Water for impurity or water of impurity?
The red cow of Numbers 19 revisited

Dominic Rudman (UK)

ABSTRACT

The description of the process for removing corpse impurity by using the ashes of the red cow in Numbers 19 is often understood as a cleansing ritual. Accordingly,  הָדַן וְמַטִּילוּ אֶת הַמְּדַנְדָּן, the Hebrew expression used to describe the concoction of water and ashes is usually translated ‘water for impurity’. This article re-examines the nature of the ritual and argues that הָדַן וְמַטִּילוּ אֶת הַמְּדַנְדָּן is actually a polluting agent. Specifically, it imparts a minor impurity to individuals suffering from a more serious contamination. This has the effect of diluting their uncleanness to the point where normal priestly decontamination can take place by laundering and bathing. The expression הָדַן וְמַטִּילוּ אֶת הַמְּדַנְדָּן should not be translated elliptically, but according to its literal meaning, ‘water of impurity’.

A INTRODUCTION

The process of cleansing from corpse contamination detailed in Numbers 19 contains several references to an item called הָדַן וְמַטִּילוּ אֶת הַמְּדַנְדָּן. This Hebrew expression appears to have caused no little bafflement among scholars, since its literal meaning would appear to be ‘water of impurity’, yet the context in which הָדַן וְמַטִּילוּ אֶת הַמְּדַנְדָּן appears implies that it has a cleansing function. For this reason, the expression הָדַן וְמַטִּילוּ אֶת הַמְּדַנְדָּן is often understood elliptically, ‘water (for the removal) of impurity’, and translated ‘water for impurity’ (Snaith 1967:273; Noth 1968:139-140).¹

Scholarship from the late nineteenth century onwards tended simply to see the ritual of Numbers 19 as a relic of primitive magic incorporated into the belief system of P (Sturdy 1976:137; Budd 1984:214). In part, this was a reaction against Jewish and Christian writers such as Philo (De Vict Offerent, c.ii) and Augustine (Quaest in Num, 33) who sought to explain the significance of the ritual through allegory (Gray 1903:247). In the latter part of the last century, an attempt has been made to understand the paradox of a cleansing agent that is

¹ The term הָדַן appears to denote impurity arising from menstruation (Lv 12:2, 5; 15:19-20, 24-26, 33; 18:19; Ezk 18:6; 22:10; 36:17), but it can also refer to more general forms of impurity (Ezk 7:19, 20; Lm 1:17; Ezr 9:11; 2 Chr 29:5). In Nm 19, it always appears in the expression הָדַן וְמַטִּילוּ אֶת הַמְּדַנְדָּן (the same also appears in Nm 31:29).
called ‘water of impurity’ based on etymological investigation. The term נָדַּים has been linked with the roots נָדַּא (Qal: depart, wander, flee; Hiphil: put to flight, chase away) or נָדַּח (Piel: chase away). If either of these derivations is correct, נָדַּים in the context of menstruation might refer to the expulsion or discharge of blood.

Derived from this specific case would be the more general sense ‘impurity’ in Ezekiel 7:19 et al (Milgrom & Wright 1984:250-253). An alternative proposal has been that, while נָדַּחֵו in the present context of Numbers 19 may refer to ‘water against impurity’, the literal sense of the Hebrew reflects an earlier stage in the ritual tradition, in which נָדַּחֵו was connected with ordeal waters, such as those used to determine the innocence or guilt of the suspected adulteress in Numbers 5 (Wefing 1981:342-364; cf Budd 1984:214).

Neither of the proposals put forward by commentators in recent decades is entirely satisfactory in explaining the paradox of an impure item that appears to cleanse. The understanding of the term נָדַּים advanced by Milgrom and Wright is dependent on a particular semantic track that, while possible, is far from straightforward. Moreover, it does not provide a solution to the problem of how an apparent cleansing agent can itself impart a minor impurity (Nm 19:21). Wefing provides a rationale for how such an agent might have negative associations, but does not offer a convincing argument for how נָדַּחֵו made the step from being an agent that determines contamination to one that removes it.

### B TEXT AND CONTEXT

#### 1 נָדַּחֵו in the Book of Numbers

Much information can be gleaned from a close reading of this text and of others associated with it (notably Lv 13-14). The contamination to be removed in Numbers 19 arises from contact with the dead. Corpse contamination is the most severe of the permitted impurities in P, and is referred to as the ‘father of the fathers of uncleanness’ in rabbinic tradition (Rashi on b. Pesah 5.14b, 17a; cf m. Kelim 1:1-4). In order to achieve its removal, a red cow is slaughtered and burned. The text makes it clear that every part of the cow is to be consumed by the fire, as well as all the other ingredients used in נָדַּחֵו. Moreover, the whole process is to be strictly supervised by the priest in charge of preparing this concoction: ‘While he watches, the cow is to be burned – its hide, flesh, blood and offal. The priest is to take some cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool and throw them on to the cow’ (Nm 19:6).

The emphasis on the reduction of the cow and the other ingredients to ashes suggests that what goes into the נָדַּחֵו of Numbers 19 may represent

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[2] The expression ‘permitted impurity’ is often used in scholarship to refer to contamination that is to some extent unavoidable. Such an impurity may arise from contact with dead bodies, from sexual intercourse, disease or cultic activity.
nullification, or total destruction. Numbers 19:6 implies that if the cow, all of the cow, were not reduced to ashes, the hdnh ym would be rendered ineffectual. The significance of the cow’s complete destruction seems to lie in the source of the pollution that hdnh ym is supposed to treat. By mixing the ashes of the cow and the other ingredients with fresh water (~yyx ~ym, lit: ‘living water’), a weak solution of death is created. The point of hdnh ym seems to be that it treats impurity from contact with a human corpse, ultimately chaos contamination arising from death (Jenson 1992:37; Wenham 1997:36-37), by including a polluting agent arising from a dead animal.

Any explanation of precisely how hdnh ym works must be speculative without concrete evidence from the text, but that does not mean that the attempt should not be made. Milgrom, for example, argues that the waters magically effect the transfer of impurity from purified to purifier (1981:62-67). Most commentators claim a more general cleansing effect for the water, however (Noth 1968:140; Sturdy 1976:137). In view of this apparent consensus on the function of hdnh ym, it is curious that at no point in Numbers 19 is it stated directly that this concoction sprinkled over a contaminated individual has a cleansing effect. The individual affected by corpse contamination becomes clean only after laundering his clothes and bathing (Nm 19:19). This is not to deny that hdnh ym is understood to have a vital role in the ritual described in Numbers 19. Numbers 19:20 makes clear that those who fail to undergo sprinkling with hdnh ym remain unclean and are to be ‘cut off’, suggesting either that they are put to death (Noth 1968:142) or excluded from the camp of Israel (Sturdy 1976:137). Yet hdnh ym itself renders unclean for one day all who touch it, and such individuals must undergo P’s usual procedures for decontamination (Nm 19:21-22). The paradox can be resolved by understanding hdnh ym as having not so much a cleansing function as a facilitating one. The function of hdnh ym, a minor source of pollution that can be removed by bathing, seems to be to cause a more serious contamination of a like nature to become responsive to the usual treatments for impurities. Possibly, the operation of hdnh ym was not rationalised, but it seems more likely that the lesser pollution was understood to merge with the greater, thereby diluting its power. A comparable idea exists in m. Tohoroth 1:5 which states that when like foods of differing levels of uncleanness are mixed together, they convey only the lesser uncleanness.

2 **Parallels to hdnh ym in Leviticus 13-14**

As many commentators have noted, Leviticus 14:1-9 contains a description of a process for making a liquid similar in many respects to the hdnh ym of 19:

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3 The fact that the ashes of the red cow retain their death-impurity is highlighted by the fact that they are said in Nm 19:9 to be stored outside the Israelite camp (cf Wright 1987:215-217).
Numbers 19 (e.g. Noth 1968:140; Sturdy 1976:135). In Leviticus, the priest also goes out of the camp (Lv 14:2, cf. Nm 19:3) this time to examine a person formerly suffering from רמות (a term often translated ‘leprosy’ but actually referring to a range of different skin complaints). If satisfied that the symptoms of the disease have abated, the priest commands that two living birds should be brought, along with cedar wood, scarlet yarn and hyssop. One bird is slaughtered over the water, so that its blood runs into it, and the remaining ingredients are dipped together in the mixture, which is then sprinkled over the person to be cleansed.

Observations of the parallels between Numbers 19 and Leviticus 14 are based on the fact that they are analogous processes for removing a severe impurity, that they make use of animal sacrifice, as well as cedar wood, scarlet yarn and hyssop. Yet scholars have, with good reason, been reluctant to link the texts too closely because of the significant differences that may also be perceived in the texts. The bird sacrificed in Leviticus 14 is not burned to ashes – rather, its blood is added to the water. The other ingredients in common are not consumed but dipped in the water and used as a means of sprinkling.

The problems posed by these differences can be solved to some extent by reading Leviticus 14 and Numbers 19 in the light of each other. The latter, as I have suggested, involves the preparation of a weak solution of death. The former uses blood as the active ingredient in the purifying water. In contrast to the symbolism of nullification and death implicit in the use of the ashes of the red cow, blood is understood by P to contain the life of the being through which it runs (Lv 17:1-14; cf. Dt 12:23) (Levine 1974:68; Porter 1976:108). In the Old Testament, the individual suffering from רמות is understood to be in a state of death (Nm 12:10-13; 2 Ki 15:5) (Cassuto 1973:36, 238; Hartley 1992:194; Wenham 1997:37). In this context, it seems that the ‘fresh water’ (~yyt ~ym, lit: ‘living water’ [Lv 14:5]) in combination with the blood of the animal sacrifice serves to create a solution of life (cf. Hartley 1992:195). This at least is the underlying idea of scholars such as Porter (1976:108) who argue that blood, being the seat of life, contains a positive force that defeats the negative force of evil. This solution, by being sprinkled on the afflicted individual, serves to return the leper to the world of the living. Apart from the necessity of slaughtering one of the two birds for its blood, the remaining items used in the ritual are left whole (symbolising the wholeness of the purified sufferer from רמות). In order to underline the new life of the purified individual, the remaining bird is released (Lv 14:9) (Keil & Delitzsch 1980:20).

C SYNTHESIS & CONCLUSIONS

In some respects, the waters of Leviticus 14 and Numbers 19 can be seen as mirror images of each other. יי יתנניה contains a series of ingredients, the
most important being the carcass of a red cow, that are consumed by fire (i.e. destroyed), but mixed with מים חיים (‘living water’). The effect is to create a contaminating solution whose active ingredient is a weaker form of the pollution to be treated. Accordingly, מים חיים should not be translated ‘water for impurity’ but ‘water of impurity’. Its polluting effect is clearly seen in the fact that it contaminates those who come into contact with it.

In Leviticus 14, a similar mix is used to treat a sufferer from רדה whose symptoms have receded. Almost the same ingredients are used, except that in place of an animal’s ashes (symbolising death), the active ingredient is blood (symbolising life). If מים חיים in Numbers 19 meant ‘water for (the elimination of) impurity’, then one would expect the water of Leviticus 14 to be given the same name, since this water does actually seem to have a purifying function. Yet the water in Leviticus 14 is never referred to by using this expression. Bearing in mind the proposal that מים חיים operates in Numbers 19 by imparting a minor impurity that weakens a greater one, it seems likely that the water of Leviticus 14 is not termed מים חיים because it does not contaminate those who come into contact with it. Rather than imparting the quality of death as does מים חיים, the water of Leviticus 14 imparts that of life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Dominic Rudman, 69 Newton Road, Eastleigh, Hants, SO50 9BX, United Kingdom. E-mail: dominic.rudman@tesco.net