *hābdīl* (הִבְדִּיל), “to distinguish,” and *lāhōrōt* (לְהוֹרֹת), “to teach.” These verbal forms reveal the functional logic of the prohibition. The question is not merely what priests were forbidden to consume but what priestly capacities had to be protected.

Third, the study develops the concept of embodied priestly pedagogy. Priests instructed Israel verbally, but their consecrated existence also communicated the nature of holiness. The distinction between *qōdeš* (קֹדֶשׁ, “holy”) and *hōl* (חֹל, “common”) could not credibly be mediated by priests whose own conduct obscured the boundaries entrusted to them.

Fourth, the study situates the priestly rule within a controlled ancient Near Eastern comparison. Hittite instructions to temple personnel and broader Mesopotamian purity traditions demonstrate that ritual specialists across the region were expected to maintain bodily discipline, observe correct times and procedures, and protect

sacred property. The comparison clarifies both a common regional concern for cultic fitness and the distinctive rationale of Leviticus 10:10–11: discernment and Torah instruction.

Fifth, the article contributes to Seventh-day Adventist biblical scholarship by seeking a more exegetically disciplined foundation for the tradition's emphasis on abstinence. An Adventist conclusion should not be imposed upon Leviticus 10 before the Hebrew text has been heard within its literary and cultic context. The more defensible theological movement is from the text's immediate concern with intoxicants and discernment to the wider canonical concern with sobriety, spiritual leadership, and exemplary covenant responsibility.

METHODOLOGY

Historical-Grammatical Exegesis

The study employs historical-grammatical exegesis to examine Leviticus 10:8–11 within its linguistic, cultic, and literary environment. Particular attention is given to Hebrew syntax and to the semantic functions of terms central to the passage. The analysis distinguishes carefully between what the text explicitly states, what the literary context strongly implies, and what may legitimately be developed through theological synthesis. This distinction is especially important in evaluating the possible intoxication of Nadab and Abihu.

Literary-Contextual Analysis

Leviticus 10:8–11 is interpreted within the immediate narrative sequence of Leviticus 9–10. Repeated motifs—including fire “from before Yahweh,” death warnings, priestly obedience, sacred boundaries, and the handling of holy things—are examined as indicators of literary coherence. Concentric or chiasmic correspondences are considered where lexical and thematic evidence supports them. The study does not assume that every symmetrical arrangement automatically identifies a theological center; structural observations are used cumulatively with syntax, lexical data, and narrative sequence (Dorsey, 1999).

Lexical-Semantic Analysis

The study examines *yayin* (יַיִן), *šēkār* (שֵׁכָר), *hāḇdīl* (הַבְּדִיל), *qōdeš* (קֹדֶשׁ), *hōl* (חֹל), *tāmē'* (טָמֵא), *tāhōr* (טָהוֹר), and *yārā* (יָרָה) in their immediate and broader Old Testament usage, drawing especially upon HALOT and standard technical commentaries (Koehler et al., 1994–2000; Milgrom, 1991). Particular care is taken with *lahōrōt* (לְהוֹרֹת) in Leviticus 10:11. Although derived from the root y-r-h (יָרָה), the form occurring in the verse is transliterated according to its actual morphology rather than repeatedly cited only by the lexical form *yārā*.

Comparative Ancient Near Eastern Analysis

The study uses a controlled comparative method to place Leviticus 10:8–11 alongside selected Hittite and Mesopotamian evidence concerning temple personnel, ritual purity, exact cultic performance, and the use of food and drink in sacred settings. Comparison is functional rather than genealogical: similarities identify shared problems of cultic administration, while differences protect the distinctive literary and theological claims of Leviticus. Because surviving evidence is uneven in date, genre, and institutional setting, the study does not claim a direct ancient Near Eastern equivalent to the Israelite wine prohibition (Feder, 2014; Miller, 2013).

History of Interpretation and Theological Synthesis

The exegetical findings are placed in conversation with priestly, wisdom, prophetic, and New Testament texts addressing sobriety, discernment, and leadership. Seventh-day Adventist interpretation is engaged as a theological conversation partner rather than as a predetermined exegetical conclusion. This procedure seeks to distinguish direct exegesis from canonical-theological application.

The Immediate Context: From Accepted Fire to Unauthorized Fire

Any interpretation of Leviticus 10:8–11 must begin with the transition from Leviticus 9:24 to 10:2. Leviticus 9:24 states: *wattēšē* 'ēš *millipnē* YHWH (וַתֵּשֶׁעַ אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה), “and fire came out from before Yahweh.” Leviticus 10:2 repeats the same core formulation. The near-verbatim repetition establishes a deliberate literary correspondence. The same divine presence that accepts ordered worship judges disordered approach. The difference is not Yahweh’s holiness but the human relationship to that holiness (Milgrom, 1991; Wenham, 1979).

Nadab and Abihu offer 'ēš *zārā* (אֵשׁ זָרָה). The adjective *zār*, here feminine *zārā*, carries the sense of that which is foreign or outside an authorized sphere. The narrator immediately clarifies the problem with the relative clause 'āšer lō' *šiwwā* 'ōlām (אֲשֶׁר לֹא אָמַר): Yahweh “had not commanded them.” Across Leviticus 8–9, obedience to what Yahweh commanded forms a repeated refrain; Leviticus 10:1 breaks that pattern through explicit noncompliance (Bibb, 2001).

The phrase is theologically decisive. Levitical worship operates within divinely differentiated categories. Priests do not autonomously determine what may be introduced into sacred space. Nadab and Abihu act where divine command should have governed priestly action. The narrative thus portrays a failure of priestly differentiation before the terminology of differentiation appears explicitly in verse 10.

Immediately after priests fail within the sphere of sacred distinctions, Yahweh prohibits intoxicating drink so that priests may *hābdl*—distinguish. The textual progression is striking: in 10:1–2 priests fail in handling sacred boundaries; in 10:8–9 intoxicating drink is prohibited; in 10:10 priests must distinguish sacred categories; and in 10:11 priests must teach those categories to Israel. This sequence does not prove historically that Nadab and Abihu were intoxicated. It does, however, make it exegetically difficult to regard the prohibition of *yayin* and *šēkār* as unrelated to the narrative problem that precedes it.

Yayin and Šēkār: The Object of the Prohibition

The divine command begins: *yayin wāšēkār* 'al-tēš (אֶל-תִּשְׂתֵּי וַיַּיִן), “Wine and strong drink you shall not drink.” The first noun, *yayin*, is the common Hebrew designation for wine. Its semantic range must be determined contextually, but in Leviticus 10 its coordination with *šēkār* and the explicitly stated concern for priestly discernment indicate intoxicating beverages (Koehler et al., 1994–2000; Milgrom, 1991).

The second term, *šēkār*, denotes an intoxicating drink and belongs to the semantic field associated with drunkenness. English “strong drink” is traditional but potentially misleading if modern readers understand the phrase exclusively as distilled spirits. Distillation in its later technological form should not be retrojected into ancient Israel. The concern is intoxicating beverage rather than modern categories of liquor.

The coordination *yayin wāšēkār* functions as a comprehensive pairing. The text is not constructing a technical beverage taxonomy. It is prohibiting intoxicating consumption in the setting where the priest’s capacity for sacred discernment must remain unimpaired. This interpretation is confirmed by the rationale of verses 10–11. The prohibition is immediately connected to differentiation and instruction. The issue is therefore not beverage identity in isolation but the capacity of alcohol to compromise priestly judgment.

The death warning intensifies the command: *wəlō' tāmūtū* (וְלֹא תָמוּתוּ), “so that you do not die.” Within Leviticus 10 this language cannot be treated as rhetorical exaggeration. Two priests have just died before Yahweh. The warning carries narrative immediacy. Priestly impairment in sacred space is potentially lethal because the priest ministers within the sphere of divine holiness.

Intoxication and Nadab and Abihu: What May the Exegete Legitimately Claim?

The relationship between the deaths of Nadab and Abihu and the prohibition of wine requires methodological precision. The text does not state that Nadab and Abihu became drunk. Neither *šātā* (שָׁתָה, “to drink”) nor a term

explicitly describing drunkenness occurs in verses 1–2. Consequently, a scholarly article should not present their intoxication as an established historical fact.

Nevertheless, absence of explicit narration does not require the interpreter to ignore literary juxtaposition. Three considerations support a contextual association. First, Yahweh’s speech concerning wine is introduced immediately after the fatal cultic event. Second, the prohibition is the first recorded divine speech addressed directly to Aaron in the immediate aftermath of his sons’ deaths. Third, the stated purpose of the prohibition corresponds precisely to the narrative problem: Nadab and Abihu act contrary to what Yahweh commanded, and the surviving priesthood is immediately instructed to remain free from intoxicants in order to *hăbdil*—to differentiate sacred categories.

Awabdy and Häner (2022) cautiously observe that Leviticus 10:9, “on the heels” of 10:1–3, may insinuate that alcohol negatively influenced Nadab and Abihu. This is a useful formulation because it preserves the distinction between implication and assertion. Bibb’s (2001) analysis of narrative gaps likewise warns against overconfident reconstruction. The strongest exegetical conclusion is therefore not that “Leviticus 10 says Nadab and Abihu were drunk,” but that the literary sequence invites the reader to interpret intoxicating drink as a plausible explanatory background to the failure of priestly discernment manifested in the episode.

Within a Seventh-day Adventist reading, this approach is particularly valuable. The theological argument for sobriety does not need an unsupported categorical assertion that the two priests were drunk. The text makes a stronger explicit claim: intoxicating drink is incompatible with the level of discernment demanded of priests approaching the divine presence.

Major Interpretive Options Regarding the Offense of Nadab and Abihu

The opacity of Leviticus 10:1 has generated several interpretations, which should be distinguished rather than collapsed into a single explanation. The narrator’s explicit judgment is that Nadab and Abihu offered *’ēš zārā*, “unauthorized fire,” which Yahweh had not commanded. On a command-disobedience reading, this clause is sufficient: their initiative violated the carefully repeated pattern of action “as Yahweh commanded” in Leviticus 8–9 (Bibb, 2001; Kiuchi, 2007). Related ritual-procedural proposals identify the wrong source of coals, an unauthorized incense offering, an improper time, or an illicit approach into sacred space. These proposals may explain the form of the violation, but the text does not specify which procedural element was wrong.

A second approach emphasizes presumption and the holiness of divine presence. Moses’ interpretation—“Among those who are near me I will be sanctified” (Lev 10:3)—frames the event as a failure to honour Yahweh’s holiness by those granted exceptional proximity. This reading does not require intoxication, although impaired judgment could intensify such presumption. A third, socio-literary approach reads the chapter in relation to priestly authority, honour, and possible struggles among priestly groups (Heyd, 2022; Meyer, 2013). Such readings illuminate the chapter’s social rhetoric but remain reconstructions beyond the narrator’s explicit explanation.

A fourth interpretation, prominent in later Jewish reception and some Christian commentary, infers intoxication from the immediate placement of verses 8–11. Leviticus Rabbah connects wine with the brothers’ death, while modern interpreters vary from categorical claims of drunkenness to cautious recognition of an insinuation. Wolak (2013) argues that alcohol may have contributed to the ritual infraction, whereas other interpreters treat the prohibition as prospective instruction for surviving priests rather than a retrospective disclosure of the brothers’ condition.

A fifth proposal relates the prohibition to mourning. Because Aaron and his surviving sons are forbidden to perform ordinary mourning gestures in verses 6–7, and wine could participate in funerary or mourning practice, verses 8–11 may continue the regulation of priestly mourning rather than explain the deaths. This interpretation usefully draws attention to the chapter’s mourning context, though the explicit rationale in verses 10–11—distinguishing and teaching—still gives cognitive and vocational clarity a central role.

The most balanced conclusion is layered. The explicit offense is unauthorized cultic action contrary to divine command. The precise ritual mistake and psychological cause are not disclosed. Intoxication remains a plausible literary inference because the prohibition follows immediately and is tied to discernment, but it should not displace the narrator's stated explanation or exclude complementary readings involving presumption, ritual error, mourning, and priestly authority.

Ancient Near Eastern Context: Priestly Discipline, Purity, and Alcohol

Ancient Near Eastern evidence confirms that Israel's priests belonged to a wider world in which temple service demanded regulated bodies, correct procedures, and vigilant custody of sacred space. The Hittite Instructions for Temple Officials (CTH 264) regulate the cleanliness of personnel who prepare divine food, the washing of bodies and garments, sexual abstention or purification before service, the correct observance of festivals, the safeguarding of temple property, and the faithful presentation of offerings. Serious negligence could threaten both the offender and the wider community because cultic disorder was believed to provoke divine anger (Miller, 2013). These instructions provide a close functional comparison to Leviticus: religious officials are not autonomous performers but custodians whose bodily condition and exact obedience matter.

The Hittite materials are especially illuminating regarding ritual purity. Bakers and kitchen workers responsible for the gods' bread were expected to be washed, groomed, and clothed cleanly; personnel rendered impure by sexual activity were required to wash before resuming cultic duties. Feder's (2014) comparative semantic study further shows that purity language across Hebrew, Akkadian, Sumerian, Ugaritic, and Hittite traditions draws on embodied experiences of cleanliness and separation. Levitical holiness is theologically distinctive, but it participates in a regional conviction that fitness for divine service is expressed through disciplined bodily practice.

Mesopotamian cult likewise combined alcoholic beverages with worship rather than treating alcohol as intrinsically profane. Beer and wine could be offered to deities and consumed in ritual and festal settings. Hittite temple personnel could also consume food and drink within prescribed sacrificial arrangements. The relevant contrast, therefore, is not between an abstinent Israel and universally drunken neighbouring cults. Alcohol could have legitimate ritual, economic, and social roles across the ancient Near East. What mattered was authorization, timing, status, and control.

Against this background, Leviticus 10:8–11 is both comparable and distinctive. Comparable is its insistence that temple servants submit appetite, body, time, and conduct to sacred office. Distinctive is its unusually explicit linkage of the beverage restriction to *hāḇdīl*, “to distinguish,” and *lāhōrōt*, “to teach.” The priest's fitness is not described only as ritual cleanliness; sobriety protects interpretive judgment and public instruction in Yahweh's statutes. No exact extant Hittite or Mesopotamian regulation should be claimed as a direct source or duplicate of Leviticus 10:9. The comparative evidence establishes a shared ancient concern for disciplined cultic personnel, while the biblical text gives that discipline a particular covenantal, pedagogical, and holiness-centred rationale.

The comparison also guards against anachronism. *Yayin* and *šēkār* belong to ancient fermented-beverage cultures, not to the modern world of distilled spirits, clinical blood-alcohol measures, or contemporary licensing regimes. The passage addresses the danger of intoxicating consumption in sacred service through ancient categories of holiness, death, distinction, and instruction. Its contemporary relevance must therefore arise through theological analogy rather than through the uncritical transfer of modern assumptions into the ancient text.

Hāḇdīl: Sobriety and the Priestly Vocation of Distinction

Leviticus 10:10 provides the first explicit rationale for the prohibition: *ūlāḥabḏīl bēn haqqōdeš ūbēn haḥōl ūbēn haṭṭāmē' ūbēn haṭṭāhōr* (וְלֹאֲהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הַקֹּדֶשׁ בֵּין הַחֹל וּבֵין הַטָּמֵא וּבֵין הַטְּהוֹר), “and to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean.”

The infinitive *hăbdîl*, from the root b-d-l (בדל), denotes separation or differentiation. The root carries significant theological weight in the Hebrew Bible. In the creation narrative, God differentiates light from darkness and waters from waters. Creation emerges as ordered reality through divinely established distinctions. Priestly ministry participates analogically in this ordering function. The priest does not create holiness or independently determine sacred categories. His task is to recognize, preserve, communicate, and administer distinctions established by Yahweh.

The two pairs in Leviticus 10:10 must also be interpreted carefully. *Haqqōdeš* (הַקֹּדֶשׁ), “the holy,” refers to that which belongs particularly to the divine sphere or has been set apart in relation to Yahweh. *Haḥōl* (הַחֹל), “the common,” does not necessarily mean sinful; it designates that which is ordinary or outside the specifically consecrated sphere. *Haṭṭāmē* (הַטָּמֵא), “the unclean,” and *haṭṭāhōr* (הַטָּהוֹר), “the clean,” describe categories of ritual status and eligibility and should not be simplistically equated with moral evil and moral goodness (Levine, 1989; Milgrom, 1991).

Here the connection with intoxicating drink becomes theologically coherent. Alcohol threatens the cognitive capacity required for nuanced differentiation. The intoxicated mind blurs precisely where priestly vocation requires clarity. Nadab and Abihu’s action may therefore be read as the narrative antithesis of *hăbdîl*: they introduce into sacred service what Yahweh had not commanded. Whatever the complete historical psychology behind their act, the narrative depicts a collapse of proper differentiation. Leviticus 10:10 thus reveals the deeper danger of intoxication: it threatens the priest’s capacity to perceive and preserve divinely ordered boundaries.

Lāhōrōt: The Priest as Teacher and Embodied Interpreter

The second purpose appears in verse 11: *ûlāhōrōt ’et-banē Yisrā’el ’et kol-haḥuqqīm* (וְלִהְיוֹת לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת כָּל־הַחֻקִּים), “and to teach the Israelites all the statutes.” The form *lāhōrōt* derives from the root y-r-h (ירה), associated with instruction and direction; *tôrâ* (תּוֹרָה) belongs to the same lexical field (Koehler et al., 1994–2000).

The sequence between verses 10 and 11 is theologically important. The priest must first distinguish and then teach. Discernment precedes instruction. A priest cannot faithfully teach distinctions that he is incapable of perceiving. The prohibition of intoxicating drink consequently protects not only ritual performance but Israel’s theological education.

This point significantly enlarges the implications of the command. The intoxicated priest does not endanger himself alone. His impaired judgment has communal consequences because Israel depends upon priestly instruction. Malachi later articulates the ideal: “For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek *tôrâ* from his mouth” (Mal 2:7). Hosea presents the tragic opposite, culminating in the declaration *wahāyâ kâ’ām kakkōhēn* (וְהָיָא כְּאָמ כַּכֹּהֵן), “and it shall be like people, like priest” (Hos 4:9).

Priestly teaching, however, should not be reduced to classroom instruction. Priestly existence was itself structured by visible consecration. Garments, anointing, bodily regulations, marriage restrictions, food laws, mourning limitations, and cultic responsibilities marked the priest as a person whose life dramatized sacred distinction. Sobriety belongs within this representational world. The priest teaches the distinction between holy and common with his lips, but he must not blur sacred distinctions with his life.

This study describes this representational function as embodied priestly pedagogy. The priest is a living interpreter of holiness. His consecrated existence gives visible form to the distinctions communicated by his instruction. The language of “living example” is therefore best understood not as a lexical gloss on Leviticus 10:8–11 but as a theological synthesis of the priest’s pedagogical and representative vocation.

The Literary Structure of Leviticus 10 Reconsidered

Leviticus 10 displays significant thematic correspondences. A cautious concentric arrangement may be represented as follows:

Element Text Thematic Content

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|----|----------|--|
| A | 10:1–2 | Fatal cultic violation by Aaron’s sons: unauthorized fire and death before Yahweh |
| B | 10:3–7 | Priestly restriction following death: silence and mourning limitations |
| C | 10:8–11 | Divine speech concerning intoxicants, discernment, and teaching |
| B’ | 10:12–15 | Priestly obligation following death: consumption of sacred portions |
| A’ | 10:16–20 | Cultic irregularity involving Aaron and surviving sons: explanation and acceptance |

The strongest feature of the arrangement is the contrast between 10:1–2 and 10:16–20. At the beginning of the chapter, Aaron’s sons depart from prescribed cultic practice, and death follows. At the conclusion, another departure from expected cultic procedure occurs. Moses becomes angry, but Aaron articulates a reasoned explanation. Moses hears the explanation, evaluates it, and accepts it.

The contrast is remarkable. The chapter begins with unexplained priestly action and divine judgment; it ends with articulated priestly reasoning and accepted discernment. Between these episodes stands Yahweh’s command concerning sobriety, differentiation, and teaching. One should avoid claiming that abstinence mechanically “causes” Aaron’s successful reasoning in verses 16–20; the text does not establish such a causal mechanism. Nevertheless, the literary arrangement foregrounds the value of discernment. Not every irregularity is identical. Sacred service requires the capacity to distinguish.

This is precisely the capacity endangered by intoxicating drink. The concentric reading therefore reinforces the lexical argument of verses 10–11. The theological center of gravity is not alcohol considered as an isolated substance. It is priestly discernment before the holiness of Yahweh, with intoxicating drink prohibited because it threatens that discernment. Structural analysis supports this conclusion, but the argument rests cumulatively on literary sequence, lexical purpose, and priestly vocation rather than on chiasm alone (Dorsey, 1999; Heyd, 2022).

Ḥuqqat ‘Ōlām: The Enduring Character of the Priestly Requirement

Leviticus 10:9 describes the command as *ḥuqqat ‘ōlām lādōrōtēkem* (לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם עוֹלָם חֻקָּה), “a perpetual statute throughout your generations.” The expression *ḥuqqat ‘ōlām* combines *ḥuqqâ* (חֻקָּה), “statute” or “prescribed ordinance,” with *‘ōlām* (עוֹלָם), a term denoting enduring or indefinite duration according to context.

The phrase should be interpreted within the covenantal and priestly economy in which it occurs. It establishes the command as a continuing requirement for the Aaronic priesthood “throughout your generations.” It is therefore preferable to speak of the command’s enduring covenantal validity for the priestly institution rather than simply asserting abstract “permanence” without qualification.

The temporal phrase “when you enter the Tent of Meeting” must also be allowed its full exegetical force. At the grammatical level, the text explicitly prohibits priestly consumption of intoxicating beverages in relation to entrance into sacred service. This point should not be obscured. Yet neither should the theological argument end there. The stated purposes of differentiation and teaching disclose why the prohibition matters: the command protects priestly faculties essential to the vocation itself.

Ezekiel 44:21 later reiterates the prohibition in a priestly-temple context: “No priest shall drink wine when he enters the inner court.” The continuity of the concern demonstrates the enduring incompatibility between intoxicating impairment and immediate sacred service. The broader question of total priestly abstinence must therefore be argued canonically and theologically rather than by grammatically deleting the phrase “when you enter.”

This distinction strengthens rather than weakens an Adventist argument. A responsible Adventist exegesis can acknowledge that Leviticus 10:9 explicitly addresses sanctuary service while arguing that the principle generated by the text is broader: intoxicating drink is incompatible with unimpaired spiritual discernment, faithful instruction, and exemplary sacred leadership. The movement from cultic command to broader ethical principle must be demonstrated, not assumed.

“Like People, Like Priest”: Sobriety and Exemplary Holiness

Hosea 4:9 provides an important theological lens for the representative influence of religious leadership: *wəhāyā k̄ā ‘ām kakkōhēn* (וְהָיָה כְּכֹהֵן כָּאָמ), “and it shall be like people, like priest.” The prophetic context is judgment, and the saying should not be transformed into a simplistic universal formula that mechanically determines congregational behaviour. Nevertheless, Hosea recognizes the reciprocal moral and religious relationship between priesthood and people. The corruption of those entrusted with knowledge contributes to communal corruption.

Isaiah 28:7 develops the relationship between intoxicating drink and religious discernment with even greater explicitness: priest and prophet reel with strong drink, become confused with wine, err in vision, and stumble in judgment. The vocabulary of Isaiah 28 supplies what Leviticus 10 implies functionally. Intoxicating drink affects perception and judgment. Religious leaders stumble precisely in activities requiring discernment.

Read canonically, Isaiah 28:7 illuminates the logic of Leviticus 10:9–11. The priest must remain free from intoxication because his vocation requires the accurate perception, administration, and teaching of divine distinctions. Yet the exemplary dimension moves the argument further. The priest represents Yahweh before Israel and Israel before Yahweh. Exodus 28 symbolically portrays this representative vocation through the names of the tribes borne upon the priestly garments. The priest’s person is incorporated into his office.

Consequently, priestly holiness cannot be reduced to technical competence. A priest who verbally teaches distinction while visibly embodying compromised judgment creates a theological contradiction. His life contests his instruction. Priestly sobriety is therefore exemplary not because Leviticus 10 explicitly commands every Israelite never to consume wine, but because the priest’s consecrated life visibly demonstrates a fundamental theological principle: proximity to sacred responsibility demands the refusal of whatever compromises the discernment necessary to represent Yahweh faithfully.

Within this framework, abstinence acquires positive theological meaning. It is not merely the absence of drinking. It is the disciplined preservation of discernment for sacred vocation.

A Seventh-day Adventist Reading: From Proof-Text to Theological Principle

Seventh-day Adventist interpretation has traditionally emphasized abstinence from alcoholic beverages, and Leviticus 10:9 has frequently functioned as part of the biblical foundation for this position (Bacchiocchi, 1989; Nichol, 1978). The strength of the Adventist concern lies in its recognition of the relationship between physical practices, cognitive clarity, spiritual discernment, and sacred vocation. Nevertheless, an academically responsible Adventist exegesis should resist overstating individual texts.

Leviticus 10:9 states that Aaron and his sons must not consume *yayin* and *šēkār* when entering the Tent of Meeting. This is the immediate grammatical and cultic scope of the command. The text does not explicitly state that all Israelites are permanently forbidden from every consumption of wine, nor does it explicitly say that Nadab and Abihu were drunk. These observations should not be regarded as threats to Adventist theology. They are requirements of exegetical integrity.

The stronger Adventist argument emerges through biblical-theological synthesis. Leviticus 10 associates intoxicants with a threat to priestly discernment. Proverbs 31:4–5 warns kings that drinking may result in forgotten decrees and perverted justice. Isaiah 28:7 portrays priests and prophets as erring in vision and stumbling

in judgment through wine and strong drink. The Nazirite institution uses abstention from products of the vine as a visible expression of special consecration during the period of the vow (Num 6:1–4). The Rechabite narrative presents communal abstinence as an example of disciplined obedience to an inherited command (Jer 35). The New Testament repeatedly values sobriety, vigilance, and self-control while explicitly condemning drunkenness.

Later Jewish interpretation preserved both restriction and qualification. Rabbinic discussion associated wine with impaired priestly service while distinguishing the periods in which a priestly division was actually on duty. Early Christian leadership texts do not simply reproduce Leviticus 10:9, yet they repeatedly require ministers to be sober-minded and not controlled by wine (1 Tim 3:2–3, 8; Titus 1:7–8; 2:2–3). The reception history therefore shows continuity at the level of vigilant, self-governed leadership, even where communities differ over whether the proper application is moderation or total abstinence.

When this canonical pattern is placed alongside the New Testament description of believers as a *basileion hierateuma*, a “royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9), the Adventist abstinence position may be framed not as the direct transfer of every Aaronic regulation to Christians but as an ethical inference grounded in a theology of consecrated discernment.

The argument may therefore be stated as follows: if intoxicating drink was prohibited where priestly discernment was immediately required; if Scripture repeatedly associates alcohol impairment with compromised judgment; if religious leaders possess exemplary responsibility; and if the Christian community understands itself in priestly and missional terms, voluntary total abstinence constitutes a coherent application of the biblical principle of sober consecration. This formulation is exegetically more defensible than claiming that Leviticus 10:9, by itself, directly legislates total abstinence for every Christian. It also allows Seventh-day Adventist theology to make its distinctive contribution through careful biblical synthesis rather than proof-texting.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that the interpretive center of Leviticus 10:8–11 is discernment under conditions of holiness. The immediate narrative presents a catastrophic failure in sacred service. Nadab and Abihu offer what Yahweh had not commanded. Without explicitly identifying intoxication as the historical cause of their action, the text immediately introduces a prohibition of intoxicating drink and explains the prohibition through the language of differentiation and teaching.

This sequence creates a compelling literary-theological relationship. Wine and strong drink are dangerous in priestly service because the priest must *hāḇdīl*. The priest must distinguish. He must recognize that the holy is not common. He must identify the unclean and the clean. He must understand Yahweh’s statutes sufficiently to *lāhōrōt*—to instruct Israel. Intoxication threatens the very faculties upon which these responsibilities depend.

The exemplary character of priestly sobriety arises from this vocational context. The priest does not simply possess information about holiness. He inhabits a consecrated office designed to make sacred distinction visible within Israel. The central theological claim of this article may therefore be expressed succinctly: the priest must be sober because he must distinguish; he must distinguish because he must teach; and he must embody what he teaches because his consecrated life represents Yahweh’s holiness before Israel.

This progression offers a more nuanced interpretation than either of two extremes. The first reduces Leviticus 10:8–11 to a technical rule governing priests during sanctuary duty. The second turns the text into an explicit universal prohibition that its grammar does not directly articulate. The literary and theological logic is richer: the immediate command is cultic; the rationale is cognitive and pedagogical; the priestly vocation is representational; and the canonical implication is ethical. It is precisely this movement that enables Leviticus 10 to contribute meaningfully to a contemporary theology of sobriety.

Implications

Implications for Old Testament Priestly Theology

This study demonstrates that priestly holiness in Leviticus involves more than ritual status. It requires the disciplined faculties necessary to recognize and administer sacred distinctions. The juxtaposition of *yayin wašēkār* with *hāḇdīl* suggests that bodily practices and cognitive-spiritual responsibilities cannot be separated in priestly theology. What the priest consumes may affect how the priest discerns. The body is therefore implicated in sacred vocation.

Implications for the Theology of Leadership

Leviticus 10 contributes to a biblical theology of leadership in which exemplary responsibility increases with representative vocation. The priest's impaired judgment can damage the community because the priest is entrusted with instruction. The principle is not that leaders possess greater human worth, but that their actions carry enlarged communal consequences. "Like people, like priest" warns that corrupted leadership can normalize corrupted practice.

Implications for Seventh-day Adventist Theology

The findings encourage Seventh-day Adventist scholars to articulate abstinence through a theology of consecrated discernment. The Adventist position need not depend upon asserting that every biblical occurrence of *yayin* denotes unfermented grape juice or that Leviticus 10 explicitly legislates universal abstinence. A stronger argument recognizes the complexity of biblical wine vocabulary while emphasizing Scripture's consistent opposition to intoxication, impaired judgment, and the surrender of self-governance. Within an Adventist theology of the body, mission, and the priesthood of believers, total abstinence may be defended as a deliberate ethic of undivided discernment and exemplary witness.

Implications for Contemporary Ministry

The theological logic of Leviticus 10 remains particularly relevant to pastors, teachers, chaplains, elders, and other spiritual leaders. Those entrusted with interpreting Scripture, counselling families, making ethical judgments, guiding congregations, and representing the Christian faith require sustained clarity of judgment. The question generated by Leviticus 10 is therefore larger than whether a minister may technically consume alcohol outside formal worship hours. The deeper question is what pattern of life best embodies the undivided discernment required of one entrusted with sacred responsibility. Leviticus 10 directs attention from minimum permission to maximum faithfulness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research should undertake a detailed syntactical examination of the relationship between Leviticus 10:9 and the infinitival clauses of verses 10–11, particularly the function of *ûlāḥaḇdīl* and *ûlāḥôrōt* within the divine speech.

Further lexical research should compare *yayin* and *šēkār* across priestly, wisdom, and prophetic literature without assuming lexical uniformity in every context. The relationship between Leviticus 10:8–11 and Ezekiel 44:21 also deserves further examination as an example of the reception and reformulation of priestly sobriety traditions.

Seventh-day Adventist scholars should develop a comprehensive biblical theology of alcohol that distinguishes lexical analysis, historical beverage production, explicit prohibitions of intoxication, priestly regulations, wisdom instruction, and theological-ethical application. Such a study should engage the full complexity of the Hebrew Bible rather than rely on selective lexical claims.

Comparative research should extend beyond Hittite instructions to dated and genre-controlled Egyptian, Ugaritic, and Mesopotamian corpora. Such work should distinguish alcohol offered to deities, alcohol consumed in communal feasting, and restrictions governing officiants immediately before or during ritual service.

Reception-historical research should trace how Leviticus 10:8–11 was interpreted in the Septuagint, Second Temple literature, rabbinic texts, patristic sources, and later Christian ministerial ethics. This would clarify which traditions understood the passage as evidence of Nadab and Abihu's intoxication and which treated it as prospective priestly legislation.

Finally, contemporary ministerial ethics should recover the concept of embodied pedagogy. Spiritual leaders teach not only through formal proclamation but through visible habits that either reinforce or weaken their theological instruction.

LIMITATIONS

This study is primarily literary, lexical, comparative, and theological. It does not attempt a full source-critical or redaction-critical reconstruction of Leviticus 10. The compositional history of the chapter remains a significant field of debate, and proposals concerning Aaronide, Zadokite, and postexilic priestly interests deserve separate treatment (Meyer, 2013).

The proposed concentric structure is heuristic rather than mathematically demonstrative. Because chiasmic analyses can become subjective when structural correspondences are overstated, the article does not make its thesis depend upon structural centrality alone. The literary pattern is treated as cumulative support for conclusions independently grounded in the syntax and rationale of verses 9–11.

The ancient Near Eastern comparison is selective. The Hittite and Mesopotamian sources differ from Leviticus in date, genre, language, and institutional setting; they are used to illuminate regional patterns of cultic discipline, not to establish direct borrowing or an exact parallel. Surviving evidence does not presently justify the claim that neighbouring priesthoods observed a prohibition identical to Leviticus 10:9.

The study also does not provide a comprehensive biblical theology of wine. Its canonical observations are selective and serve the specific theological question of sobriety, discernment, and leadership. A wider treatment would need to address positive depictions of wine, festal use, agricultural symbolism, and the diversity of contexts in which *yayin* appears.

Finally, the Adventist synthesis offered here is constructive rather than exhaustive. A fuller history of Seventh-day Adventist interpretation of alcohol, health reform, and the priesthood of believers would require broader engagement with denominational primary sources and contemporary Adventist scholarship.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that Leviticus 10:8–11 should be interpreted first within the immediate narrative aftermath of the deaths of Nadab and Abihu. The text does not explicitly state that Aaron's sons were intoxicated, and scholarly integrity requires that this limitation be acknowledged. Nevertheless, the immediate placement of the prohibition against *yayin* and *šēkār*, together with the stated purpose of enabling priests *hăḇdîl*, “to distinguish,” establishes a significant literary-theological association between intoxicating drink and failed priestly discernment.

Nadab and Abihu enter the sacred sphere and perform what Yahweh “had not commanded.” The narrative thus depicts a failure within the ordered boundaries of holiness. Yahweh's subsequent command protects the priestly capacity to differentiate *qōdeš*, “holy,” from *ḥōl*, “common,” and *ṭāmē*, “unclean,” from *ṭāhōr*, “clean.” Yet priestly discernment is not an end in itself. The priest must also *lāḥōrōt*—teach Israel.

Here the theological significance of sobriety reaches beyond cultic competence. The priest is a teacher whose consecrated life gives visible form to the distinctions communicated by his lips. He must not merely explain holiness. He must inhabit a life ordered by holiness. The immediate concern of Leviticus 10:8–11 is therefore the threat of intoxicating drink to priestly discernment, while the wider theological implication is the exemplary character of priestly sobriety.

The priest must be sober because he must distinguish. He must distinguish because he must teach. He must embody what he teaches because he represents Yahweh before the covenant community.

Leviticus 10 thus moves the discussion beyond a narrow debate over drinking. Its deeper theological concern is the integrity of sacred representation. When those entrusted with holiness lose the clarity to distinguish, worship itself becomes vulnerable to distortion. When priests preserve sober discernment, their lives become visible instruction. In this sense, priestly sobriety is not merely abstention. It is embodied theology.

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