

## A Brief Note on Eschatology [1]

*Parsha Chukot* [2] presents us with a number of interesting narratives that detail completely disparate events and subject matter. For example the *parsha* begins with the teaching about the Red Cow or Heifer [3] – whose ashes purified the people who had been contaminated. Then, the chronology jumps by over thirty-eight years, and tells of Miriam's death and the condemnation of Aaron and Moses, who are punished *and* will never enter the Promised Land. Aaron's death is also described.

It also appears from the text that the passage of time has done nothing to change the attitude of some of the Israelites – they still complained about their life in the wilderness, and they continued to sin. In their remonstrations, triggered by a water shortage, they follow the unfortunate lead of their parents and grandparents. They accused Moses of leading them into a desert deathtrap. To complete the picture of the Israelite camp, they worshipped other gods and were guilty of sexually immoral practices. The Torah describes how twenty four thousand persons were stricken dead by a divine plague.

One of the teachings is that of the purification ritual that required the ash of a Red Heifer. The Torah teaches that the dead are impure, and any contact with a corpse, would render a man impure. The dead of the Israelite camp would defile the living. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the mores imposed by the Torah was in its approach to and treatment of the dead. The Israelites were unlike their Egyptian overlords and other surrounding cultures; they did not glorify or worship the dead, one of the more cultic practices of the ancient Egyptians, whose enduring monuments is mainly tombs and mortuary temples.

Because death was an everyday occurrence, there was a daily risk of coming into contact or being in the presence of a corpse, especially in the confines of the Israelites' camp. Inevitably many people could be affected by the contamination of the dead; how many depended on the place and circumstances of the death. The priests would be most at risk, especially when they lived among the tribes and not in a separate area. Therefore, the availability of a Red Heifer to complete the purification ritual was absolutely necessary to the smooth functioning of the camp.

However, the existence of a Red Heifer that would conform to all of the rigid requirements imposed by Jewish law is a biological anomaly. Because the animal must be entirely red; a single hair of another colour would disqualify it. According to the *Mishnah* only nine Red Heifers were actually slaughtered in the period extending from Moses to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., a span of about two thousand years. [4] Since then, there has not been one true Red Heifer reported. Because no one has been able to perform the ritual purification rite, Rabbinic Law generally forbids entry onto the Temple Mount to prevent the trespass by the contaminated onto the sacred precinct where the *Mishkan* was located.

A tradition has developed that the appearance of the tenth Red Heifer will herald the coming of the Messiah. There is presently a breeding program in Israel that is sponsored by Jewish and Christian interests, whose efforts are directed at breeding a Red Heifer that will comply with legal requirements. If this program is successful, the ramifications would be enormous as various eschatological beliefs centered on Jerusalem and the

Temple Mount will boast of their validation. A successful breeding program could ignite the movement to build the Third Temple and the return of the long-awaited Messiah. For Christian fundamentalists, the Messiah will return at the height of the battle of Armageddon, and he will require a Third Temple from which the Lord will begin a millennial reign. And for Muslims, an Antichrist figure called the Dajal will be a Jew who will lead an all-encompassing war against Islam, which will culminate in the return of Jesus (as a Muslim prophet), to the *Kaaba*, or Sacred Rock, in Mecca. [5]

*Parsha Chukot, Shabbath July 1, 2006 (July 8 in the Diaspora)*

1. Eschatology is a belief or a doctrine concerning the ultimate or final things, such as death, and the destiny of humanity.
2. Literally, *the decree*.
3. Heifers are young maiden cows.
4. See *Parah*. The first was under the supervision of Moses; the second was prepared by Ezra; two by Shimon Ha Tzaddik; Yochanan, the High Priest also sacrificed two; Eliehoenai, the son of Ha-Kof was the seventh. Hanamel, the Egyptian burned the eighth. The ninth Red Cow was sacrificed by Ishmael, son of Piabi.
5. See Rod Dreher, "Red-Heifer Days" National Review Online. At: <http://www.nationalreview.com/dreher/dreher041102.asp>.