

Solomon and the Ashes of the Red Heifer

Numbers 19:1-22

The one thing that tradition says Solomon could not understand in all his wisdom was the sacrifice of the Red Heifer.

The rabbis were also puzzled: Why were those who prepared and carried out the sacrifice rendered unclean, when the Red Heifer's ashes mixed with water rendered everything clean? Why was everything, including the blood, hide and the dung, burned? Why did it all take place completely outside the Temple/Tabernacle?

To examine this we've got to start back in the Garden of Eden.

The fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden left humanity with three results of their sin.

Blame - Sin results in blame or condemnation by the judgment of God. "The wages of sin is death" (**Romans 6:23**).

Guilt - Internally, sin results in feelings of personal guilt.

Shame - In a social context, sin that is publicly revealed results in shame. Shame is sort of like everyday embarrassment, but on steroids.

Guilt is a feeling of sorrow for sin, for our actions, for what we have done.

Shame is the response to realizing that I AM sin. It strikes at my being, my identity as part of the society or community. Shame tells me sin is who I am, not just what I do.

We've studied how Christ took the blame for our sin (represented by the goat for Yahweh sacrificed on Yom Kippur) and our feelings of guilt (borne away by the scapegoat into the wilderness) in **Leviticus 16**.

But what about our shame? Is there a remedy for that too?

Shame causes us to hide, it shuts up our mouth, we want to die or disappear, dissolve right through the floor.

Anthropologists describe how, in some shame-based primitive tribes, when someone transgresses a social taboo, they sometimes retreat to their hut and simply die from shame. They call it "voodoo death" because it seems like magic. The weight of social ostracism is too much to bear, there is no remedy, and the rejected person simply has a heart attack.

We all have experienced some level of shame. We have failed or disappointed others. Situations or events in our past that caused shame stay with us. It can be a psychological "hot button," so that when something brings it to mind, we react as if it

were happening in the present.

For a few, that shame can be toxic and can take control of our life.

Shame and Nakedness

The shame of Adam and Eve was expressed by their "knowing they were naked" (**Genesis 3:7**). With shame, we are exposed, uncovered, and try to hide or create something through our own effort to cover ourselves, as Adam and Eve did with their fig-leaf garments. Their first response was to hide and cover themselves.

God asks "Who told thee that thou wast naked?" Actually, nobody had told them. In other words, because shame is a social effect, there had to be more than one person involved to reflect the disapproval and humiliation. Their own sense of shame had told them that they were left exposed and naked.

It was only later that Adam and Eve's guilt was displayed by their self-justification and accusation.

The society or community that evoked the shame of their sin was the community in the Garden - God and the couple, the attending angels, the animals over which they were given dominion, and even the serpent. Everybody knew or would come to know what they had done.

God covered their shame with a sacrifice - the skins of the sacrificed animal, which looked forward to Christ's own sacrifice (**Genesis 3:21**).

Christ displayed the remedy for our shame on the cross, where - like Adam and Eve - He was stripped naked and exposed in all his weakness and agony.

On our recent trip to Italy we stumbled into a nondescript church and discovered it contained a chapel with a large crucifix made by Michelangelo in his youth. The unique aspect of the crucifix was that Jesus was depicted as naked hanging on the cross, whereas most depictions supply a kind of loincloth.

- **Hebrews 12:2** - "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."

The verse could be translated "instead of (*anti*) the joy, Christ endured the cross, despising (*kataphroneō*) the shame."

kataphronéō = to "think down on or against," to dis-esteem, or think little of something"

He "dis-esteemed" the shame involved, considering it as something not to be feared or avoided.

But the effects were certainly experienced *by* Him. He was considered unclean, and placed "outside the camp" at His crucifixion. He experienced the effects of our sin and the sin of the whole world fully - and received God's righteous *blame/punishment* for it - death. He bore the *shame* to the extent that He cried "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me!" After His burial, He descended into hades, like the scapegoat that was sent into the wilderness, bearing away our *guilt*.

Blame, Guilt and Shame - were all dealt with on the cross.

But what does that mean for us?

Living in a society based on honor and shame, Paul described how the world viewed himself the other apostles: "we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day" (**1 Corinthians 4:13**). - i.e. the leftover "scrapings" which have no value and are only good for throwing in the garbage.

Paul is saying he took on the same shameful position that Jesus did:

- **Philippians 2:8-9** - "But made himself of no reputation (*kenoō* - emptied), and took upon him the form of a servant (slave), and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." The most shameful of deaths.

This was the "mind of Christ" - the life attitude believers are commanded to enter into.

Humility was not a virtue in Greek or Roman society. Humility was shameful. But, it is the only path to the cross.

"He took the form of a servant (or slave)." - Slavery was the most shameful social position. Slaves were not noticed as people, their humanity was not considered. They had no rights.

A Doubled Edged Sword

But God uses shame. He criticized Israel for not blushing in shame for their idolatries.

- **Jeremiah 3:3** - "...thou hadst a whore's forehead, thou refusedst to be ashamed."

The shame that we must come to accept is that our sin was so terrible, our rebellion so egregious, that it required nothing less than the crucifixion of God's own Son to make it right.

But shame is the one thing that our flesh hates to acknowledge. We can't look at it straight on. We look away, hide, deflect or change the subject. Shame paralyzes us, makes it almost impossible to speak. Our face becomes frozen and we blush.

A Shameful Episode

The rabbis proposed that the Red Heifer sacrifice was somehow related to Israel's making of the Golden Calf in the wilderness (**Exodus 32**). Moses came down the mountain with the tablets of the Law, and Israel was having an orgy while worshipping a false god. It was a shameful low point in Israel's history.

The Red Heifer was said to atone for the sin of the golden calf, so that the mother – the Red Heifer – should purify the defilement caused by her offspring, the golden calf.

According to R. Meir in all of Jewish history only seven heifers were burned, but according to the rabbis there were nine (Par. 3:5), and the tenth and last will be prepared by the Messiah (Yad, Parah Adummah 3:4).

Miamonides: "The first was brought by Moses our teacher. The second was brought by Ezra. Seven others were offered until the destruction of the Second Temple. And the tenth will be brought by the King Moshiah; may he speedily be revealed." (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Parah Adumah 3:5.)

No Red Heifers were sacrificed after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. But the supply of ashes survived and continued to be used by Jews for purification up until about the time of Emperor Constantine, according to rabbinical reports. There is no record of exactly when the supply actually ran out.

Presuming the ashes are lost or used up, they cannot be mixed with any new ashes, as was the tradition, which served as a sort of insurance against any one part of the supply accidentally being discounted.

In fact, the Messiah did bring the last Red Heifer - pictured in Himself and his Bride.

King Solomon famously stated, "I had said I would become wise — but it is far from me" (**Ecclesiastes 7:23**). The Midrash expounds, "With all other [laws of the Torah] I held my footing, but when it comes to the teaching of the heifer, I analyzed, I asked and I researched [without understanding]." (Tanchuma, Chukat 6.)

We have an advantage over Solomon. We know that the Law prophesied of Jesus the Messiah, especially the sacrifices and offerings.

- **John 5:39-40** - "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: [but] they are they which testify of me."

The Church Fill Up the Sufferings Which are Lacking...

I propose that the Red Heifer represents Jesus indwelling his church as his Bride (the heifer is female), which is completely consumed as a living sacrifice. The Red Heifer sacrifice depicts the aspect of the crucifixion that removes our shame, while at the same time reflecting our "filling up" the sufferings that are lacking.

- **Colossians 1:24** - "Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church..."

What does that mean? How can Jesus' afflictions be lacking something?

The same words are used to describe disciples bringing aid to Paul:

- **1 Corinthians 16:17** - "I am glad of the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus: for that which was lacking on your part they have supplied (filled up)."

"lacking" and "supplied" are the same Greek words as in the Colossians passage. What was lacking was getting the aid from Corinth to Paul, from there to here.

Similarly, what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ is getting the meaning of His suffering from first century Jerusalem to our present-day world in the same way Paul did - preaching the cross. But by doing so we are guaranteed tribulation and suffering of our own.

This means we continue in His trials, not our own.

- **Luke 22:28** - "You are they which have continued with me in my temptations/trials."

Effects of the Cleansing Waters - Acceptance

The Ashes of the sacrificed and burned up Red Heifer were gathered, and then mixed with "living water" from the Pool of Siloam to create what is called the "waters of Separation" or "rejection." i.e. the waters would erase any uncleanness that had caused social exile, separation or rejection.

The removal of uncleanness through the Red Heifer Ashes (which meant a return to social inclusion and acceptance back into the community) is dispensed as believers preach the gospel while both acknowledging their own shame and shame's removal by Christ's sacrifice.

The mystery for the rabbis was why those who prepared the sacrifice were rendered unclean. But this is readily explained if we see Jesus as the one preparing the sacrifice.

Christ who prepared the Red Heifer sacrifice was rendered unclean on the cross by taking on our sin and our shame. He gave up his own purity and sinlessness in order to prepare us to be living sacrifices too. The uncleanness was realized in His shame - His nakedness, his weakness, loss of even movement by his pierced hands and feet, his loss of continence - recall that the Red Heifer's dung is also burned. Victims usually emptied their bowels as they died. Crucifixion involved a public trial where one lost any legal standing, then a crowd mocked and spit on the victims to further humiliate them.

The hide of the Red Heifer is burned, relating to the nakedness of Adam and Eve (God covered them with the hide of a sacrificed animal) and of Christ exposed on the cross.

Reproach

Why was the Red Heifer sacrifice conducted outside of the Temple precincts? Because Christ's crucifixion occurred outside the Temple and city walls.

- **Hebrews 13:12–13** - "So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured."

"reproach" = *oneidismos* - taunts, reviling, disappointment, disapproval, a cause or occasion of disgrace or discredit, to bring disgrace or shame upon someone.

(Ultimately his reproach was erased by His victorious resurrection!)

The heifer is red because sin is represented by the color red, well as the blood of Christ that atones for sin:

- **Isaiah 1:18** - "...Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."

The Red Heifer had to be completely red - even two hairs of another color would disqualify her. In the same way, we must see that we are completely sinful, in fact that we ARE sin, to the core.

The heifer had to have never had a yoke, or even carry anything as heavy as a cloth on its back. This represents an absence of self-effort. The Bride does no work, she receives only grace. She has not been "tamed" by the world to exert herself according to the world's value system.

The heifer could not have been mounted or mated by a bull. In other words, she was a virgin, like the 144,000 in **Revelation 14:1,4**. In fact, their spiritual purity is a consequence of the sacrifice pictured by the Red Heifer and the sprinkling of the waters of separation made from the Red Heifer ashes.

The main use of the waters of separation was to purify those who had become unclean by touching a dead body. When we confront our own sin, guilt and deep shame, we touch our own dead body. Our uncleanness causes estrangement and exile that can only be remedied by the Ashes of the Red Heifer.

The Bride is the embodiment of Christ as the Red Heifer - fully consumed, reduced to ashes, mixed with "living" water, dipped out with a hyssop branch and sprinkled by the hand of an innocent child.

The rabbinical tradition is that to administer the waters of separation, one had to never have become unclean. They raised children in caves underneath the Temple, protected from accidental defilement by stepping on a grave, for instance. Such a "holy child"

would be the one to dip a branch of hyssop into the waters and sprinkle it on those seeking cleansing.

But this is another picture of Christ , this time seen as coming into the world as an innocent child.

- **Acts 4:29-30** - "And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, By stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus."

The hand that sprinkles the waters for cleansing is also the hand that heals and performs miracles.

The Bride as the embodiment of the Red Heifer sacrifice offers the world the remedy for their condemnation, guilt and shame, through the gospel of salvation. If they receive it, they can be forgiven and their shame covered.

First we must face our own shame - especially the fact that our sin was sufficiently gross that it required the Son of God to die. Then we can receive the cleansing and the return to the fellowship with God, and as the Red Heifer is consumed as a living sacrifice, we take the message of forgiveness and cleansing to the people in our world.