

## The Original Significance of the Rite of the Red Cow in Numbers xix

JULIUS A. BEWER

UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, NEW YORK

**I**N Num. 19 we have the well-known description of the preparation of the ingredients which are to be used for the water of purification. A red cow without blemish, which has never yet borne a yoke, and has, therefore, never been used for profane purposes, is to be killed outside of the camp. The priest is to take some of its blood and sprinkle it seven times toward the sanctuary. Then the cow is to be burnt to ashes, skin and blood and all. The priest throws cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet thread into the fire as additional ingredients. After the whole is entirely burnt to ashes, the ashes are collected; they constitute the ingredients for the water of purification which is used for cleansing persons who have become defiled by contact with the dead. Every one who has participated in the ceremony becomes unclean.

The law is incorporated in the Priest-code, but that does not mean that we do not have here an extremely ancient practice. What the rite meant to the Priest-code is clear from the above outline. But what did the rite of the red cow mean originally?

It will hardly be denied that the impression which the ceremony makes is that of a regular ancient whole burnt-offering. The cow must be without blemish and must not yet have borne a yoke; that is, it must be fit for purposes of worship. It is burnt completely and all together. The strange feature is that the blood also was burnt with the

rest. We shall probably not be wrong if we assume that this is a survival from primitive times, when the people burnt every portion of the animal, even the blood, in a whole burnt-offering.

This whole burnt-offering was originally not offered by the priest, but by any one who chose to offer it. The priest does not kill the animal, nor does he burn it; he does not collect the ashes, nor does he bless them; he simply sprinkles some blood in the direction of the sanctuary, burns the cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet thread, and looks on; he does not even wait till the ashes are procured, but leaves before the end of the ceremony. It seems likely, as Holzinger has suggested in his commentary on Numbers, that he had originally nothing whatever to do with the matter. Indeed, the act of sprinkling the blood seven times in the direction of the sanctuary, which the priest performs, has come in because this rite was included in the category of rites connected with the sin-offering. It was no part of the original ceremony. The cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet thread did belong to the original rite; only it was not at first necessary that a priest should throw them into the fire.

To whom was the sacrifice originally offered? Not to Jahve, for it is not offered on his altar. Herein is still contained the hint that it was originally a sacrifice foreign to the Jahve-cult. The connection with that cult was made later, by the sprinkling of the blood in the direction of the sanctuary of Jahve. To whom then was it offered? The fact that the ashes are used for purification from uncleanness contracted by contact with the dead, points in the direction of a sacrifice to the demons or spirits of the dead. And here it is, perhaps, not without significance that the sacrificial animals offered by the Greeks to the chthonic deities had to be of red color, and that the person who was pursued by the Erinnyes bound scarlet threads around his hands. May this not be the reason for specifying so distinctly that the cow must be red? We find this specification, so far as I know, nowhere else in the Old Testament.

If this is so, we shall probably have to think that in primi-

tive times a whole burnt-offering of a red cow was made when death occurred in the family or tribe, this offering being to the spirits of the dead; then the ashes, being regarded as sacred, were used for getting rid of the taboo which men and things had become infected. The ashes would, perhaps, not all be needed at the time; what was left over was probably from the very beginning preserved, and afterward used when some one had become taboo by contact with a corpse. But of course the original occasion for the preparation of the ashes was a death in the family or tribe; the whole burnt-offering was the important thing, the ashes at first merely incidental. The Jahve-religion incorporated this ancient offering into its cultus, and in doing so transformed it and lost the old conception completely; but there remained indications that it was originally not connected with Jahve's sanctuary and religion.

The rite in Num. 19 cannot be considered without reference to the rite in Deut. 21, where we have in a sense a parallel case. Here it is in connection with the corpse of a man who has been murdered in the open country and whose murderer cannot be detected. The elders of the city nearest to the spot where the dead man was found, must take a heifer which has never been used for any profane work and bring it to a running stream, where they are to slay it. Then they must, in the presence of the priest, wash their hands over it and declare before God that the city which they represent is guiltless of the murder, and entreat God to forgive his people for the crime which has been committed in their midst.

Now here also, as Bertholet has already pointed out in his commentary on Deuteronomy, we have originally a sacrifice. Here also the priests are a later addition, for the elders of the city offer the sacrifice. And they offer it, not to Jahve, but to the spirit of the dead, who might, if not appeased in this manner, avenge himself upon the nearest city. Deuteronomy, however, does not any longer regard the ceremony as a real sacrifice, exactly as the Priest-code does not in connection with Num. 19. It has become merely a symbol.

In both cases, in Deuteronomy and in Numbers, we have examples of the power of the ancient Jahve-religion to assimilate the various customary rites, and, in assimilating, to transform them so that they are brought into harmony with its own spirit.