

# *Numbers*

## *Lesson #7*

### *The Red Heifer*

*(18: 1 – 19: 22)*

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# Review

No sooner had the Israelites set out from Mt. Sinai than they began complaining: they hated the food, the leadership of Moses and Aaron, the rigors of the journey . . . and on and on.

Very quickly, the complaining escalated into open rebellion. Korah and a group of Levites—Moses and Aaron’s tribe—led a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, while Dathan and Abiram of the tribe of Reuben led a rebellion of 250 community leaders against Moses and Aaron.

God’s punishment was swift and severe: the Levites were incinerated, while Dathan and Abiram—and their entire families, *“their wives, their children, and their little ones”* (16: 27)—were swallowed alive by the earth: *“They went down alive to Sheol with all belonging to them; the earth closed over them, and they disappeared from the assembly”* (16: 33).

Terror gripped the surviving community: *“We will perish; we are lost, we are all lost! Anyone who approaches the tabernacle of the Lord will die!”*

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# Preview

In the wake of the rebellion, Moses turns to the Levites, those of his own tribe, and to the priests, Aaron and his descendants. He must have their support if he is to succeed; indeed, if he is to survive! So Moses “sweetens the pot,” giving Aaron and his sons exclusive rights at the tabernacle and a greater share in the sacrifices and the tithes, while giving the Levites additional privileges, as well.

God also introduces the ritual of the “red heifer,” a red cow without blemish or defect, which will be slaughtered and its ashes used as a purification offering for those who touch a dead human corpse. The ashes of a red heifer combined with spring water, go far beyond the ritual we studied in Leviticus 21 & 22.

The introduction of the red heifer at this point in Numbers suggests a significant increase in the number of dead human bodies as the journey to the “Promised Land” continues.



The growing unrest of the entire Israelite community, the open rebellion of Korah and his followers, as well as the direct challenge to Moses and Aaron's leadership by Dathan, Abiram and the 250 community leaders, triggers God's swift and severe punishment.

God incinerates Korah and his followers; the earth suddenly opens up and swallows Dathan, Abiram and their families; and God sends a plague on the people, killing 14,700 of them. Terror grips the entire community as they cry out: *"We are lost, we are all lost"* (17: 27)!

At this peak of crisis, Moses must garner support from his most crucial constituency, the Levites and the priesthood, Aaron and his sons.

So God makes a bold and decisive move . . .

“The Lord said to Aaron: You and your sons as well as your ancestral house with you shall be responsible for any sin with respect to the sanctuary; but only you and your sons with you shall be responsible for any sin with respect to your priesthood. You shall also present with you your kinsmen of the tribe of Levi, your ancestral tribe, that they may be joined to you and assist you, while you and your sons with you are in front of the tent of the covenant. They shall discharge your obligations and those with respect to the whole tent; however, they shall not come near the utensils of the sanctuary or the altar, or else both they and you will die. They will be joined to you to perform the duties associated with the tent of meeting, all the labor pertaining to the tent. But no unauthorized person shall come near you. You shall perform the duties of the sanctuary and of the altar, that wrath may not fall again upon the Israelites.”

(18: 1-5)

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Notice how God integrates the entire tribe of Levi into the operation and maintenance of the tabernacle. Previously, the three levitical clans—the Koathites, Gershonites and Merarites—had narrow, specific duties: the Koathites transported the furnishings within the tent of meeting; the Gershonites packed and transported the fabrics of the tabernacle; and the Merarites packed and transported the boards, pillars and posts of the tabernacle.

The clans continue performing these same tasks, but their responsibilities are now broadened and more fully integrated into the tabernacle's overall operation.



And notice, too, from a literary perspective how a pun on the name Levi reinforces the integration of the Levites into the tabernacle’s overall operation.

Recall the “battle of the dueling wives” in Genesis 29-30. When Jacob wished to marry Rachel, her father Laban tricked him into marrying Rachel’s older sister, Leah, first. Because Jacob didn’t love Leah, God enabled her to conceive prolifically! She bore four sons in rapid succession: Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah, the name of each son reflecting her increasing disappointment with Jacob.

With the birth of her third son, she said:

*“Now at last my husband will become attached to me, since I have born him three sons”; that is why she named him Levi.*

(29: 34)

“Levi” derives etymologically from the Hebrew verb “to join” or “to become attached to.” As the birth of Levi may enable Jacob to “become attached to” Leah, so are the Levites “joined to” or “attached to” the priesthood in 18: 2 and 4.

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“The Lord said to Aaron: You and your sons as well as your ancestral house with you shall be responsible for any sin with respect to the sanctuary; but only you and your sons with you shall be responsible for any sin with respect to your priesthood. You shall also present with you your kinsmen of the tribe of Levi, your ancestral tribe, that they may be **joined to you** and assist you, while you and your sons with you are in front of the tent of the covenant. They shall discharge your obligations and those with respect to the whole tent; however, they shall not come near the utensils of the sanctuary or the altar, or else both they and you will die. They will be **joined to you** to perform the duties associated with the tent of meeting, all the labor pertaining to the tent. But no unauthorized person shall come near you. You shall perform the duties of the sanctuary and of the altar, that wrath may not fall again upon the Israelites.”

(18: 1-5)

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**That's very clever!**

**It sure is!**

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**With the Levites more fully integrated into tabernacle operations, God then “sweetens the pot” for Aaron and his sons, the priests:**

*“The Lord said to Aaron: I hereby give to you charge of the contributions made to me, including the various holy offerings of the Israelites; I assign them to you and to your sons as a perquisite, a perpetual due. This is what you shall have from the oblations that are most holy: every offering of theirs . . . the contributions that are their gifts . . . whatever is under the ban . . . the redemption price of a son . . . the first born of cattle . . . sheep . . . and goats . . .; [however], you shall not have any heritage in [the Israelites’] land.”*

**(18: 8-20)**

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In addition, God “sweetens the pot” for the Levites as well, assigning them *“all tithes in Israel as their heritage [which would be substantial] in recompense for the labor the Levites perform”* (18: 21), noting that:

*“When you take from the Israelites the tithes I have assigned you from them as your heritage, you are to make a contribution from them to the Lord, a tithe of the tithe.”*

**(18: 26)**



Now that is very shrewd political maneuvering on the part of God and Moses. The Levites are now fully invested in the tabernacle operations and they are amply compensated for their efforts. The priesthood is protected, and Aaron and his sons are fully in charge.

Very shrewd maneuvering, indeed!





**During the disciplines imposed by God, the body count increases substantially:**

1. The man who gathered wood on the Sabbath is stoned;
2. Dathan and Abiram and their families are swallowed alive by the earth;
3. Korah and the 250 community leaders are incinerated;
4. 14,700 Israelites who grumble against God are killed by a plague.

**And God has said: *“Corresponding to the number of days you spent reconnoitering the land—forty days—you shall bear your punishment one year for each day: forty years”* (14: 34), and during that time the *“entire wicked community that conspired against me: here in the wilderness they shall come to their end and there they will die”* (14: 35)—603,548 men, and an equal number of women: over a million corpses.**



*Mummified remains of Ramses II (1303-1213 B.C.)  
Egyptian Museum, Cairo.*

**As we learned in our study of Leviticus, life/death is the basic dichotomy that underlies all of Scripture. The Egyptian culture in which the Israelites lived for nearly half a millennium viewed life through the prism of death and eternity. Egyptian religion firmly believed in the physical resurrection of the body**

**and eternal life beyond the grave. The pyramids were elaborate tombs in which the mummified corpse of the king, along with his important possessions, awaited resurrection, at which time he would lead his resurrected people into eternity. In ancient Egypt, much of life focused on virtuous living, a good death and the expectation of a joyous eternity. Many duties of an Egyptian priest involved embalming the dead and conducting elaborate funerary rites.**



In a very important sense, much of Israelite theology stands in sharp contrast to the Egyptian paradigm. For an Egyptian, death is the doorway to a joyous eternity achieved by righteous deeds and a virtuous life, an eternity portrayed in countless Egyptian tombs, carvings and manuscripts such as the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.

Conversely, Israelite theology consistently emphasized present-day life, sacred in all its forms, as a gift from God, meant to be lived fully, celebrating and blessing each moment. For the Israelite, death was not a welcomed event, but the doorway to Sheol, a place of darkness where both the righteous and unrighteous go, a place cut off from life and from God. Consequently, Israelite priests—and Judaism in general—shunned death in all its forms.

## Psalm 88

Lord, the God of my salvation I call out by day;  
at night I cry aloud in your presence.  
Let my prayer come before you;  
incline your ear to my cry.  
For my soul is filled with troubles;  
my life draws near to Sheol.  
I am reckoned with those who go down to the pit;  
I am like a warrior without strength.  
My couch is among the dead,  
like the slain who lie in the grave.  
You remember them no more;  
they are cut off from your influence . . .

(88: 1-6)



**Consequently, coming in contact with a human corpse causes a person to be “unclean”:**

- A lay person may touch a corpse, but such a person will remain unclean until evening, when he must wash his clothes and bathe;
- A priest may only touch a corpse if it is that of his mother or father, son or daughter, brother or unmarried sister—the most intimate of blood relatives, after which he must wash his clothes and bathe; and
- A priest is forbidden the customary signs of mourning: cutting the hair or beard or lacerating himself.



**Given the events that have occurred in the wilderness, there will be corpses aplenty, the community will be rife with corpse contamination.**

**In Numbers 19 we address the issue.**

“The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: “This is the statute for the ritual which the Lord has commanded. Tell the Israelites to procure for you a red heifer without defect and free from every blemish and on which no yoke has ever been laid. You will give it to Eleazar the priest, and it will be led outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. Eleazar the priest will take some of its blood on his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the tent of meeting. Then the heifer will be burned in his sight; it will be burned with its hide and flesh, its blood and dung; and the priest will take cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet yarn and throw them into the fire in which the heifer is being burned. The priest shall then wash his garments and bathe his body in water, afterward he may enter the camp. The priest remains unclean until evening . . .

“Likewise, the one who burned the heifer shall wash his garments in water, bathe his body in water, and be unclean until evening. Then somebody who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer and deposit them in a clean place outside the camp. There they are to be kept to prepare purification water for the Israelite community. This is a purification offering. The one who has gathered up the ashes of the heifer shall also wash his garments and be unclean until evening. This is a permanent statute, both for the Israelites and for the alien residing among them.”

(19: 1-10)

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**Red heifer**

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# Holy cow!



Ha, ha, ha!



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A red heifer is extremely rare, a real biological anomaly. In Hebrew it is called a *parah adumah*, a “red cow.” The Mishnah, the primary compilation of Jewish oral law, contains a tractate on the red heifer in *Sefer Taharot*, and it is discussed in several other tractates, as well. According to Jewish law, the red heifer must:

- Meet all the criteria of a sacrificial animal;
- Been born naturally;
- Never been in contact with an “unclean” person;
- Be absolutely pure, with not even two black hairs;
- Never have been used for labor;
- Never have been mated.



**The red heifer is slaughtered and burned—along with cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet yarn (as in the ritual following a cleansed leper in Leviticus 14: 4)—on the east side of the tabernacle/temple.**

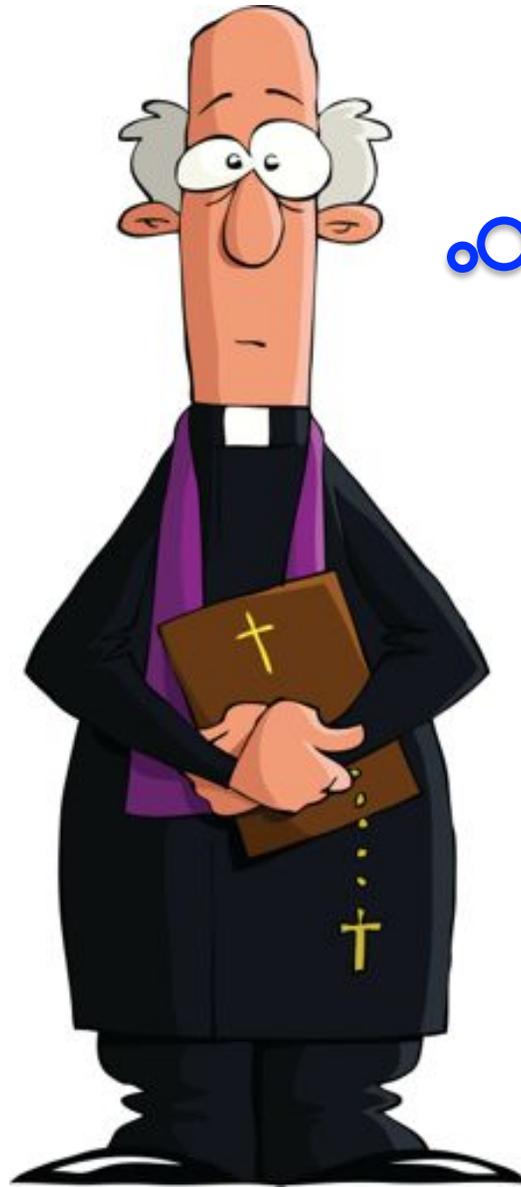
**In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple period, the red heifer was sacrificed on the Mount of Olives, and since there was a cemetery there, a ramp was built, lest the red heifer come in contact with a corpse.**



**The Temple Institute, a fundamentalist Jewish group, intends to build a 3<sup>rd</sup> Temple on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, where the Dome of the Rock—the 3<sup>rd</sup> holiest site in Islam has stood since A.D. 691.**



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**Nevertheless, the Temple Institute has made over 90 ritual items, to exact scriptural specifications, to be used in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Temple. Their work is funded primarily by fundamentalist Jews and Christians in the United States, who believe that the 3<sup>rd</sup> temple must sit on the temple mount before the end times come.**

**One of the most difficult projects is breeding a red heifer, a 3<sup>rd</sup> Temple necessity. The institute identified two candidates, one in 1997 and one in 2002, but they were later disqualified.**

**They are still trying.**

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“This is the ritual: When someone dies in a tent, everyone who enters the tent, as well as everyone already in it, will be unclean for seven days, and every open vessel with its lid unfastened will be unclean. Moreover, everyone who in the open country touches a person who has been slain by the sword or who has died naturally or who touches a human bone or a grave, will be unclean for seven days. For anyone who is thus unclean, ashes shall be taken from the burnt purification offering [the ashes of the red heifer], and spring water will be poured on them from a vessel . . .

“Then someone who is clean will take hyssop, dip it in this water, and sprinkle it on the tent and on all the vessels and persons that were in it, or on the one who touched the bone, the slain person or other corpse, or the grave. The clean will sprinkle the unclean on the third and on the seventh day. Then they will wash their garments and bathe in water and in the evening be clean . . . This will be a permanent statute for you.”

(19: 14-21)

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**In Christian typology, the Red Heifer speaks of Christ. In the non-canonical *Epistle of Barnabas* we read:**

“Now what do you suppose this to be a type of, that a command was given to Israel, that men of the greatest wickedness should offer a heifer, and slay and burn it, and, that then boys should take the ashes, and put these into vessels, and bind round a stick purple wool along with hyssop, and that thus the boys should sprinkle the people, one by one, in order that they might be purified from their sins?”

Consider how He speaks to you with simplicity.

1. The **calf** is Jesus.
2. The **sinful men** offering it are those who led Him to the slaughter. But now the men are no longer guilty, are no longer regarded as sinners.
3. The **boys** that sprinkle are those that have proclaimed to us the remission of sins and purification of heart. To these He gave authority to preach the Gospel, being twelve in number, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel.
4. But **why are there three boys that sprinkle?** To correspond to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, because these were great with God.

5. And why was the **wool** [placed] upon the **wood**?  
Because by wood Jesus holds His kingdom, so that  
[through the cross] those believing on Him shall live  
for ever.
6. But why was **hyssop** joined with the wool? Because in  
His kingdom the days will be evil and polluted in which  
we shall be saved, [and] because he who suffers in  
body is cured through the cleansing efficacy of hyssop.  
And on this account the things which stand thus are  
clear to us, but obscure to them because they did not  
hear the voice of the Lord.”

*Epistle of Barnabas, 8.1 [Roberts-Donaldson English translation].*



Such Christian typology as we see in the *Epistle of Barnabas* continued down through the Middle Ages, and it formed the basis for scriptural exegesis well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially among Calvinists after the Protestant Reformation.

Although it has fallen out of favor among contemporary biblical scholars, it still a common exegetical tool among those in the Eastern Orthodox Church, and it is key to understanding early and medieval Christian art.



Written sometime before A.D. 190, the most complete text of the *Epistle of Barnabas* is in the 4<sup>th</sup>-century *Codex Sinaiticus*, (along with the *Shepherd of Hermas*), following the text of the New Testament. It is housed in the British Library in London.

**Smarty pants!**



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**Franz Marc. *World Cow* (oil on canvas), 1913.  
Museum of Modern Art, New York.**

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Franz Marc (1880-1916) was a German Expressionist painter. He had a lot to say about color: **blue** is the male principle, stern and spiritual; **yellow** the female principle, gentle, cheerful and sensual; **red** is matter, brutal and heavy, the color that must be vanquished by the other two.

When you encounter Marc's "World Cow," you see red, raw matter, the brutality of the world, big and dumb. But look at the eyes. They are profoundly sad, deep pools that mirror the cost of the world's brutality, and—perhaps—the price paid for our redemption from it.

Marc was a key figure in the German Expressionist movement and founder of the journal *Der Blaue Reiter* ("The Blue Rider"). He was killed at the Battle of Verdun in 1916, canon fodder in a savage war.

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# Questions for discussion and thought

- 1. In the wake of mass rebellion, what must Moses do to maintain his leadership among the Israelites?**
- 2. What does Moses offer the Levites for their support?**
- 3. What does Moses offer the priests for their support?**
- 4. Why is the “red heifer” introduced into Numbers at this point?**
- 5. From a typological perspective, what does the ritual of the red heifer mean?**

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