The nineteenth chapter of the book of Numbers deals with the Red Heifer (parah adumah; literally, red cow). Father de Vaux interprets this, with a high degree of probability, as a rite "of ancient origin... accepted by Yahwism" (Ancient Israel, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1961, p. 461). Verses 1 to 10 of the chapter discuss the preparation of a water of purification (mē niddah; literally, water of purification from sin). The rite involved the burning to ash of a Red Heifer by an assistant, possibly a layman, after slaughter in the sight of a priest and a ritual sprinkling of the Heifer's blood by "Eleazar the priest." The Heifer had to be without spot or blemish and never to have borne the yoke. The officiating priest became ritually unclean as a result of his part in the ceremony; so, too, did his assistant. A third person, again not specified as a priest, but only as one who was ritually clean, was then required to gather up the ashes of the Heifer and to store them in a place "outside the camp" (mihutz lammahaneh). This participant was also rendered unclean by his action and required purification. This section (verses 1 to 10) concludes, without reference to the specific method of mixing the ashes of the Heifer with water or to the specific uses to which the water of purification was to be put, with the words: "and it shall be unto the children of Israel and unto the stranger that sojourneth among them, for a statute (ḥuk) for ever."

This chapter of Numbers continues by speaking of the ritual defilement of the man who touches a corpse. His uncleanness persists for seven days. On the third of these days, he is to be sprinkled with the water of purification; otherwise his impurity will not be removed.
on the seventh day. 1) A person who does not fulfil the injunction of sprinkling is to be excommunicated ("that soul shall be cut off from Israel") because of his continued impurity (verses 11-13). A new theme enters with verse 14; now it is not only direct contact with a corpse that defiles, as it was in verse 11. When a death takes place in a tent, all the contents of the tent as well as every person who enters the tent is unclean for seven days. Verse 15 adds that every uncovered vessel becomes unclean. Verse 16 goes even farther: whoever touches a corpse in the out-of-doors, or a human bone, or even a grave is ritually impure for seven days.

Not until verse 17 do we find the directions for the preparation and use of the water of purification for those who are unclean. It is to be prepared by adding running water (literally, "living water," i.e., water from a spring or a flowing stream, not from a pool) to a portion of the ashes of the Red Heifer in a vessel. A ritually clean person (verse 18) is to dip a sprig of hyssop into the mixture and sprinkle the tent in which the death took place, all its contents, and all the persons who had become defiled by contact or by mere presence in the tent. Verse 19 adds that the sprinkling is to take place twice, on the third day and again on the seventh day. The previously clean person who performs the sprinkling contracts a minor defilement by his part in the purification ceremony; verse 19 requires him to purify himself, to wash his clothes, and to bathe in water on the seventh day, and verse 21 orders that it shall be a perpetual statute (ḥūḵ) "that he that sprinkleth the water of separation shall wash his clothes; and he that toucheth the water of separation shall be unclean until even" and (verse 22) that everything that he touches and anyone who touches anything that he has touched shall also be unclean until evening.

There is only one other biblical text that mentions the water of purification, Numbers XXXI, verse 23, which requires that the metallic spoils of war are to be first purified by fire and then purified by the water of purification, while other spoils, which could not withstand the fire, are merely to be passed through the water of purification.

1) The recent Jewish Publication Society of America translation (1962) translates verse 12 to require two sprinklings, on the third, and again on the seventh day; this assimilates verse 12 to verse 19. The Hebrew text as it stands does not support this translation, but it is not an unreasonable emendation.