

The Ashes of a Red Heifer

By [Don Preston](#)

Newspapers around the world have reported the excitement created in March of this year by the birth of a [red heifer](#). Born on a farm near Haifa, Israel, this heifer, inspected and "approved" by 25 Rabbinic experts, is now the focus of intense interest and controversy. According to Jewish sources no flawless red heifer has been born in Israel since the fall of Jerusalem in A. D. 70. One Jewish activist said "We have been waiting 2,000 years for a sign from God, and now He has provided us with a red heifer." The calf is thus viewed as a sign of the imminent coming of the Messiah and reestablishment of the Temple with its sacrificial system. Millennial Christian groups on the other hand see the birth of the calf as a sign of the Second Coming of Jesus to establish the kingdom and millennial reign.



Secular Jews have gone on record as wishing the young cow would just disappear; some have even suggested that it be destroyed to avoid a potential war. Arabs, who control the Temple Mount, are nervous because they believe Jews will use the heifer as an excuse to destroy the Islamic Dome of the Rock. Jewish extremists have made several attempts to destroy the Mosque since the early 1980s — when there was no red heifer. Thus the young bovine is viewed as a spark for violence against the Arab sanctuary. And the threat is real. Whether Jew or Christian, any modern anticipation of the reestablishment of the red heifer ceremony is ill grounded.

A Look at the Ceremony

Numbers 19 describes the important ceremony of the red heifer. A red heifer without flaw and that had never worn a yoke was to be taken outside the camp and slain. As the entire body was burnt, cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet were to be added to the fire. When the carcass was consumed the ashes were gathered. For the purification ceremony, pure water was added to some of the ashes of the heifer sacrifice. The resulting paste was applied to anyone coming into contact with a dead body. There are several distinctive features of the red heifer ceremony. It is the only sacrifice in Israel's system that was offered outside the confines of the city.¹ In addition, it is interesting that the one who offered the sacrifice became unclean and the one to whom it was applied became clean. This is the only sacrifice in which the animal's blood was burned; and the only offering in which the burning was the preliminary act.² In all other sacrifices the burning was the crowning act of sacrifice or was the final act after the blood was offered. Finally, the ashes of the red heifer were for the cleansing of the defilement of death.³ What is so important about the red heifer sacrifice is that Jesus has fulfilled its prophetic significance.

Jesus and the Red Heifer Sacrifice

Jesus' passion fulfills the typological [prophetic] elements of the red heifer sacrifice. The heifer was to be slain outside the city; Jesus was slain "outside the gate," (Hebrews 13:12). Historically the heifer was taken to the Mount of Olives and slain.⁴ Jesus' passion prayer occurred in Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, (Matthew 26:30). The entire heifer was to be consumed. Jesus gave himself completely in sacrifice. The ashes of the heifer were to be collected by one that was clean and stored in a clean place. Joseph of Arimathea, a devout man, collected Jesus' body and placed it in a new tomb, one that had never been defiled, (John 19:41.) The heifer's ashes were to be stored outside the city; Jesus' body was laid in the tomb outside the city.

During the sacrifice of the heifer, hyssop, cedar and scarlet were to be added. While on trial Jesus had a scarlet robe placed on him, (Matthew 27:28). As he hung on the cross he asked for a drink. The soldiers dipped hyssop in vinegar and gave it to him,⁵ (John 19:29). The red heifer ashes were applied to the defiled person in two stages, on the third day and on the seventh, (Numbers 19:12). There was an "already-but-not-yet" process of cleansing from the defilement of death. Likewise, the New Testament affirms that Jesus destroyed death by his death, (2 Timothy 1:9-10), but would destroy death at his parousia, (1 Corinthians 15:24-28⁶). This was the "already-but-not-yet" of resurrection. Jesus' sacrifice fulfills the prophetic significance of the red heifer sacrifice.

Deliverance from Death

The writer of Hebrews states the purpose of Jesus' sacrifice "through death, he might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the Devil," (Hebrews 2:14). Is this an implicit referent to the red heifer sacrifice? This sacrifice, more than any other, was devoted to the deliverance from the defilement of death.

In Hebrews 9:13-14 it says: "For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for 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?" Because of the meaning of the red heifer sacrifice-deliverance from the defilement of death — Hebrews 9:13-14 must be seen as a "resurrection text" setting forth the reality of resurrection life in Jesus. He provides cleansing of the conscience and deliverance "from dead works."

Deliverance from Dead Works

Deliverance from "dead works" means deliverance from "works or conduct that leads to death instead of life."⁷ For the Jew this included deliverance from the Old Covenant System because, though glorious, it was a "ministration of death," (2 Corinthians 3:6); it could not give life, (Galatians 3:20-21). For the Gentile, deliverance meant freedom from that which had "killed"; "And you he made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins" said Paul to the Gentile Ephesians of their conversion to Christ. In Christ is to be found "the eternal inheritance" (Hebrews 9:15). To put it succinctly "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life," (Romans 6:23).

Resurrection Implications

The red heifer was for the deliverance from death; Jesus' sacrifice is for the deliverance from death. Jesus' sacrifice is effective spiritually; something the red heifer ceremony could only anticipate. Because Jesus died to deliver us from death, (Hebrews 2:14), and because his sacrifice is effective this means we are currently delivered from death.

Hebrews draws on the imagery of the Old Covenant sacrifices: "Let us draw near to God with a true heart, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water," (Hebrews 10:22). The Old Covenant sacrifices were applied by the sprinkling of the blood and washing of the body; yet they could never cleanse the conscience nor deliver from death, (Hebrews 9:9; 10:1-4).

The blood of Jesus however is applied to our hearts at the time when our bodies are "washed with pure water." This is an unmistakable reference to baptism. In Romans 6:3-4, the writer says that those baptized into Christ join with his death, burial and resurrection; they are raised to walk in newness of life. Resurrection life is for those who enter the power of his resurrection.

The apostle affirms in Colossians 2:11-13 that in baptism the believer is "buried" with Christ and "raised up with him by faith in the operation of God." He also says that at this juncture "you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him,

having forgiven you all trespasses." Here is deliverance from death by the power of the sacrifice of Jesus.

A Modern Tragedy

Both Jews and dispensational Christians are excited about the birth of the red heifer in Israel. While they have different perspectives both groups anticipate the reestablishment of the red heifer sacrifice. Both groups fail to see in Jesus the fulfillment and expiration of that sacrifice.

God decreed that when the Old Testament was completely fulfilled it would pass away, (Matthew 5:17-18). If Christ has not completely fulfilled the prophetic aspect of the red heifer sacrifice the old law is still in effect. Thus, if death has not been completely purged the law is still in effect. If he has fulfilled the prophetic element of that offering the old law has passed — and death has been abolished.

In Colossians 2:14-16 and Hebrews 10:1-4 the writer says the Old Covenant sacrifices were a "shadow of good things to come." Both passages also say that Jesus is the substance or reality to which those shadows pointed. Thus, the completion of Jesus' work would signal the termination of the Old Covenant and its sacrificial system. God never intended for animal sacrifices to be permanent: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire" Hebrews 10:5. The Lord always pointed Israel beyond those animal offerings to the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus. He is the perfect, one time for all time sacrifice for sin, Hebrews 10:1-12.

As long as that old system—including the red heifer sacrifice—stood, man could [can!] have no access to God, (Hebrews 9:6-10). That old system would only stand until "the time of reformation," (Hebrews 9:10);⁸ but that system was "ready to vanish away" when Hebrews was written, (Hebrews 8:13).

In the first century, some Jewish Christians were forsaking Christ to return to the observance of the Old Covenant law. The Hebrews writer said that to do so was to apostatize and "crucify Christ afresh," Hebrews 6:4-6. All attempts to reestablish the red heifer sacrifice are tantamount to a rejection of Christ's sacrifice. His sacrifice accomplishes deliverance from sin and death. Simply stated, if Christ's sacrifice delivers us from sin, it delivers us from death. Christ's sacrifice lacks nothing. Reestablishment of the red heifer sacrifice could add nothing to it.

Christ's sacrifice is the reality anticipated by the "shadow" of the red heifer offering. Christ's sacrifice is better than the red heifer holocaust,⁹ (Hebrews 9:13-14). A restoration of the red heifer sacrifice would be the reinstatement of an inferior system. The ashes of the red heifer "sanctified to the purifying of the flesh." Jesus' sacrifice cleanses the conscience.

The cleansing of the red heifer sacrifice cleansed from the defilement of physical death. The sacrifice of Christ gives eternal life, (Hebrews 9:15). Jehovah never took pleasure in "burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin," (Hebrews 10:6-7). To seek the restoration of those sacrifices is to return to what He never desired. Christ's death and his parousia destroyed death and brought life to full reality. The shadows of the old system have given way to the reality.

Jesus' sacrifice is superior to the red heifer sacrifice. Jesus is the fulfillment of the sacrificial system of Old Covenant Israel. Jesus is the cessation of the Old Covenant system. Let us not be guilty of rejecting the perfect, efficacious deliverance from death because of a zealous but misguided zeal over the birth of a red calf in Israel. The sacrifice of the red heifer — or a thousand like her — can never equal the sacrifice of Jesus.

Footnotes

1. The remains of other sacrifices were to be burned outside the city, Leviticus 4:11-12; 9:13, etc. But this was disposal not sacrifice. The red heifer was to be slain outside the camp.
2. Another sacrifice of the red heifer involved the breaking of its neck and not burning. If a corpse was found near a town the "city fathers" had to offer the heifer as a cleansing for the defilement of that death and to clear themselves of any culpability, (Deuteronomy 21:1-9).
3. Numbers 19:9 says the ashes were for the purification of sin. Yet the main emphasis in the text is cleansing from defilement of death. Interestingly, most commentators ignore this and focus on purification from sin.
4. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969):50
5. I have thus far been unable to find the "cedar" that would correspond to the red heifer sacrifice. Some have suggested that the cedar was the cross, the inscription on the cross, or even the cedar of the Temple. Any help from the readers would be appreciated
6. The "process" of "the death of death" cannot be denied. Scripture affirms that by means of his death Jesus destroyed death, Hebrews 2:14; 2 Timothy 1:9-10. Yet scripture also says that death would be destroyed at the parousia, 1 Corinthians 15:24-28. These are not two different kinds of death, spiritual and physical, but a process initiated and consummated. The consummation was empowered by the initiation.
7. Max R. King "The Word of the Beginning of Christ: A Study of Christianity's OT Roots," Part IV, *Living Presence*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (November, 1995):7. The "dead works" were not the Law per se, but servitude to that which could not deliver from death.
8. Pentecost in his tome on millennialism ignores Hebrews 9:10 and the time of reformation. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958) This is significant because the current age cannot be the time of reformation per millennialism. That would be to admit too much. Yet the millennium cannot be the reformation because that would mean that the Old Covenant would of necessity be in force now and then pass at the arrival of the millennium. Yet the millennialist insists that the sacrifices are restored in the millennium. This is a great conundrum for the millennialist.
9. In theological terms a holocaust is a burnt offering.

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