

**God's People in the Wilderness: Studies in the Book of Numbers**  
**Numbers 19: The Water of Cleansing**  
Park Street Church Christian Formation (Winter Term 2019)

A Brief Review: From Sinai/Horeb to Kadesh Barnea

Defining Events

- Spies –
  - geography of the Land
  - disobedience and consequences – 40 years of dying in the wilderness
- Numbers 15 – assurance they would enter the Land even after defying the Lord's command
- Numbers 16-17 - Rebellion from Levites, Reubenites, and additional leaders
  - Severe consequences
  - Aaron's rod and the implications
- Numbers 18 - Levites' responsibilities and privileges

Further Review: what were the means of providing for the priests and Levites?

- Levites were given to priests as a "gift" (18:6-7)
- Offerings for priests (and families)
  - First fruits of grain, new wine, oil
  - *Herem*
  - First borns (sons redeemed)
  - No inheritance in Land
- Provision for Levites
  - Tithes (from which they likewise tithed)
- How is Numbers 19 a needed follow-up to the events of the preceding chapters?

The "Red Heifer" Ritual [all of chapter 19]

- What questions might arise as we read this?
- There is a detailed description before the explanation; why?
- What does this process accomplish?
- What "spheres" seem prominent? Why are they such high profile?
- This is presented as a "requirement of the Torah" (19:2); why was it so important? [hold that question]

What elements of this process made it unique? [preparation and description 19:1-10]

- Israelites were to bring a red heifer; no defect; never yoked
- Eleazar the priest took it outside camp and slaughtered it
- Blood sprinkled seven times toward the Tent of Meeting
- Burned – only place where blood was burned (along with skin, flesh, offal) – it is the most powerful cleansing agent [death to rid the community of death]
- All elements of sin offering and cleansing agents were included—blood, cedar wood, hyssop, scarlet wool (note Lev 14)
- Ashes placed in a ceremonially clean place outside camp
- Priest, person who burned animal, and person who gathered ashes all had to wash clothing and were ceremonially unclean until evening

### And now the water: what was the purpose of joining ashes and water?

- The importance is unveiled in stages
  - Verses 9,17 – ashes were used in water for purification from sin [juxtaposition: ashes of death with life-giving water]
  - Verse 11 - Contact with death, the ultimate in uncleanness
  - Verses 13, 20 – failure to be sprinkled with water of purification defiled the Sanctuary; person was to be cut off
  - Verse 21 - The one sprinkling the water was deemed temporarily unclean
- Contact with death was so severe, cleansing occurred in two states – third and seventh days [verses 12, 19]
- Place determined process
  - Inside tent, the air was polluted
  - Outside, contact with corpse or bones or graves
- And why were these instructions so vital at this point?

### Death in the wilderness and beyond

- The wilderness forty years would be fraught with death; see Numbers 31:19-23
- The forthcoming war effort in the Land would mean increased casualties
- Thinking long-range: this purification sin offering provided for the Israelites suffering bereavement a way of purification that did not cost them expensive sacrifices right after burying their dead
- A possible polemic: this ritual would guard them against engaging in ancestor worship or worship in funerary contexts

### Echoes and Applications

- Psalm 51:9 - cleanse me with hyssop
- Hebrews 9:13-14 - How does this point to Jesus?
- On what lessons might we reflect?
- The next chapter - arrival at the Wilderness of Zin