

# THE RED HEIFER OFFERING

By Mike Burnham

The first sacrifice of a heifer occurred when God established His covenant with Abram in Genesis 15. It was later made a part of the Mosaic covenant in Numbers 19. David was anointed during Samuel's sacrifice of a heifer in 1 Samuel 16. No other references to such a sacrifice are found in the Bible, but the first-century Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, recorded a strange story regarding an attempt at sacrificing another heifer. It occurred during the Passover festival a few years before the Romans destroyed Herod's temple: "At the same festival...a heifer, as she was led by the high priest to be sacrificed, brought forth a lamb in the midst of the temple." (*The Wars of the Jews*, book VI, chapter V, paragraph 3).

Josephus mentions this along with several other strange happenings in the years preceding the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The heifer gave birth to a lamb! But the heifer, by definition, was a virgin. How could she have been pregnant? Was it a virgin birth? Furthermore, she did not deliver a species of her own kind. The cow dropped a lamb in the temple. A miracle?

If we use this story to help us determine the meaning of the red heifer offering it would point to the heifer as representing Israel and the lamb as representing Jesus. God seemed to be telling Israel (typified by the heifer) that they had produced the Messiah (typified by the lamb). Josephus doesn't tell us if the heifer was disqualified or not but it is assumed it was since it could no longer be considered a heifer (a virgin). Israel, a few years later, was scattered among the nations after the destruction of Jerusalem. The picture of her denial of her messiah and subsequent judgment or her disqualification of cleansing.

I have read that Jewish sources report that a red heifer was sacrificed shortly before the temple was destroyed, so another red heifer must have been substituted. The Jewish revolt against the Romans began in A.D. 66. Sometime over the next four years, the ashes of the red heifer, along with many other temple items, were removed for safekeeping and hidden by the priesthood.

### **SEARCH FOR THE ASHES**

Since 1977, a concerted effort to locate the missing ashes has led archeologist Vendyl Jones to explore a cave near the Dead Sea. He believes a copper scroll, discovered in 1952, describes the "Cave of the Column" as the one in which the ashes of the red heifer were hidden. For the past twenty years, several excavations have been made.

In 1988, his team discovered a juglet of oil which fits an ancient description of the oil used for anointing priests and kings. In 1992, Jones opened a hidden chamber in the "Cave of the Column" complex described in the copper scroll. Inside was a silo containing 600 kilograms of spices used for the temple incense offerings.

In the near future, if he can get the necessary excavation permits, he plans to open the seventh hidden chamber of the cave. According to the copper scroll, this chamber should contain the ashes of the red heifer and the garments of the high priest.

### **RED HEIFER BORN**

A reporter of the Boston Globe reports that a red heifer was born in 1996 on a northern Israeli farm run by a religious high school for troubled and orphaned students. The heifer was born of a black and white mother and a brown father, yet she has not one black hair or white hair. The article

opens with the following: "She stares out at the world through dewy eyes, stumbling on awkward legs, dipping into her trough with abandon, oblivious to the soaring hopes and apocalyptic fears that have spread with the news of her birth.

"Watched over by an armed guard in a skullcap and visited by rabbis and other seekers of meaning, this rust-colored six-month-old heifer is hailed as a sign of the coming Messiah and decried as a walking atomic bomb.

"of a variety believed extinct for centuries, the red heifer is seen by some as the missing link needed for religious Jews to rebuild their ancient temple in Jerusalem. Sacrificing the animal in its third year and using its ashes in a purification rite would allow Jews to return 2,000 years later to the temple site, a spot holy to both Jews and Muslims.

"With tensions already high over Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decision to build a Jewish neighborhood in the section of Jerusalem that Palestinians consider theirs, many fear that the calf's arrival could create an explosive situation."

### **THE FIRST RECORDED HEIFER**

The first sacrifice of a heifer occurred some four hundred years before Moses. It is recorded in the account of the covenant God made with Abram. After showing him the divine story written in the stars, that his posterity would produce the Messiah, we are told that Abram believed in the Lord and the Lord "*counted it to him for righteousness*" (Gen. 15:6). Then the Lord promised Abram that his posterity would possess the land wherein he dwelt (Gen. 15:7-11). This seems to be a little more difficult for Abram to understand, than the promise about his posterity, and he asked the

question, *"whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?"* The Lord responds with a strange request. Abram must prepare a series of sacrifices before he can find the answer to his question (Gen. 15:12-18). Abram was told that the covenant concerned his seed. Therefore, we may assume that the animals used in the sacrifice point to Abram's progeny.

## **THE HEIFER**

The heifer typifies the barren Sarai and her miracle children, who were destined to go into a land was not theirs (Egypt). There, they would suffer affliction and after four hundred years they would return. From the day they entered Egypt to the day they left were four generations ---- Levi, Kohath, Amram, and Moses.

The gender of the heifer (female) reminds us not only of Sarai, but her progeny, Israel, who became the barren wife of Jehovah. While Moses remained atop Mount Sinai, the heifer (Israel) made herself a golden bull (the Egyptian calf, Apis!). This act was regarded as spiritual fornication. Rabbinical commentaries say that Moses broke the tablets of stone, God's marriage contract with Israel, because he did not want Jehovah to be married to an unfaithful wife. To describe this mystical relationship between Israel and God, He used the metaphor of a wife and her husband. A similar mysterious metaphor is used in the New Testament to explain the relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:23-32).

God requested a heifer because she was barren. At this point in Abram's family, Sarai could have no children. More than that, she was too old to bear a child. It would take a miracle to produce a son from her womb. As an even greater metaphor, the heifer also represent God's barren wife, Israel. Israel never bore spiritual fruit.

## THE SHE GOAT

The she goat points to Hagar, that other female in Abram's family. In fact, we find the story of his marriage to Hagar in the next chapter --- Genesis 16. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Sarai was too old and Abram too anxious to produce an heir. The handmaid was subservient enough as long as she remained a slave. But once she stepped into the role of a wife, conflict developed. After the Egyptian conceived, she despised her mistress.

The Egyptian handmaid came to symbolize a bondage, both spiritual and physical (Gal. 4:21-31 will read later in the lesson). Some years later, Joseph was sold to a caravan of Ishmaelites and taken into Egypt. Hagar had her revenge. Her progeny led Sarai's great grandson into a land where he later brought the entire family ---- "*a land that is not theirs.*"

After the Exodus, the she goat offering was incorporated into the Mosaic law as an atonement for a sin of ignorance (Num. 15:27). One might assume that Abram's marriage to Hagar was a sin of ignorance, according to this verse. Abram's aged wife thought she was bringing happiness to her husband and an heir. But no messiah could come from an Egyptian.

The conflict between Hagar and Sarai can be seen to this very day in the bitterness between their families. The house of Ishmael (the Arabs) and the house of Isaac (Israel) remain at war.

The heifer and she goat were slaughtered and divided. Prophetically, they point to a divided house. The house of Israel was divided between the ten northern tribes and two southern tribes after the death of Solomon. Each group met an untimely fate. The northern tribes fell to the invasion of Assyria in 722 B.C., and the southern tribes fell to the Babylonians in 606

B.C. Ishmael has fared no better. His future was foreordained:

Gen. 16:12 *And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.* (KJV) God's prophecy has come to pass. The Arabs are a warring people to this day. There is no peace with them. Their rivalry among themselves is exceeded only by their hatred for Israel.

### **THE RAM**

The ram represents Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. Bear in mind that the covenant herein described was not Abram's but God's. Therefore, God must produce the ram. The heifer, a virgin, may bear the heavenly ram, but she could not, of herself, produce the heir. It must be God's heir.

At this point, the report Josephus recorded begins to make sense. Just before the Romans destroyed the temple, Jerusalem's dispenser of the Mosaic covenant, a red heifer gave birth to a lamb in its courtyard. The story, beginning with Abram's heifer and ram, reaches its grand finale. The barren heifer bears, not one of her own species, but a lamb! A biological impossibility. However, God had a prophetic message for the house of Israel. The metaphoric heifer, typical of the chosen people, had produced the heavenly heir ---- God's lamb!

### **THE TESTATOR**

Laid out before Abram was a heifer, a she goat, and a ram. The heifer and she goat help to explain the prophecy, but the ram will make God's covenant with Abram effective. The writer of Hebrews explains in Heb. 9:15-17. We can see this quite plainly in Genesis 22. God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. But as the story unfolds we see that it is not Abraham's son

and heir that makes the covenant effective, it is God's Son and heir. Isaac asks his father about the sacrificial lamb, to which he replies; Gen. 22:8 *And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.* (KJV) And God did. The ram, whose horns were caught in the wreath of thorns, represented more than just a substitute for Isaac. The ram foreshadowed the testator of God's covenant. He was God's substitute, as well as Isaac's. God provided a lamb for Himself. The covenant is not in effect throughout the Old Testament because only when the testator dies will God's covenant of grace finally become effective.

### **THE TURTLEDOVE AND YOUNG PIGEON**

The two birds may represent the two witnesses of Deuteronomy 19:15 *One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.* (KJV) Like the two cherubim on the lid of the ark of the covenant, they seem to symbolize the law and the prophets. Throughout the Old Testament, beginning with Mount Sinai, the law and the prophets pointed the people toward the promise of a coming messiah. Their hope of eternal life lay in the One Who was to come. There was no conflict between the law and the prophets, their message was the same. As time progressed, Moses became the epitome of the law, while Elijah was regarded as Israel's greatest prophets. It was these two men who met with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, which was He of whom the law and the prophets spoke.

### **THE BONDAGE OF HAGAR**

**Galatians 4:21-31**...Three factors are taught here and can be seen in Abram's heifer, she goat and ram. Sarah is the free woman typified by the

red heifer. She was the one Paul referred to as "thou barren that bearest not." Sarah brought great sorrow upon her future family when she insisted that Abram produce a son by Hagar. Hagar, the bondmaid, typified by the she goat, become an allegory of Sinai or the law. Paul wrote that the two women represent two covenants, grace and law, or, the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant. In Paul's day, Jerusalem remained under bondage of the law. The temple was still actively practicing the 613 laws of Moses. Paul was now calling upon his countrymen to cast out the bondwoman and her son. The Mosaic law was no longer necessary. God's covenant with Abraham had, at last, become effective with the death of the testator, Jesus Christ, the ram.

### **ISRAEL'S CHILDHOOD**

From the days of his childhood, Israel was placed under the law which acted as a tutor or governor (Gal. 3:21-25; 4:1,2,4-7). In Exodus 4:22, God told Moses that Israel was His firstborn son. The law was their tutor, their schoolmaster while they were in their childhood. When did Israel become an adult? In the fullness of time! Israel was now ready for redemption from the law.

Israel, heir to the Abrahamic covenant, can finally dispense with the Mosaic law --- that tutor of his childhood ---- and accept the inheritance of the Abrahamic covenant.

But the nation rejected Christ. They had Him crucified. But this was also part of the plan. The ram had to die. The death of the testator was necessary to make the covenant effective.

Today, Israel is approaching complete maturity. The firstborn son is no longer a child. The kingdom is at hand and God is going to *"make them*



*willing in the day of His power."*

## **THE MOSAIC ORDINANCE**

**Numbers 19**....There are several things here to be considered. First, it must be a red heifer without spot. No white hairs or no black hairs could be found anywhere on its body. It must be genetically pure.

This is typical of Israel who, though scattered among the nations, has not assimilated. The Jew retains his identity. Genetic purity is paramount in Judaism. It is said that the greatest sin is to marry a Gentile.

Secondly, the heifer must be an animal upon which no yoke had ever been placed, not even a piece of cloth. The heifer had to be in the prime of her life, a virgin having never produced a calf. This is also typical of Judaism ---- a closed religious society. Gentiles are tolerated, but not welcomed.

Thirdly, the sacrifice of the heifer was not allowed within the temple courtyard. It was always taken "...without the camp." As a type of Israel, it appears that the chosen people were destined to be exiled from their promised land. Century after century the Jews were driven from one country to another, suffering persecution continually.

In the Jewish rituals, three sacrifices were made outside the temple walls. The red heifer was sacrificed to purify those who came in contact with a dead body. The scapegoat was driven out into the wilderness to remove personal guilt. Finally, if a leper was cured, the patient could observe a ritual for purification, in which a live bird was dipped in water and blood and let loose in a field. None of these ceremonies were allowed to take place inside the temple compound. In other words, the Mosaic law had, within its sanctuary, no real provision for the spiritual wants to which these sacrifices

symbolically pointed.

Purification lay outside its sanctuary and beyond its symbols. Spiritual death, as the consequence of the fall of Adam, and personal sinfulness lay beyond the reach of the temple provision.

These Jewish ceremonies pointed to the future ---- to Him Who was to come. Every death, every case of leprosy and every Yom Kippur was a prophetic call for the messiah to come.

### **THE THIRD AND SEVENTH DAYS**

The ashes of the red heifer provided a purification for defilement. Coming into contact with a dead body or anything that belonged to the deceased, constituted defilement. The defilement lasted for seven days (Num. 19:11-17).

Hidden within this ritual is the prophetic implication introduced by Moses ---- the millennial-day concept. Moses used the metaphoric seven days to represent seven thousand years. The believer can be purified in the sight of God in the seventh millennium, provided he believes in the purifying covenant made on the third day.

Two thousand years after the creation of Adam, at the dawning of the third millennium, God made a covenant of grace with Abram. That covenant has been extended to all humanity. The purification covenant made at the dawning of the third day of history's week, will make it possible to renew paradise on the seventh day ---- the seventh millennium.

It was also during this third day that Israel left Egypt and set out for the promised land. Israel was sprinkled with the metaphoric ashes on the

prophetic third day and will also be purified on the seventh day ---- the seventh millennium. When Christ returns to set up His kingdom, Israel will be exalted as the head of nations.