

The faithful of old— studied by the young

Aaron: a man who found strength through weakness

Luke Whitehouse

FROM SINAI the voice of the Lord was heard, and it echoed forth. There the Jews stood in awe as they saw the lightning, the thunders and the wonders. It was from that same mountain where the Lord had caused His Name to be known amongst the children of Israel. The time had come for the Lord to “dwell among them” (Ex. 29:45). The time had come for the separation between God and man to be bridged. So the Levitical priesthood was instituted (40:15). The process of mediation was the selected way, and a man named Aaron would bear this responsibility, in order to bring the two together.

The man and the type

We are first introduced to Aaron when Moses is visited by the Lord, Who commands him to return to Egypt (ch. 4). We see a different Moses here—no longer a warrior in Egypt, where he spent the first forty years of his life. For the next forty years he was a caring shepherd in the land of Midian (ch. 2). These years had moulded him; he had developed and grown according to the characteristics the Lord expects to see in faithful subjects. Having therefore been educated in Egypt in the ways of kingship, he now, typifying the Lord Jesus, was ready to lead the flock of Israel.

However, he had seemingly lost the confidence he once had when he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter (Heb. 11:24); or perhaps he had never been particularly strong in the art of oratory or presentation. So we read, “And Moses said unto the LORD, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since Thou hast spoken unto Thy servant” (Ex. 4:10). In the next verse we see that the angel of the Lord expressed considerable anger at Moses’ lack of conviction, resulting in God nominating Aaron his brother to speak on his behalf, as he could “speak well” (v. 14). This is the first time in the Scriptures that Moses and Aaron work together. Following on

from this, Aaron later becomes a type of Christ as our mediator and High Priest (Heb 12:24; 9:11), and Moses a god unto Pharaoh (Ex. 7:1), both ministering to Israel, the “chosen” people (Deut. 7:6).

The light and the oath

Aaron was the older brother of Moses by three years (Ex. 7:7). They did not come from Reuben’s line but from Levi’s, who was Jacob’s third son. Their father Amram (whose name means ‘exalted people’) was the first-born of Levi’s second son. God chose them of His own grace and will, like us. Peter understood this remarkable privilege when he wrote in his first epistle, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of Him Who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light” (2:9).

Aaron was a true example of one who was called out from the darkness, as his name in the Hebrew means ‘light bearer’. The woman who was to be united to the ‘light bearer’ was called Elisheba, or ‘God is an oath’.

The idol and the ignorance

Aaron’s responsibility lasted around forty years, the time he wandered with Israel (Num. 14:34). He started this calling at the age of 83; he was certainly at an age of maturity! However, despite this there were occasions when Aaron’s maturity and courage wavered. Our minds instantly go to the time of the molten calf (Ex. 32:3,4), where Aaron was given responsibility to keep watch over the people. As flesh is flesh, Aaron failed and the Israelites abused their leader’s trust. Aaron was weak, and, like Adam, he sinned.

Meanwhile, on Mount Sinai, three miles from Horeb, Moses remained in total ignorance of the crime Aaron and the people were committing. The Almighty’s anger “wax[ed] hot” against them,

“All the people brake off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aaron”



Picture: Mark Pennington

“. . . then I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf”

and so He revealed their disobedience to Moses (Ex. 32:10), saying that they had “corrupted themselves” (v. 7). Moses returned to the children of Israel and challenged the man responsible, even Aaron (vv. 19-24). When Aaron explained, we get a good grasp of why we are told he ‘spoke well’. Aaron spoke as though the calf appeared in the form it was without intervention from man; that it was a matter of chance, or rather something supernatural. He spoke of it as if it were alive, and that it came out from the fire by itself (v. 24). He was desperately trying to wriggle from blame.

The Testimony, April 2010

However, this excuse was something of a panic. Perhaps he was implying that it was another one of God’s miracles. The point is that, even though he may not have known it, he replicated what had happened in the Garden of Eden. Aaron was partly to blame (Ex. 32:21) for his lack of leadership, but it was the ‘serpent thinking’ of the people of Israel that led him to sin. This is why God’s wrath was kindled against the children of Israel (v. 10). It is also interesting to note that, when Moses (acting as a type of God) came down from Sinai, he saw the children of Israel naked (v. 25). Our minds again go back to Eden, where God found an Adam and Eve who knew they were naked, they both having just sinned (Gen. 3:10,11). We get a similar description of the ecclesia at Laodicea (Rev. 3:17).

A man who trusted in the things he saw

Ultimately it was Aaron who showed a lack of faith, as he needed something physical to look at for worship. We ask the question, What is faith? “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). In other words, faith is hope in something we cannot see but know exists, if only we are patient. Aaron did not understand this at the crucial time; his lack of patience caused the children of Israel to turn to something visible, as they did when choosing Saul, when God was their true King (1 Sam. 8:7,19-22).

Another argument which supports this is the fact that the verses suggest that the image was made of gold, and we know that gold through Scripture is a symbol of tried faith (1 Pet. 1:7). In other words, it was through Aaron’s own lack of faith that they made this image. Aaron failed in this case because his mind was not on the things which were right. Spiritually he was still in Egypt. The golden calf was in the image of Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of dance and pleasure.

He thought he was doing the right thing. This is similar to Uzzah (2 Sam. 6:6-8). Here is an example of man who in his “own eyes” thought he was doing the right thing, but in fact was not; God had set a specific order in which to worship. The children of Israel all too often adopted the same philosophy, as they always did the things which were “right in [their] own eyes” (Judg. 17:6).

A man who found strength through weakness

As a result, Aaron needed to learn a most significant lesson. The things of this world cannot be

integrated with the things of the spirit. Christ put this beautifully. After preaching the Parable of the Unjust Steward to his disciples, he said: "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt. 6:24; Lk. 16:13).

Like Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 3), the children of Israel wanted something in the form of man's glory. However, it was not only the calf that Aaron made, but also the vanities of Egypt, that swept the people away. He became afraid to oppose the tumultuous throng who had so madly turned away from God to serve the works of their hands. He followed a "multitude to do evil" (Ex. 32:1,2). Aaron was trying to act as a politician. He thought that by yielding slightly he would gain greatly. He believed that, if he could keep the multitude set on evil worship, he would be in their favour. His younger brother, meanwhile, was receiving the Law. Moses was the brother 'drawn' (as his name means) to lead the people. He was the brother who found favour in the sight of the Lord (Num. 11:15), and it is not the only time a younger brother has done so (see, for example, Gen. 25:23).

A man that will find strength through a greater priest

It was not only the people who wanted Jesus crucified, but also the Aaronic priesthood. Aaron was, then, a type, but failed through weakness. Aaron effectively failed as a leader, but the Lord Jesus Christ has passed through the veil (Heb. 6:19,20) and, as the captain of our salvation (2:10), has brought many sons to glory. In other words, he has trodden that wilderness journey from Sinai to the Promised Land without provoking his God. If we follow him we shall also enter into his rest (4:11).

For all Aaron's faults, he showed marvellous loyalty. He laboured with his beloved brother Moses for forty years. We see this in the rebellion of Korah (Num. 16), and in the time when he fell face down in front of the Israelites in recognition

God continued to acknowledge Aaron as the high priest by miraculously causing his rod to bud.



Picture: Mark Pennington

that he was one of four men who wanted to fight the giants (chs. 13,14). We even see it in the time when he and his sons remained in the tabernacle for seven days in quiet contemplation and prayer (Lev. 8:33).

Furthermore, and most importantly, we see that God continued to acknowledge him as the high priest by miraculously causing his rod to bud (Num. 17). We gain encouragement from the thought that this man did not allow the sins he committed to overwhelm him, but had the strength to turn to God and humble himself.

By grace found rest

The time came when Aaron was to die. Mount Hor, which was on the western border of Edom, was the place chosen by God for that purpose

(Num. 20:22-29). The children of Israel arrived and camped at its base, where they were told the sad news. They solemnly watched as Moses and Eleazar (Aaron's son) ascended the mount to bury their first high priest.

As Aaron ascended the mountain he would have seen one of the most remarkable scenes ever to be viewed by a living person—a view which he had been waiting to see for nearly forty years. From the summit of the mountain he would have seen the mountainous area of the Sinaitic Peninsula, with the entire region where the Israelites had wandered for so many years. He would have seen the boundless desert, marked by so many incidents in which he played such a notable part.

We can imagine what thoughts must have dominated the minds of the three men as they viewed this scene. They had witnessed the

complaints of the Israelites for forty years, whilst Mount Sinai in the distance had witnessed the wonderful revelation given to them forty years earlier. As these three men looked upon the land, they would doubtless have spoken about their great hope.

It would have been a sad farewell for those two brothers, who had worked with such dedication together in the service of their Creator; and there would have been some cherished final words of consolation between them both. It was now up to Eleazar to carry the responsibilities of the high priest, so Moses clothed him with his father's garments (v. 28). Aaron was left to contemplate the majestic view as he fell upon sleep. As with Aaron, the same principle governs our lives. The wilderness we too must walk; then, by God's grace, we shall rest.