

Aaron's Rod That Budded

By David Pyles

One of the most important symbols of the Old Testament was Aaron's Rod that budded (Num 16 & 17). The importance of this rod may be inferred from the fact that God ordered it to be stored in the Ark of the Covenant as a memorial.

The story leading to the rod began with a major insurrection against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. This revolt was very threatening because the instigators were from the leaders in Israel. These leaders were over 250 in number. Many of the common people afterward became complicit, but it was the leaders who incited them. The rebels were from two collaborating factions. The first was a group of Levites headed by a wicked man named Korah. These Levites objected to the religious authority given to Aaron, who had been appointed as the High Priest. Korah and company wanted the power and glory of this office. The second faction consisted of Reubenites under the leadership of men named Dathan and Abiram. These Reubenites objected to the civil authority of Moses. Reuben was the eldest son of Jacob, so the best theory is that these dissenting Reubenites thought that Moses had usurped power rightfully belonging to them by primogeniture.

All of this has a ring of familiarity to those having knowledge of the New Testament. The Jews of those times also revolted against the God-given authority of the Messiah, and this revolt was headed by the leaders of Israel, namely the elders, judges and priests. While the common people generally received Jesus gladly (Mk 12:37), they too became caught up in this malicious frenzy, being incited by the leaders. All this of course led to His crucifixion on the cross. Further, this revolt against Christ was against both religious and civil authority because God had ordained Him to be both. He was prophesied to be both a priest and a king (Zech 6:9-15). This was implied by the fact that He was foreshadowed by Melchizedek (Ps 110:4). Melchizedek was the first man on earth represented by the Bible as being a priest, and he was also a king (Gn 14:18-20, Heb 5-7). Now the bad actions of these men in the days of Moses were overruled by the hand of God to tell a greater story to the praise of Christ. As a psalm once said, "*Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain,*" (Ps 76:10).

In an attempt to settle the revolt, and to determine who had divine approval for the positions at issue, Moses commanded that the 250 members of the Levite faction appear the next day before of the Tabernacle with brazen censors for purposes of offering incense. The Bible does not explain how these censors were to be used to ascertain the will of God, but the rebels should have known that the test could have dire consequences on those who failed. A short time prior, Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, had been killed by fire from God because of their unauthorized use of incense. Notwithstanding the fear that should have been invoked by this memory, the Levite rebels impudently appeared with their censors the next morning as challenged. They also stirred up a mob to support them. As for the Reubenite rebels, they refused to show themselves at the Tabernacle since this could be construed as obedience to Moses. They obstinately remained at their tents.

God was angered at the rebels and the deceived mob, and told Moses to distance himself from them so that He could destroy them all. However, Moses and Aaron interceded for the mob and persuaded God to spare them. This too foreshadowed the case of Jesus Christ, who interceded for His crucifiers, saying, "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do,*" (Lk 23:34).

All the rebels met with horrific ends. The dissenting Reubenites were swallowed by the earth and taken alive into the pit. Immediately afterward, the rebellious Levites were devoured by fire, leaving their 250 censors in the ashes. Interestingly, the book of Revelation prophesied the same two fates for the wicked in the last days. Some of these are prophesied to be cast into the bottomless pit for 1000 years, then these and others will be devoured by fire from heaven (Rev 20:1-9).

Amazingly, these terrifying events did not quell the revolt against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites continued to complain. So God commanded another test to conclusively resolve the matter. The conflict had not been settled by death, even of the most horrific sort, but God's last test would finally settle it by life.

Each tribe was commanded to bring a wooden rod with its name on it. The house of Aaron was to do the same. These rods were then to be placed overnight in the Tabernacle in the Holiest of All. When the morning came, the rods were to be inspected, and the rod that had miraculously come to life and budded would identify who

God had authorized for the priesthood. When the test was actually applied, Aaron's rod was the one that budded, and it was also bearing fruit. When the children of Israel witnessed this miracle, they were moved to submission and the revolt was ended. God then commanded that the rod be stored in the Ark of the Covenant as a memorial. Tradition says the rod was from an almond tree, though this cannot be confirmed by the Bible.

This procedure seemed strange, and it was also strange that it should successfully settle a conflict that had not been settled by the spectacular destruction that had already been witnessed. However, when the Bible becomes strange, this is good indication that deeper meaning is intended. In this case, several Biblical prophecies and principles were communicated in the symbolism of the story:

1) The world has had countless religions, all of which claimed to be ordered by God or gods, though they were truly the inventions of some man claiming religious insight and authority. The Jews themselves worshipped many gods over their history, and even in worshipping the true God, they were divided into various denominations and factions. These facts lead one to ask: Which of these countless religions, if any, truly have divine authority? The answer is the religion whose rod budded, or was quickened from death to life. A rod is of course a symbol of authority. The authority of the Christian religion is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead. This resurrection was the signature of God serving to certify His true religion. As Paul said, Jesus was *“declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead,”* (Rom 1:4).

2) Aaron's rod not only budded but it also brought forth fruit. God's religion will be fruitful, leading to truth, love, virtue, peace and liberty among men. In the history of the world, no religious teacher has produced more such fruit than Jesus Christ. Of course, there can be a significant difference between what represents itself as Christianity and what is the actual truth of Christ, but where He is truly taught, these will be the blessed effects.

3) Even though Jesus Christ is God's appointed religious and civil authority, all men are by nature rebels against Him. Their corruption is so deeply rooted that, as with the rebels against Moses, not even threats of death and hell will reform them.

4) However, life will succeed where threats of death and hell will not. The Bible teaches that a man will submit to Jesus Christ in faith only when that man has been quickened by the Holy Spirit of God. That is, something must miraculously bud within the dead spiritual being of the man. Scriptures represent this internal quickening as being analogous to the resurrection of Christ, and also as being guaranteed by it. This principle was expressed in:

And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places... – Eph 1:19-20

This important verse says that our belief in Jesus Christ, occasioned by our spiritual quickening, was produced by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. This interpretation is confirmed a few verses later, where it is said:

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus... – Eph 2:1-6

Hence, our spiritual quickening was not only guaranteed by the resurrection of Christ but was also portended by it. Spiritually, we were dead rods that miraculously budded, and this is the reason we cease our rebellion against Him and submit to Him in faith.

5) Aaron's Rod budded in the Holiest of All to symbolize the fact that the miraculous spiritual quickening it represented occurs under a heavenly power (Jn 1:11-13).

6) Aaron's Rod budded in the solitude of the Tabernacle, away from the means of man, to show that spiritual quickening is completely and directly a work of the Holy Spirit of God (Jn 3:3).

7) Aaron's Rod budded away from the eyes of man to show that spiritual quickening is invisible to the natural eye, though it may be ascertained by its fruitful effects (Jn 3:8).

But perhaps the strangest part of the story of Aaron's Rod was in how it ended. God declared that the 250 brazen censors of the rebels were holy, and commanded that they be retrieved from the ashes and beaten into plates to cover the altar. This was to be done as a memorial and warning. Now all this was very surprising because we expected these censors to be considered abominable, being the instruments of wicked and rebellious men. As it happened, from that day forward, no man would ever see the altar again in its original form. Rather, as he looked to the altar, he would see what had been the instruments of wicked men, yet these were curiously accounted as holy. Now the cross was an instrument of wicked men, and might be considered an abomination on that account, but it is now the sacred symbol we see in our imaginations when we think of the true altar and sacrifice of God. The image of the old altar has been displaced by the image of a cross.

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