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The Law of the Red Heifer: A Type and Shadow of Jesus Christ

Mélbourn O'Banion

The law of the red heifer, found in the book of Numbers, chapter 19, is one of the most significant and yet least understood sacrificial laws in the Old Testament. This law, which governs the purification of those who become ritually unclean by contact with a corpse, was given to the children of Israel to be a “perpetual statute unto them” (Num. 19:21), and, like all other sacrifices, to ultimately point them to the Messiah.

Jewish tradition teaches that only Moses knew the full meaning of this *chukkat*, or law, which must be obeyed even though not understood. The Midrash says of *chukim*, “Four Torah laws cannot be explained by human reason, but being divine, demand implicit obedience: to marry one’s brother’s widow (Deut. 25:5), not to mingle wool and linen in a garment (Deut. 22:11), to perform the rite of the scapegoat (Lev. 16:26, 34), and to perform the rite of the red cow (Num. 19).”¹ Even the wise and venerable King Solomon purportedly said, “All these I have comprehended,” speaking of ordinances, “but as regards the section dealing with the Red Heifer, I have investigated and inquired and examined: ‘I said: I will get wisdom; but it was far from me’ ”(see Jacob 4:14).²

1. *Numbers Rabbah* 19:8, as quoted in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, 1149.
2. *Midrash Rabbah*, Numbers Vol. II (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 754.

Those who desire to grasp the true meaning of this commandment will know by study and also by faith that the law of the red heifer is a powerful symbol of Jesus Christ. In Christ was this law fulfilled, and only through Christ may we become clean and conquer death, just as only through the ashes of the red heifer could the children of Israel become ritually clean following contact with a corpse.

This paper will show that the law of the red heifer is a type and shadow of the atonement of Jesus Christ. The Lord's requirements for the sacrifice of the heifer will be carefully analyzed, as will the requirements that symbolize Christ and his ultimate sacrifice. The breadth and depth of symbolism that point to Christ in this law are too great to be coincidental. Like all other animal sacrifices, much is found in the sacrifice of the red heifer that corroborates with Jesus Christ's divinity and his culminating atonement for all mankind.

Background of the Sacrifice

The Lord commanded Moses to have the children of Israel bring forth a red heifer "without spot, wherein is no blemish, and upon which never came yoke" (Num. 19:2). The heifer was to cleanse Israel from Levitical defilement (defilement from the dead) and proved a unique sacrifice for several reasons. This sacrifice, unlike other sin offerings, was a sacrifice made once for all the children of Israel (at least as long as its ashes lasted),³ was wholly burnt, and was performed outside the camp or sanctuary.

Seven days before the sacrifice, the priest chosen to perform the rite (usually the eldest son of the high priest)⁴ remained in the

3. From the *Mishnah Parah* we learn that there have been a total of nine red heifers burned. The first was under the supervision of Moses; the second was prepared by Ezra; two were sacrificed by Shimon Ha 'Tzaddik; Yochanan, the High Priest, also sacrificed two; Elichoenai, the son of Ha-Kof supervised the seventh. Hanamel, the Egyptian, burned the eighth, and the ninth red cow was sacrificed by Ishmael, son of Piabi. Maimonides is said to have written that "the tenth red heifer will be accomplished by the king, the Messiah." See Rabbi Chaim Richman, *The Mystery of the Red Heifer: Divine Promise of Purity* (Jerusalem: Chaim Richman, 1997), 76.

4. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Gospel Symbolism* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), 95.

temple and was daily sprinkled with the ashes of a previously sacrificed red heifer.⁵ On the day of the sacrifice, the priest, wearing his white priestly raiment, would lead the red heifer outside the camp to the “appointed place,” or sacrificial altar, where the elders of Israel would already be waiting. The priest would then place the heifer into an opening in the pile of wood made from cedar, pine, and fig trees, whereupon the priest would bind the red heifer with its face looking to the west (toward the temple) and slay it with his right hand while catching some of its blood in his left.⁶ He then dipped his finger into the blood and sprinkled it seven times directly toward the Most Holy Place of the temple. After this, the priest kindled the fire and placed cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet into the midst of the burning fire. A clean priest would then take up the burnt remains and deposit them outside the camp (incidentally, the priest who sacrificed the heifer became unclean because of the sacrifice).⁷ Then, when the ashes were needed for ritual purification, some of them were placed in a vessel, mixed with spring water, and, together with hyssop, sprinkled on those unclean on the third and seventh days after their contact with the dead.⁸

Functional Typology

The function of the red heifer was to atone for the greatest defilement according to Jewish law: death. According to the rabbis, the highest form of ritual impurity was contact with a corpse.⁹ As Edersheim writes,

5. According to the *Mishnah Parah* 3:11, the officiating priest was removed from his house to a chamber facing the temple six days before the sacrifice. This room was called the Stone Chamber, so named because all services in connection with the red heifer had to be performed in vessels made either of baked earthenware or any material that is, like stone, insusceptible to uncleanness.

6. *Mishnah Parah* 3:9.

7. The ashes were divided into three parts and stored in three different locations. One part was deposited on the rampart, one was on the Mount of Olives, and one was divided among the twenty-four courses of the priests that took the temple services in turn. See *Mishnah Parah* 3:11.

8. See Numbers 19:11–22 for a detailed description of the law of ritual impurity resulting from contact with death.

9. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 14:9–14.

From all these provisions it is evident that as death carried with it the greatest defilement, so the sin-offering for its purification was in itself and in its consequences the most marked. And its application must have been so frequently necessary in every family and circle of acquaintances that the great truths connected with it were constantly kept in view of the people. In general, the laws in regard to defilement were primarily intended as symbols of spiritual truths, and not for social, nor yet sanitary purposes, though such results would also flow from them. Sin had rendered fellowship with God impossible; sin was death, and had wrought death, and the dead body as well as the spiritually dead soul were the evidence of its sway.¹⁰

Clearly, the purpose of the law of the red heifer was to purify those who had become ritually unclean through contact with death and allow them back into the presence of God, or into his temple—in other words, to take away the defilement of death that stood between God and man.

This principle of reconciling man to God is also the primary purpose of Christ's atonement. Only in and through Christ can man be made clean and again enter into the presence of God. Without the Atonement "all mankind would have been endlessly lost" (Mosiah 16:4) and "must unavoidably perish" (Alma 34:9), for "there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah" (2 Ne. 2:8).

Both the priest who offers the sacrifice and the unclean person made clean illustrate the symbolic functionality between the law of the red heifer and Christ. Rabbis have deliberated for centuries concerning the irony of this sacrifice, especially since those who were once impure are made pure, while those who were pure to begin with (the priest and the attendants) become impure by participating in the ritual. They admit the reasons for this transfer of ritual cleanliness are beyond their comprehension.¹¹ One

10. Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 279.

11. Richman, 9.

who sees the priest in the correct way understands the typology the priest symbolizes Christ because he takes upon himself the ritual impurities of man and thereby becomes unclean himself. As in many of the sacrifices in the Old Testament, both the sacrifice and the priest symbolize Christ.

Location Typology

From various accounts we know that the rite of the red heifer was performed directly east of the temple on the Mount of Olives. In the *Mishnah* we read:

A causeway was made from the temple mount to the Mount of Olives, being constructed of arches above arches, each arch placed directly above each pier as a protection against a grave in the depths, whereby the priest who was to burn the cow, the cow itself and all who aided in its preparation went forth to the Mount of Olives.¹²

This account accords with the commandment of the Lord given to the children of Israel to sacrifice the heifer “outside the camp” (Num. 19:3). This location, referred to by some scholars as the *Miphkad*¹³ altar, is where the red heifer was sacrificed. It is no surprise that Christ began his work of redemption on the same mount in a garden called Gethsemane. Since the Mount of Olives was directly east of the Temple Mount, this garden must have been very near the altar where the red heifer ritual was performed, especially considering that the priest needed a full view of the sanctuary through the eastern, or *Shushan*, gate.¹⁴

12. *Mishnah Parah* 3:6.

13. Some scholars view the red heifer sacrificial altar as an extension of the altar described in Ezekiel 43:21 in which the Hebrew word *miphkad* is translated as “appointed place” in both the King James Version and in the Jerusalem Bible. See Karen Boren, *Messiah of the Winepress* (Provo, UT: Beit Parah Publishing, 2002), 52. Although there may be some relation in the names of the altars, I have not found sufficient evidence to support such a theory.

14. This gate pointed east toward the ancient Persian capital *Susa* and was said to have been lower than the other gates so that the priests sacrificing the red heifer on the Mount of Olives could look directly into the temple. See *Mishnayoth* (Gateshead, England: Judaica Press, 1983, vol. 5), *Middoth* 511, and David B. Galbraith, D. Kelly Ogden, and Andrew C. Skinner, *Jerusalem: The Eternal City* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1996), 189.

Another key parallel between the red heifer sacrifice and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is the location of the altar in relation to the temple. The altar's location made it possible for the priest sacrificing the red heifer on the Mount of Olives to see directly into the giant entryway of the Holy Sanctuary, which stood sixty-six feet high and thirty-three feet wide. Inside the Holy Sanctuary hung the veil leading to the most sacred chamber, the Holy of Holies. The high priest could pass through this veil once a year on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) to symbolically enter the presence of God.

It is not coincidental that the altar existed in a location where the priest could direct his attention and actions to the only place there was access to God's presence. The red heifer represents Christ because it sacrifices its blood so that the children of Israel can enter into the Holy of Holies, or the presence of God. Jesus Christ, "neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption *for us*" (Heb. 9:12). Surely the location of the altar in relation to the Holy of Holies was designed to teach and prepare the Jews for the One who would allow all, not just the High Priest, to enter into the presence of God.

Element Typology

Many of the elements used in the sacrifice of the red heifer were symbolic of Jesus Christ. The cedar wood, hyssop, scarlet wool, ashes, and blood all typify and teach of Christ and his expiation for humankind.

The sacrificial elements of cedar, hyssop, and scarlet wool all have cleansing properties and were used in other sin offerings (see Lev. 14:4). The wood of the cedar tree is renowned for its ability to preserve things from decay and corruption, just as Christ preserves us from physical decay and spiritual corruption. The herb hyssop is a well-known cleansing agent and carries with it the symbol of purification (see Ex. 12:22). As David proclaimed, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Ps. 51:7). Like hyssop, Christ has the ability

to purge us from sin and wash us clean through the power of his atonement. The color scarlet was obtained in ancient Israel by crushing a worm from oak trees. At least two symbols relating to Christ are found in this element. The first is the color red, which reminds us of blood, the symbol of life, and also of the Atonement (see Lev. 17:11). Another tie comes from the prophetic words found in Psalm 22:6, which reads, "But I *am* a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people." This verse prophesies that Christ will be treated like a worm, crushed by his people until he becomes as red as scarlet by the blood he sheds.

Although the elements of cedar, hyssop, and scarlet wool play an important part in the ritual, the ashes of the heifer become the focus of this sacrifice, for ultimately it is the ashes that cleanse the ritually unclean from defilement. The burning of the animal in its entirety—"skin, flesh, blood, and dung" (Num. 19:5)—is found in no other animal sacrifice. The Jews took this commandment so literally that after the animal was burned, they beat the ashes with rods and stone hammers to crush any fragments that did not turn to ash.¹⁵

The symbolic parallels of the ash and Christ are striking. Christ became the red heifer by taking upon himself all the sins of the world. He did not suffer for only some; he took upon himself all pain, all suffering, and all sin so that we may obtain all that the Father has. He was crushed for the sins of his people just as the ashes were. His atonement is not discriminatory, nor is it bound by time or influence, but it is available to all, just as the ashes of the red heifer were able to cleanse all from ritual impurity.

It seems inescapable that the red color of the heifer symbolized blood. The Hebrew adjective *adom*, from *parah adumah*, Hebrew for red heifer, is related to the Hebrew *dam*, the word for blood.¹⁶ That the blood of the red heifer is symbolic of the blood of Christ may be illustrated in several ways.

15. *Mishnah Parah* 3:11.

16. Baruch A. Levine, *Anchor Bible: Numbers 1–20* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 460.

In Leviticus 17:11 we read, “For the life of the flesh *is* in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the souls.” We learn from Paul that “almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission” (Heb. 9:22). “For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb. 9:13–14). As blood gives us mortal life, so does the blood of Christ grant us eternal life. The scriptures are replete with verses teaching this doctrine.¹⁷

Like the priest who was to sacrifice the red heifer, Christ ascended the Mount of Olives and entered the Garden of Gethsemane in white raiment.¹⁸ As he knelt and prayed to his Father he became “exceedingly sorrowful” and “fell on his face” (Matt. 26:38–39) in prayerful pleading. His intense agony became too much to bear. His physical body finally revolted at the indescribable and unyielding pain and anguish he was experiencing. The suffering caused Christ to “bleed at every pore” (D&C 19:18), and “his sweat was it were great drops of blood” (Luke 22:44), possibly the condition known today in medicine as hematiidrosis. His body literally, not figuratively, shed forth blood from every pore in reaction to the pain thrust upon him.¹⁹ John Taylor summed up Christ’s experience in the garden with these words:

But what is the real reason for all this suffering and bloodshed, and sacrifice? We are told without the shedding of blood is no remission of sins. This is beyond our comprehension. Jesus had to take away sin by the sacrifice of himself, the just for the

17. See Moses 6:59–60, Heb. 13:11–12, John 6:53–54.

18. *Mishnah Parah* 4:1.

19. Some scholars think Luke was being figurative when writing, “his sweat was as it were great drops of blood.” From modern scripture we know it was literal (see Mosiah 3:7, JST Luke 22:44, and D&C 19:18).

unjust, but, previous to this grand sacrifice, these animals had to have their blood shed as types, until the great antitype should offer up himself once and for all. And as he in his own person bore the sins of all, and atoned for them by the sacrifice of himself, so there came upon him the weight and agony of ages and generations, the indescribable agony consequent upon this great sacrificial atonement wherein he bore the sins of the world, and suffered in his own person the consequences of an eternal law of God broken by man. Hence his profound grief, his indescribable anguish, his overpowering torture, all experienced in the submission to the eternal fiat of Jehovah and the requirements of an inexorable law.²⁰

One cannot help but wonder if Isaiah had this event in mind when he wrote, “Wherefore *art thou* red in thine apparel, and thy garments like him that treadeth in the winefat? I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people *there was* none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment” (Isa. 63:2–3).

Heifer Typology

Unlike most other sin offerings, the sacrificial animal in the law of the red heifer was not male, but female.²¹ A marvelous message is manifested in this metaphor. The female sacrifice suggests that the ritual is life giving. Through women we are born and gain mortal life; through Christ we become spiritually reborn and gain eternal life.²² Jesus taught the Jews this principle when he said, “I am come that they might have life. . . . I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep”

20. John Taylor, *The Gospel Kingdom: Selections from the Writings and Discourses of John Taylor*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1941), 116.

21. The Hebrew word *parab*, translated as cow or heifer, is the feminine form of *par*, the Hebrew word for bull. The biblical meaning of heifer should not be confused with its modern English meaning, which is a cow that has not yet had a calf. We know that a *parab* is older than three years, since a calf up to three years of age is an *eglab*.

22. It is interesting to note that *Yeshua*, the name of Jesus and the Hebrew noun for salvation, is a feminine word.

(John 10:10–11). Lehi clearly taught this principle to his son Jacob when he said, “There is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through . . . the Holy Messiah, who layeth down his life according to the flesh” (2 Ne. 2:8).

Just as the children of Israel could not become clean from the defilement caused by death through any other means than the ashes of the red heifer, so can we overcome death and gain eternal life only through the atonement of Christ. He is the light and life of the world—“no man cometh unto the Father, but by [him]” (John 14:6).

The heifer, like Jesus Christ, had to be perfect to be worthy of sacrifice. The heifer not only had to be “without spot, wherein is no blemish, *and* upon which never came yoke” (Num. 19:2), but its horns, hooves, and even eyelashes had to be red. If the horns and hooves were not perfectly red, they would be chopped off before the heifer was sacrificed (*Parab* 2:2). If one had ridden on the heifer, leaned on it, hung on its tail, crossed a river by its help, placed rope on its back, or put one’s cloak on it, it became invalid (*Parab* 2:3). If a mere two black or white hairs were found on the heifer, the animal became invalid (*Parab* 2:5). The heifer’s physical flawlessness was symbolic of the spiritual perfection required of Christ to atone for the sins of mankind—for he had to be spiritually without spot or blemish.

Another way the heifer symbolized Christ was that it was not compelled to leave the temple grounds and walk to the Mount of Olives. In the *Mishnah* we learn the priests had to “bring her forth, by herself.”²³ This foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ, for Christ, like the heifer, went voluntarily to the Mount of Olives to partake of the bitter cup that only he knew awaited him. He was not coerced to leave the Upper Room, cross the Kidron Valley, and enter into the Garden of Gethsemane. Rather, he led his disciples to the garden and voluntarily took upon himself our sins while his disciples slept. “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,

23. *Mishnah Parab* 3:7.

yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth" (Isa. 53:7).

The book of Hebrews provides us with another profound parallel between Christ and the red heifer. In chapter ten, Paul teaches that the Mosaic Law was a "shadow of good things to come, *and* not the very image of the things" (vs. 1). The animal sacrifices can never "continually make the comers thereunto perfect" (vs. 1). For if they could, why have they not "ceased to be offered?" (vs. 2). "For *it is* not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins" (vs. 4).

"Then said he [Jesus Christ], Lo, I come to do thy will, O God . . . By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once *for all*" (vs. 9–10). The priests stand daily in the temple sacrificing animals that will never take away sins, but Christ, "after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God" (vs. 12).

As Paul clearly points out, the purpose of the sacrifice of the red heifer was not to take away the Israelites' sins. The animal sacrifices had only the power to purify temporarily. Christ came and offered himself as the "one sacrifice for sins for ever" (vs. 12), thus enabling him to forgive us and allow us to be purified permanently. The sacrifice of the red heifer was given as a shadow of Christ's ultimate sacrifice; it was to point the children of Israel in the right path and help prepare them for the coming of the Messiah.

Conclusion

Like all sacrifices in ancient Israel, the sacrifice of the red heifer is a powerful type of Christ, offering us many insights into Christ's intercession for all mankind. The function, location, and elements of the law of the red heifer all point to the Savior, teaching and testifying of his power to reconcile man to God and overcome the effects of sin and death. Because of the permanent propitiation made by Christ on our behalf, we can enter boldly "into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way,

which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh. . . . [Therefore] let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb. 10:19–22). Only through the blood of our Savior, even Jesus Christ, may we overcome death, enter the presence of God, and dwell with the Lord forever.