

Numbers 19: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 19. Now the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, This is the statute of the law that the Lord has commanded. Tell the people of Israel to bring you a red heifer without defect, in which there is no blemish, and on which a yoke has never come. And you shall give it to Eliezer the priest, and it shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered before him. And Eliezer the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle some of its blood toward the front of the tent of meeting seven times. And the heifer shall be burned in his sight, its skin its flesh and its blood with its dung shall be burned. And the priest shall take cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet yarn, and throw them into the fire burning the heifer. Then the priest shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward he may come into the camp. But the priest shall be unclean until evening. The one who burns the heifer shall wash his clothes in water, and bathe his body in water, and shall be unclean until evening. And a man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer, and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place, and they shall be kept for the water for impurity for the congregation of the people of Israel. It is a sin offering.

And the one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes and be unclean until evening. This shall be a perpetual statute for the people of Israel, and for the stranger who sojourns among them. Whoever touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days. He shall cleanse himself with water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean. But if he does not cleanse himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not become clean. Whoever touches a dead person, the body of anyone who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles the tabernacle of the Lord. And that person shall be cut off from Israel, because the water for impurity was not thrown on him. He shall be unclean. His uncleanness is still on him. This is the law when someone dies in a tent. Everyone who comes into the tent, and everyone who is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days.

And every open vessel that has no cover fastened on it is unclean. Whoever in the open field touches someone who was killed with a sword, or who died naturally, or touches a human bone or a grave, shall be unclean seven days. For the unclean they shall take some ashes of the burnt sin offering, and fresh water shall be added in a vessel. Then a clean person shall take hyssop, and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it on the tent and on all the furnishings, and on the persons who were there, and on whoever touched the bone, or the slain, or the dead, or the grave. And the clean person shall sprinkle it on the unclean on the third day, and on the seventh day. Thus on the seventh day he shall cleanse him, and he shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and at evening he shall be clean. If the man who is unclean does not cleanse himself, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, since he has defiled the sanctuary of the Lord. Because the water for impurity has not been thrown on him, he is unclean. And it shall be a statute forever for them. The one who sprinkles the water for impurity shall wash his clothes, and the one who touches the water for impurity shall be unclean until evening. And whatever the unclean person touches shall be unclean, and anyone who touches it shall be unclean until evening.

In Numbers chapter 19 the ritual of the red heifer is instituted. This is easily one of the strangest of all of the rituals of the law. Besides several strange features of the rite itself, the hero might well wonder what it's doing in its current position. One of the questions that is presented to us by this ritual is whether it should be understood as a sacrifice. While Gordon Wenham argues that it is not a sacrifice, Jacob Milgram argues that it is. In verse 9 it's described as a purification offering. Yet in contrast to typical purification offerings, none of the animals seems to be burnt up upon the altar. The part that is burned is incinerated outside of the camp in a clean place.

Nevertheless there are important similarities with the logic of the purification offering. We find the relevant law of the purification offering in Leviticus chapter 4 verses 4 to 12.

[3 : 54] He shall bring the bull to the entrance of the tent of meeting before the Lord, and lay his hand on the head of the bull, and kill the bull before the Lord. And the anointed priest shall take some of the blood of the bull, and bring it into the tent of meeting. And the priest shall dip his finger in the blood, and sprinkle part of the blood seven times before the Lord, in front of the veil of the sanctuary. And the priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense before the Lord that is in the tent of meeting. And all the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

And all the fat of the bull of the sin offering he shall remove from it, the fat that covers the entrails, and all the fat that is on the entrails, and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them, at the loins, and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the kidneys, just as these are taken from the ox of the sacrifice of the peace offerings. And the priest shall burn them on the altar of burnt offering. But the skin of the bull and all its flesh, with its head, its legs, its entrails, and its dung, all the rest of the bull, he shall carry outside the camp to a clean place, to the ash heap, and shall burn it up on a fire of wood. On the ash heap it shall be burned up.

In the case of the regular sin offerings for the people, the priests can consume the sacrifice. Their holiness trumps the uncleanness, as it were. This doesn't, however, apply in the case of the sacrifices purification for the priests themselves, which besides the portions presented on the altar and the blood, must be incinerated outside of the camp. The blood of the red heifer is not offered on the altar, because it is an ongoing purification, as Milgram observes. The purification offering can defile those who handle it, and this is similar to what we see in Leviticus chapter 16, verses 23 to 28.

Then Aaron shall come into the tent of meeting, and shall take off the linen garments that he put on when he went into the holy place, and shall leave them there. And he shall bathe his body in water in a holy place, and put on his garments, and come out, and offer his burnt offering, and the burnt offering of the people, and make atonement for himself and for the people. And the fat of the sin offering he shall burn on the altar. And he who lets the goat go to Azazel shall wash his clothes, and bathe his body in water, and afterward he may come into the camp. And the bull for the sin offering, and the goat for the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall be carried outside the camp. Their skin, and their flesh, and their dung shall be burned up with fire. And he who burns them shall wash his clothes, and bathe his body in water, and afterward he may come into the camp. The purification sacrifice absorbs the impurity that it purifies, and must therefore be eliminated. While these things purify, those who handle them are in danger of contracting impurity from those things that purify, because purification offerings bear the impurity that they remove from people. Something of this logic can be seen in Leviticus chapter 6 verses 24 to 30.

The Lord spoke to Moses saying, speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, this is the law of the sin offering. In the place where the burnt offering is killed, shall the sin offering be killed before the Lord. It is most holy. The priest who offers it for sin shall eat it. In a holy place it shall be eaten, in the court of the tent of meeting. Whatever touches its flesh shall be holy, and when any of its blood is splashed on a garment, you shall wash that on which it was splashed in a holy place. And the earthenware vessel in which it is boiled shall be broken. But if it is boiled in a bronze vessel, that shall be scoured and rinsed in water. Every male among the priests may eat of it. It is most holy. But no sin offering shall be eaten from which any blood is brought into the tent of meeting to make atonement in the holy place. It shall be burned up with fire. In consuming the sin offering, in Leviticus chapter 10 verse 17, the priests are said to bear the iniquity of the congregation. They are able to absorb, in some sense, that impurity, and to overwhelm it on account of their holiness. However, the impurity contracted by something that is used to make atonement for the holy place is too great, and so cannot be consumed without contracting an overwhelming impurity. Why is a red heifer used for this ritual? The red heifer would be the largest female animal. The ashes that it produced would be able to function for much of the population. Within the laws of the sin or purification offering, the bull represents the priest, and the whole congregation. Using a red heifer would distinguish this purification from that purification sacrifice. The redness seems to strengthen the connection with blood. However, as we shall see, the word also likely puns upon a number of other Hebrew words. It puns upon the word for blood, for red, and also the words for man and earth. These connections are likely important, as we shall see.

[8 : 40] Before the animal is burned, some of its blood is taken by the priest and sprinkled seven times towards the tabernacle. For Milgram, this proves that it is some form of sacrifice, not just a strange ritual. The sevenfold sprinkling of the blood is similar to other blood rituals. For instance, the blood is sprinkled with the priest's finger seven times before the Lord, in front of the veil of the sanctuary, in the purification offering for the priest, or for the whole congregation, in Leviticus chapter 4. Blood is also sprinkled seven times in a similar manner on the day of atonement, and also as part of the ritual for the cleansing of lepers and for leprous houses.

The blood of the animal is not brought inside the tabernacle, perhaps because the impurity in such a case does not extend as far into the tent as it would in the case of an impure priest. The parts of the animal that are incinerated to obtain the ashes are the same parts of the animal that are burned of the purification offering in Leviticus chapter 4 verse 11. Nothing here is said about the parts of the animal that would typically have been offered to the Lord. To the parts of the animal that were incinerated, the priest had to add cedarwood, hyssop, and scarlet yarn, elements that recall the ritual for the cleansing of lepers in Leviticus chapter 14 verses 3 to 7. Then if the case of leprous disease is healed in the leprous person, the priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed, two live clean birds, and cedarwood, and scarlet yarn, and hyssop. And the priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthenware vessel over fresh water. He shall take the live bird with the cedarwood and the scarlet yarn and the hyssop, and dip them and the live bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the fresh water. And he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease. Then he shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird go into the open field. The leper, as we have seen elsewhere, has something of the character of a living corpse. So it should not surprise us that there are similarities between the process for the cleansing of the corpse defiled person, and the cleansing of the leper. The items added to the burning red heifer also recall, as the elements of the ritual for the cleansing of the leper, the Passover. Cedarwood recalls the doorposts, the scarlet yarn recalls the blood on the doorposts, and the hyssop, the hyssop with which the blood was sprinkled upon them. The account of the Passover in Exodus chapter 12, the ritual for the cleansing of the leper in Leviticus 14, and the ritual of the red heifer in Numbers chapter 19, are the only three occasions where hyssop is mentioned in the Pentateuch. In the ritual of the red heifer, as in the ritual for the cleansing of the leper, the blood is applied not to the objects of the tabernacle, but to persons. We should bear in mind that the objects of the tabernacle often symbolize persons in some way, so the application of blood to tabernacle items could be seen as the symbolic application of the blood to persons.

However, there were various exceptional occasions where blood was applied directly to individuals. In the initial establishment of the covenant in Exodus chapter 24 verse 8, Moses cast blood on the people. In the priestly ordination ritual, blood was applied to the extremities of the priest's bodies.

A similar application of blood occurred in the ritual for the cleansing of the leper. The ritual of the red heifer has, as Milgram notes, similarities to the ritual of the Day of Atonement, which was with the two goats, an intensified form of the purification sacrifice.

It also has similarities to the ritual for the cleansing of lepers. However, in contrast to both of those rituals, there is no dispatching of one animal into the wilderness or open field.

[12:10] The application of blood to the bodies of persons should also be considered in light of the different foci of impurity. Many of the purification rites are principally dealing with ways that the sanctuary and its objects have been rendered impure as a consequence of the people's behaviour, not so much the impurity of the people themselves. The impurity of the leper, the corpse-defiled person, or the person with a bodily emission is an impurity of their own bodies, not an impurity of the tabernacle caused by their actions. Consequently, some form of purification needs to occur on their own bodies, not just on the tabernacle objects. The deep strangeness of this ritual suggests the possibility that there is deeper symbolic import to what is taking place, perhaps that like the ritual of jealousy, it relates to events in Israel's history. Animals in the sacrificial system have their particular type stipulated. They must be of the herd or the flock, or goat or sheep. Often the sex of the animal is stipulated. It must be a male of the herd, or a female of the flock. Not infrequently, we also see the stipulation of the age of the animal, of the first year, or perhaps a mature animal.

The red heifer is exceptional in being an animal whose colour is stipulated, and as we've already noted, besides the colour associated with blood, the word has connotations. Adumar connects with Adumar, the earth. Adumar might also recall Adam, man, Edom, red, and Dam, blood. This cluster of associations might bring us back into the world of Genesis 2-4. Adam, the man, is created out of the Adumar, the earth. In chapter 4, Cain's shedding of his brother's blood leads to banishment. In the ritual of the red heifer, we have allusions back to the exile of man from the realm of God, from the garden, to the defiling character of blood, as we see in chapter 4 in the story of Cain, and to the way in which man returns to the dust and to ashes. As human beings, we are but dust and ashes. When we die, we are reduced to those elements. In this chapter, the ashes of the red heifer are referred to both as ashes and also as dust in verse 17. Recognising such associations, Joel Hewman argues that there is an analogy between the tabernacle and the garden of Eden. Both are sanctuaries of the Lord's dwelling. Banishment from Eden in Genesis placed man in the realm of death. Banishment from the camp or the promised land involves a similar sort of death and alienation. The story of the beginning of Genesis might also be recalled in the emphasis upon the third and the seventh day. The third day recalls the third day of the creation, where the land is brought up out of the waters, and the seventh day recalls the Sabbath, the rest, and the completion of the creation. Reflecting upon these connections further, we should consider the way that chapter 19 is situated within the larger book, Numbers.

Why is the institution of the ritual placed here? The answer to this question, as Hewman argues, will be found by considering the narrative context. He writes, It is the final liturgical law given during the era of the Sinai generation, and itself thematises purification and separation from death and the wilderness. Considered merely as another rite of purification, it could conceivably be located almost anywhere that cultic legislation is appropriate.

In fact, Leviticus, at first blush, seems a more appropriate literary context. But intentional juxtaposition is the key to its placement. The Red Heifer itself thematises the narrative at this point.

The wilderness is preeminently a place of death for Israel, which must die to be reborn. The Heifer, as a symbol of the old generation of Israel, is reduced to dust in the wilderness. By means of the ashes of the Heifer and living water, the one contaminated by death is restored to a living relationship with God, even as the new generation is transferred from the wilderness to the land of promise. The Heifer immediately foreshadows the impending final elimination of the old generation, and symbolises the promise given to the new. Future life in the land will replace the pervasiveness of death in the wilderness. Human's argument can also help us to understand this chapter as filling the great gap in the Book of Numbers, a jump from the second year of the Exodus to the conclusion of the period of the wilderness wanderings. The ritual of the Red Heifer is a symbolic representation of this entire period. The dying after the old generation, connected with symbols of the initial Exodus and Passover, will lead to the cleansing of a new generation and the entrance into the land. In the next chapter of the Book of Numbers, the deaths of the key figures of Miriam and Aaron occur, and the imminent death of Moses is also declared. After their deaths and the dissolution of the whole original

[16 : 54] Exodus generation, the people will finally be prepared to enter into the promised land. A question to consider. Can you think of other rituals and laws by which Israel was kept separate from death? What broader significance might Israel have discovered in reflecting upon these different laws?