



Numbers - Chapter Nineteen

III Numbers 13:1-19:22 - Forty Years Near Kadesh (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Nineteen

Life and death are the two poles of existence inside and outside the Bible. Holiness, God, and life are associated in Scripture, whereas uncleanness, sin, and death also belong together. Human corpses caused the gravest kind of pollution under the Mosaic system, affecting all who approached them. Thus those who have contact with the dead must keep away from the sanctuary and undergo cleansing. This rite is designed to provide ritual cleansing for all who have been near or touched corpses. This is especially relevant here in view of the numerous deaths reported in the preceding chapters and those that follow.

III.f Numbers 19:1-22 - Ceremony of the Red Heifer

Refer to the chapter summary above.

III.f.i Numbers 19:1-10 - The Recipe for Producing the Cleansing Ash

A heifer is a young cow that here has not produced a calf. Its youth shows its fullness of life, while its redness speaks of blood, the most effective agent of atonement. Cedar wood, hyssop and other crimson material is used in the process. The redness of cedar wood and the crimson material may also be significant.

Hyssop is also used for cleansing: <<*Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow*>> (Psalm 51:7). The same ingredients are used in the cleansing of a leper: <<*the priest shall command that two living clean birds and cedar wood and crimson yarn and hyssop be brought for the one who is to be cleansed*>> (Leviticus 14:4).

The ashes are described as a sin-offering in v.9, an offering designed to cleanse both the sanctuary and the worshipper; refer to Leviticus Chapter 4. Those

engaged in producing this cleansing ash paradoxically incur a mild uncleanness themselves.

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ² This is a statute of the law that the Lord has commanded: Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect, in which there is no blemish and on which no yoke has been laid.

Numbers 19:1-2

Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect. A heifer is a cow which has never been pregnant, and thus cannot yet give milk. They had to find one with a red colour, which, of course, would be somewhat rare. Normally the animal's colour did not matter. This one had to be red to resemble blood.

A similar animal was to be killed when an unidentified body was found in the countryside: <<*The elders of the town nearest the body shall take a heifer that has never been worked, one that has not pulled in the yoke; the elders of that town shall bring the heifer down to a wadi with running water, which is neither ploughed nor sown, and shall break the heifer's neck there in the wadi*>> (Deuteronomy 21:3-4).

In which there is no blemish and on which no yoke has been laid. These requirements made this particular animal even rarer. This red heifer, therefore, would be valuable, rare, and pure because she had not yet been impregnated. All offerings made to God had to be as near perfect as possible: <<*You shall not offer anything that has a blemish, for it will not be acceptable in your behalf*>> (Leviticus 22:20).

³ You shall give it to the priest Eleazar, and it shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. ⁴ The priest Eleazar shall take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle it seven times towards the front of the tent of meeting. ⁵ Then the heifer shall be burned in his sight; its skin, its flesh, and its blood, with its dung, shall be burned. ⁶ The priest shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson material, and throw them into the fire in which the heifer is burning. ⁷ Then the priest shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterwards he may come into the camp; but the priest shall remain unclean until evening. ⁸ The one who burns the heifer shall wash his clothes in water and bathe his body in water; he shall remain unclean until evening. ⁹ Then someone 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 congregation of the Israelites for the water for cleansing. It is a purification-offering. ¹⁰ 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 Israelites and for the alien residing among them.

Numbers 19:3-10

It shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. Eleazar the priest had to witness the slaughtering of the animal but did not perform the task himself. Why it had to be performed outside the camp and not before the tent of meeting is not explained. However, the whole process seems to be linked with uncleanness and thus it should be undertaken away from the camp where God has chosen to dwell with his people: *<<you shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp; they must not defile their camp, where I dwell among them>>* (Numbers 5:3).

Then the heifer shall be burned in his sight; its skin, its flesh, and its blood, with its dung, shall be burned. The red heifer would be sacrificed in the customary fashion, with a bit of blood being sprinkled on the altar. Yet, the complete carcass of the animal was burnt and the ashes gathered by one observing the cleansing ceremonies before and after the gathering of ashes.

Unlike every other sacrifice in the OT, the blood of the red heifer is burnt along with the sacrifice, instead of being completely drained out at the jugular. Blood was to be part of the ashes that would come forth from the burning of the carcass of the red heifer.

The priest shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson material, and throw them into the fire in which the heifer is burning. When the heifer was burnt, the priest would also put cedar wood and hyssop and crimson material into the fire. In Leviticus 14:4-6, each of these three items are used in the cleansing ceremony for a leper. Each of these items has a special significance.

Cedar is extremely resistant to disease and rot, and is well known for its quality and preciousness. These properties may be the reason for including it here, as well as a symbolic reference to the wood of the Cross. Some even think the Cross Jesus was crucified on was made of cedar, although the Bible and any other historic documents make no reference to this.

Hyssop was used not only with the cleansing ceremony for lepers, but also Jesus was offered drink from a hyssop branch on the Cross (Matthew 27:48).

Crimson, the colour of blood, pictures the cleansing blood of Jesus on the Cross. Crimson was used in the veil and curtains of the tabernacle (Exodus 26:31), in the

garments of the high priest (Exodus 28:5-6), the covering for the table of showbread (Numbers 4:8), as the sign of Rahab's salvation: <<*She said, 'According to your words, so be it.' She sent them away and they departed. Then she tied the crimson cord in the window*>> (Joshua 2:21), and the colour of the mocking 'king's robe' put on Jesus at his torture by the soldiers: <<*They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him*>> (Matthew 27:28).

Then the priest shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterwards he may come into the camp; but the priest shall remain unclean until evening. The whole process makes the priest unclean and therefore he must perform the ritual of cleansing. He is permitted to enter the camp but cannot participate in any duties because he remains unclean until evening, which marks the start of the new day.

They shall be kept for the congregation of the Israelites for the water for cleansing. It is a purification-offering. The residue from the burning of the carcass, the cedar, the hyssop, and the scarlet fabric together would produce a lot of ash, and the ash was to be gathered and sprinkled in water bit by bit to make water fit for purification.

III.f.ii Numbers 19:11-22 - The Cleansing Procedure

The process of the cleansing ash has two phases: it involves sprinkling water with some ash in it on the affected person or tent on the third day after contamination and also on the seventh day. On the seventh day he must also bathe himself and wash his clothes.

The sprinkling does not have to be done by a priest, just a clean person (vv.18-19). Failure to carry out this rite is serious: it defiles the tabernacle, and that person shall be cut off, i.e. they will probably die. Hebrews 9:13-14 notes that the blood of Christ is even more effective in its cleansing power; it will: <<*purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!*>>. These regulations were intended for Israel; now that Christ has come, Christians do not need purification rites such as these.

¹¹ Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean for seven days. ¹² They shall purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean; but if they do not purify themselves on the third day and on the seventh day, they will not become clean. ¹³ All who touch a corpse, the body of a human being who has died, and do not purify themselves, defile the tabernacle of the Lord; such persons shall be cut off from Israel. Since water for cleansing was not dashed on them, they remain unclean; their uncleanness is still on them.

Numbers 19:11-13

Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean for seven days. To be ceremonially unclean was not sin as one might think of it; it meant that one was barred from their regular fellowship with and worship of God, and their fellowship with God's people, until they were made clean.

All who do not purify themselves, shall be cut off from Israel. One who was unclean needed purification, and could not ignore their condition, but was still part of the nation, unless they refused to correct their unclean condition.

A wonderful parallel is found in John 13:5-11; when a Christian is 'washed by Jesus' blood', they need only to have their feet washed as they become unclean in the normal practice of life. Yet, if they do not let Jesus 'wash' them, they have no part with him, just as he informed Peter. Each believer must receive the beautiful once-for-all cleansing Jesus brings to them when they are born again; yet continually come to him to be cleansed of the 'day-to-day' things.

Defile the tabernacle of the Lord. These laws were relevant to all in Israel, but especially to priests, who had the potential to defile the tabernacle of the Lord: <<*All the leading priests and the people also were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations; and they polluted the house of the Lord that he had consecrated in Jerusalem*>> (2 Chronicles 36:14), and: <<*O God, the nations have come into your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins*>> (Psalm 79:1). Under the New Covenant, the Christian also has a special call to purity, because they can also defile the dwelling place of God: <<*Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body*>> (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

¹⁴ 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 for seven days. ¹⁵ And every open vessel with no cover fastened on it is unclean. ¹⁶ Whoever in the open field touches one who has been killed by a sword, or who has died naturally, or a human bone, or a grave, shall be unclean for seven days.

Numbers 19:14-16

This is the law when someone dies in a tent. The practice of quarantining all those who come into contact with a dead body was a wonderful public health measure as well. Those potentially contaminated would be set aside until it could be seen if they contracted a disease from the dead body.

And every open vessel with no cover fastened on it is unclean. In fact, this principle extended to every open vessel, which could potentially harbour disease causing organisms. If near a dead body or any other source of contamination, those vessels would be declared unclean and thus destroyed, reducing the danger of communicable disease.

A human bone, or a grave. It was not just touching the corpse that made a person unclean; body parts and even the final resting place had to be avoided: <<*Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realising it*>> (Luke 11:44).

Shall be unclean. What was inherently unclean about a dead body? Simply that death is the result and positive proof of sin: <<*The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die'*>> (Genesis 2:15-17), and: <<*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned*>> (Romans 5:12). Death is like sin made visible. In someone touched the carcass of a dead animal, he was unclean for less than one day: <<*By these you shall become unclean; whoever touches the carcass of any of them shall be unclean until the evening*>> (Leviticus 11:24). However, if one touched a dead human, he was unclean for seven days! Man is indeed greater than the animals, especially greater in sin. In Romans 7:24, Paul cries out in frustration of defeat in sin: <<*Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*>>. One can only be delivered from the body of death if they receive and walk in the precious work of Jesus on their behalf.

¹⁷ For the unclean they shall take some ashes of the burnt purification-offering, and running water shall be added in a vessel; ¹⁸ then a clean person shall take hyssop, dip it in the water, and sprinkle it on the tent, on all the furnishings, on the persons who were there, and on whoever touched the bone, the slain, the corpse, or the grave. ¹⁹ The clean person shall sprinkle the unclean ones on the third day and on the seventh day, thus purifying them on the seventh day. Then they shall wash their clothes and bathe themselves in water, and at evening they shall be clean.

Numbers 19:17-19

For the unclean they shall take some ashes of the burnt purification-offering. The ashes of the red heifer, described earlier in the chapter, were sprinkled in fresh water, and this water was used for purification: <<*I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from*

all your idols I will cleanse you>> (Ezekiel 36:25), and: <<*let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water*>> (Hebrews 10:22).

And at evening they shall be clean. Thus, the ashes of the red heifer, which the ingredients all speak of the work of Jesus on behalf of humankind, combined with water, which speaks of the work of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit: <<*On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water"'*>> (John 7:37-38). These, combined together, to bring cleansing. It can cleanse even the uncleanness brought about by death.

All this cleansing is a precious picture; but the reality is in Jesus: <<*For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!*>> (Hebrews 9:13-14).

²⁰ Any who are unclean but do not purify themselves, those persons shall be cut off from the assembly, for they have defiled the sanctuary of the Lord. Since the water for cleansing has not been dashed on them, they are unclean.

Numbers 19:20

Any who are unclean but do not purify themselves, those persons shall be cut off from the assembly. This shows that uncleanness cannot correct itself. The unclean man will not just become clean. He must do something, and he must do what God says must be done in order to be clean: <<*Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, so that they do not die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst*>> (Leviticus 15:31). His own plans or schemes for cleansing mean nothing. The punishment for failing to obey is severe.

²¹ It shall be a perpetual statute for them. The one who sprinkles the water for cleansing shall wash his clothes, and whoever touches the water for cleansing shall be unclean until evening. ²² Whatever the unclean person touches shall be unclean, and anyone who touches it shall be unclean until evening.

Numbers 19:21-22

It shall be a perpetual statute for them. This law was not just for the wilderness years but was to be observed by the people of God for all time, or at least until the Messiah came to fulfil the law.

The one who sprinkles the water for cleansing. Those who help others to become clean must walk in cleanness themselves. The one who regards the water of cleansing as a common thing, i.e. whoever touches the water for cleansing, will himself be regarded as unclean.

Whatever the unclean person touches shall be unclean, and anyone who touches it shall be unclean until evening. Uncleanness was easily transmitted, but cleanness had to be deliberately sought: <<*Then Haggai said, 'If one who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?' The priests answered, 'Yes, it becomes unclean'*>> (Haggai 2:13).