THE PARADOX OF THE RED HEIFER

by

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In seeking to understand the paradox of the Red Heifer, a puzzle which has fascinated readers of the Bible for centuries, the dominant approach in the last decade has been that of Jacob Milgrom. Beginning in a series of articles and culminating in the discussion in his commentary on Numbers, Milgrom has elaborated an interpretation of the rite based on the premise that explaining it as a sin-offering, ḥattāq, provides the necessary clues for a comprehensive explanation of the ritual and a satisfying resolution of the attendant paradoxes.

The purpose of sin-offerings as a group, according to Milgrom, is to remove contamination, hence these sacrifices should be called "purification offerings". The Red Heifer is an atypical purification offering in that its blood, which infuses the ashes with their power, is not offered on the altar (as we might expect on the basis of the pattern of other purificatory sacrifices), but burned together with all the rest of the animal. All who are involved in preparation of the
Red Heifer from the moment of consecration, or of its ashes, or who handle the ashes are thereafter rendered impure. They must cleanse themselves and their garments, and wait until evening before they can rejoin the people, while the person who has contracted corpse uncleanness is rendered pure by sprinkling with these very ashes mixed with water. This is the heart of the paradox: the Red Heifer’s ashes purify the defiled, but they defile the pure. Milgrom proposes that the key to resolving this dilemma is to be found in the mechanism of purgation. The purification offering absorbs the impurity it has purged, hence it is now contaminated by the residues of the defilement it has eliminated. Milgrom offers a number of ancient Near Eastern parallels for this assertion.

This interpretation, however, contains a major flaw. In the Near Eastern examples cited the ritual detergents are contaminated with the impurity they have removed after they have been used. In modern terms, it is as if some of the dirt we wash off remains adhering to the bar of soap. In the case of the Red Heifer, however, it is explicitly stated that all those involved in preparation of the sacrifice after the consecration of its blood are rendered impure (Num. xix 7-10), even before the ashes are used and have come into contact with the impurity of corpse uncleanness. The case of the Red Heifer is therefore not analogous to the Near Eastern parallels suggested by Milgrom. The mechanism by which its ashes defile cannot be the residual impurity left behind in ritual detergents, since the ashes defile before they are brought into contact with impurity. To the best of my knowledge, Milgrom does not deal with this point directly in his publications on the Red Heifer. Wright, however, does address this issue, suggesting that the sacrifice defiles from the moment of consecration “prospectively, before actual use in purification”.

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8 (n. 4, above) p. 116. This suggestion of Wright is apparently based on an idea elaborated by Milgrom in connection with another aspect of purificatory sacrifices. Milgrom attempts to explain why the carcasses of these animals defile even though they are no longer in contact with the blood brought into the sanctuary. He suggests that the impurity leaps from the sanctuary to the carcass (“Two Kinds”, p. 336). See also D. P. Wright, The Disposal of Impurity (Atlanta, 1987), p. 130. Neither Milgrom nor Wright explains the mechanism by which this leap is supposedly made.