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**WILLIAM K. GILDERS,
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BLOOD? MAKING SENSE OF A BIBLICAL RITUAL**

WHY DOES ELEAZAR SPRINKLE THE RED COW BLOOD? MAKING SENSE OF A BIBLICAL RITUAL

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1. INTRODUCTION

Numbers 19 is a prescriptive ritual text that sets forth procedures for dealing with the impurity that occurs when a human being dies. The chapter consists of two units of instruction for the performance of ritual complexes (sets of ritual actions) directed against death impurity. The first part of the chapter (vv. 1-10) is concerned with the preparation of ash by burning a slaughtered “red” cow along with various substances.¹ The second half of the chapter (vv. 11-22), not treated in this paper, prescribes how the ash is to be used.

In Num 19:9, the red cow is apparently designated a **קטאת** (“purification offering”), but it is unlike any other **קטאת** offering, indeed, quite unlike any other sacrifice.² The animal is not brought to the cult shrine, the Tent of Meeting, to be offered on the altar. Instead, it is slaughtered outside of the Israelite encampment and entirely burned there, no part of the animal being offered on the altar. Of particular note is the fact that the blood of the red cow is not applied to appurtenances of the shrine. Rather, only a small amount is sprinkled towards the entrance of the Tent of Meeting while the rest is burned with the animal’s carcass.

This paper brings to this unusual ritual performance the questions I explored in relation to other sacrificial rites in my recently published study of ritual blood manipulation in the Hebrew Bible.³ There are significant theoretical and methodological problems involved in characterizing, defining, explaining, and interpreting activities commonly designated “ritual,”⁴ and in dealing with texts that

¹ I follow the convention of rendering Heb. **אדמה** as “red.” However, this translation is not without problems, since color-categories differ from culture to culture. The term **אדמה** seems to comprehend the color range from brown, through red-brown, to red, and we should probably envisage a “brown” cow. See Athalya Brenner, *Colour Terms in the Old Testament* (JSOTSup 21; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982) 58-80, esp. 62-65.

² On the anomalous character of the red cow, see Jacob Milgrom, “The Paradox of the Red Cow (Num. xix),” in *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology* (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 36; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983) 85-95 (reprinted from *VT* 31 [1981] 62-72); the essay is also included in Milgrom’s commentary on Numbers: *Numbers* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 371-76.

³ *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

⁴ The meaning of the term “ritual” and the identification of the phenomena

prescriptively or descriptively portray ritual performances. This paper explores these problems using the red cow ritual as a concrete case example, with a special interpretive focus on the blood manipulation act within that ritual complex. How should we go about making sense of the sprinkling of the red cow blood? What is involved in making sense of this ritual performance? While the red cow blood manipulation will be the focus of this paper, my intention is that its analysis and conclusions will be applicable to the interpretation of other ritual actions.

2. RITUAL PERFORMANCE AND RITUAL TEXT

Numbers 19:1-10 is a prescriptive ritual text, a text that prescribes the actions of a ritual performance. A prescriptive ritual text is not itself the ritual performance. The significance of this basic point can be clarified by comparing the activities of two interpreters of ritual, the anthropologist engaged in field work and the biblical scholar engaged in the reading of the Bible. These interpreters are united by the fact that they are outsiders to the activity they interpret; and their concern to understand the ritual activity they encounter almost certainly differs from that which is held by those who performed the rituals or wrote about them in ancient times. Both interpreters will likely deploy theoretical models that will lead them to propose explanations of the ritual activities that differ from those offered by the participants or the text. Yet, the two interpreters obviously are not involved in identical activities. The field anthropologist is observing actual practice in a social setting. The biblical scholar is reading a literary representation of ritual behavior composed in a social world to which he or she has no living access. They differ, therefore, in their primary activity. The anthropologist's primary activity is observing activity. The biblical scholar's primary activity is the reading of a text.

The fact that the primary activity of the biblical scholar is the reading of a text is sometimes under-emphasized by those biblical scholars who are interested in ritual. Frank H. Gorman, for example, acknowledged in his published doctoral dissertation that he was dealing with textual representations of rituals and not with the rituals themselves, but dismissed the problem by asserting, “The texts will be used to deduce what the rituals might have looked like if actually enacted, and it is the meaning and significance of that enactment that will be the focus of study.”⁵ In effect, Gorman opted to ignore his own activity as a reader and to interpret the rituals that he had reconstructed through his reading activity without offering substantive reflection on these processes of reading and reconstruction. What is

to which it refers has been much debated. See my brief discussion in *Blood Ritual*, 2-8. See also Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 110; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 24-27. Rappaport both offers a definition of ritual and explores the problems involved in defining the category.

⁵ Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology* (JSOTSup 91; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 31.

missing from Gorman's study is an explicit explanation of how he deduced an image of practice from the textual representations.⁶

In contrast to this approach, I advocate that scholars deal with represented ritual in the Hebrew Bible with a strong emphasis on the fact that they are reading texts. Assumptions about what we are doing when we read a narrative about a ritual will affect to a considerable degree the manner in which we envisage the ritual actions being enacted. In other words, along with applying theoretical models for the interpretation of ritual activity, scholars should also theorize their reading activity. Furthermore, such theoretical reflections on what we do when we read texts should be fully integrated with those concerned with the interpretation of ritual. At the heart of such reflections is the question of meaning. How do we arrive at what we designate as the "meaning" of a text or of a ritual enactment? What is "meaning"?

In the Hebrew Bible we have both prescriptive and descriptive ritual material. Both types of materials are almost always narrative in character. They appear in the form of "stories" about activity. Descriptive texts represent what people allegedly did. Prescriptive texts tell a story about what people are supposed to do. The prescriptive narratives may be likened to the scripts for theatrical performances. Like theatrical scripts, they may be read apart from their actual enactment as performances, and like scripts they must be distinguished from the performances that might be based upon them. The experience of reading a script is not the same as the experience of watching its content performed on the stage. If we distinguish between script and performance in the case of prescriptive texts, we must emphasize the distinction between representation and actual practice even more vigorously in the case of descriptive narratives. For, while a prescriptive text appears to represent a ritual that might be enacted for us, a descriptive text represents a ritual that allegedly took place in the past. Our access to it is purely through its literary representation. Our primary activity, in every case—whether the text is prescriptive or descriptive—is the reading of a text, and not the observation of an actual enactment.

My approach to textual interpretation is eclectic. In terms of recent debates about the nature of interpretation and the question of textual determinacy—that is, whether there is such a thing as a "text" which itself determines our interpretive activity—I have been influenced by the argument of Stanley Fish that textual interpretation is a communal process in which readers employ interpretive methods or conventions created by an interpretive community of which they are a part.⁷ The results of the application of these interpretive conventions are seen as self-evidently valid by members of an interpretive

⁶ It should be noted that Gorman has revised his position on the importance of giving attention to the textuality of biblical representations of ritual activity. See his review of Gerald A. Klingbeil, *A Comparative Study of the Ritual of Ordination as Found in Leviticus 8 and Emar 369*, *JBL* 118 (1999) 534-36, here 535. Gorman's criticism of Klingbeil's approach to ritual texts also applies to his own earlier work.

⁷ Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

community and contending interpretations are evaluated in the light of the interpretive conventions shared by the members of the community. To be valid, an interpretation of a text must reflect and conform to existing interpretive conventions, or the interpreter must find a way to persuade other interpreters to modify those conventions so that his or her interpretation can be evaluated within the framework of an interpretive community. On the basis of Fish’s perspective, I employ the traditional philological and historical critical modes of interpreting biblical texts—the interpretive conventions of the interpretive community of modern academic biblical scholars—but with a critical consciousness of the limitations of our efforts and the problems and challenges posed by the nature of the material we study, striving to reflect critically on my own interpretive activity and on that of scholars whose work I address.

I also draw on the work of Wolfgang Iser, who emphasizes the role in textual interpretation of what he terms “gap-filling.”⁸ Gap-filling involves readers taking what they deem to be self-evident in the text and combining it with information they supply to produce a final *Gestalt*. At its most basic, this approach involves supplying information the text does not make explicit but which readers understand to be required to make sense of what they have before them. As modern readers of ancient texts, we make educated guesses about the sorts of knowledge an author might have expected a reader to bring to a text. In short, my approach involves a four-fold relationship between text, author, reader, and the community of readers to which an individual reader belongs—in which each element contributes something to the final product we term an “interpretation.”⁹

3. READING THE RED COW RITUAL TEXT

Having outlined a basic reading approach in broad strokes, I shall now illustrate its application by looking at the specific text with which I am here concerned, Num 19:1-10. I offer first my translation of the text:

(1) Yhwh spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying: (2) “This is the statute of the Teaching, which Yhwh commands, saying, ‘Speak to the Children of Israel that they are to take unto you a flawless red cow, on which there is no blemish, upon which no yoke has been placed. (3) You shall give her to Eleazar the priest, and he shall

⁸ Iser, “Indeterminacy and the Reader’s Response in Prose Fiction,” in *Aspects of Narrative* (ed. J. Hillis Miller; New York: Columbia University Press, 1971) 1-45; idem, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); idem, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

⁹ Obviously, a great deal more could be said about these questions, especially about how we define and qualify such terms as “author,” “reader” and “text.” For the various approaches to the definition of “reader,” see the essays collected in Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); on the identity of the “author,” see Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978) 146-51.

bring her forth outside the encampment and he shall slaughter her before him. (4) Then Eleazar the priest shall take some of her blood with his finger and shall sprinkle towards the front of the Tent of Meeting some of her blood seven times. (5) Then (someone) shall burn the cow in his sight—her hide and her flesh and her blood, with her dung, shall he burn. (6) Then the priest shall take cedar wood, and hyssop, and scarlet material, and cast (them) into the midst of the burning of the cow. (7) Then the priest shall launder his garments and bathe his flesh in water, and afterwards he may enter into the encampment, but the priest shall be impure until the evening. (8) The one who burns her shall launder his garments in water and bathe his flesh in water, but shall be impure until the evening. (9) Then a pure man shall collect the ash of the cow and place (it) outside of the encampment in a pure place, and it shall be reserved for the congregation of the children of Israel for water of impurity. It is a purification offering.¹⁰ (10) Then the one who collects the ash of the cow shall launder his garments, but shall be impure until the evening. So it shall be for the Children of Israel and for the resident alien who resides in their midst for a perpetual statute.”

In dealing with this or any other text it is necessary to begin by asking what information we can take as given explicitly by the text, keeping in mind that readers frequently disagree about what is, in fact, “given.” I note, first, that the words are spoken by Yhwh, the god of the Israelites, to Moses and to Aaron, who are to transmit them to the people. Thus, as readers we are granted direct access to words that, in the textual narrative context, come second-hand to the Israelites. We “hear” Yhwh speak to Moses and Aaron.

Yhwh prescribes that the people are to take a red cow, which must be without blemish, and which has never borne a yoke (v. 2). It is to be given to Eleazar the priest, conveyed outside of the encampment in which the ancient Israelite community is pictured as living, and slaughtered before Eleazar (v. 3). According to some interpreters, Eleazar himself conveys the cow out of the encampment.¹¹ In agreement with many interpreters, I understand the text not to specify who conveys the cow outside the encampment.¹² However, Eleazar is

¹⁰ I agree with those scholars who understand the words **הַטָּאֵת הַזֹּאת** at the end of v. 9 to designate the red cow as belonging to the category of the “purification offering” (traditionally, “sin offering”). See Milgrom, “Paradox,” 86, 90; Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20* (AB 4; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 464; Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (trans. J. D. Martin; OTL; London: SCM Press, 1968) 141. Pace, e.g., Eryl W. Davies, *Numbers* (NCB; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995) 199-200.

¹¹ Levine (*Numbers 1-20*, 461) identifies Eleazar as the subject of “he shall convey” (**וְהוֹצִיא**) (but note his translation of the Hebrew: “and let it be taken outside” [ibid., 459]). It appears that Philip J. Budd also takes Eleazar as the subject (*Numbers* [WBC 5; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1984] 208).

¹² See RSV; NIV; NJPSV; NRSV; Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 459; Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993) 362-63, n. 2. Jacob Licht (*A Commentary on the Book of Numbers [XI—XXI]* [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1991] 187 [Hebrew]) treats the decision as uncertain.

clearly not the subject of “he shall slaughter” (ושחט), since the act is performed “before him” (לפניו).¹³

Once the animal has been slaughtered, Eleazar is to manipulate the blood (v. 4), taking some of it with his finger and sprinkling it seven times towards the front of the Tent of Meeting (אל-נכח אהל-מועד). The clear identification of Eleazar as the one who is to sprinkle the blood stands in notable contrast to the vagueness of the prescriptions that appear in the preceding verse. Whereas the text seems to indicate that anyone may convey the animal out of the encampment and that anyone may slaughter the animal in Eleazar’s presence, the specific mention of Eleazar in v. 4 tells us that the sprinkling of the blood is his task. It is also worthy of note that Eleazar’s priestly status is emphasized by the repetition of his title. As in v. 3, he is explicitly identified as “the priest.”

After Eleazar has sprinkled the blood, the whole dead animal—its hide, flesh, blood and dung—is burned in his presence (v. 5).¹⁴ Eleazar takes and tosses three substances—cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet material—into the fire (v. 6). The text here simply identifies “the priest” as the subject of this action. Given the previous identifications of Eleazar as “the priest” and the fact that there is no reference to any other priest involved in the process, I take Eleazar as continuing to act here. This is an example of the importance of the textual interpretation process for creating a picture of the ritual performance to be interpreted. A reader not committed to what I regard as my straightforward reading of the text could conceivably identify this priest as someone other than Eleazar and thereby arrive at a different image of the ritual performance.¹⁵

After the animal has been burned the ashes are collected and kept in a specified place until needed to make what is termed “water of impurity” (מי נדה) (v. 9). At the end of v. 9 we are given a very important piece of information. “It”—the cow now burnt to ashes—“is a purification offering” (חטאת הוא). Note that I treat the designation of the cow itself as a “purification offering” as a textual given. This is not, however, an uncontested claim. There is, in fact,

¹³ As Levine notes (*Numbers 1-20*, 461), in this case the subject is “elliptical” and “unspecified, and this verb could just as well be translated as a passive: ‘it shall be slaughtered.’” See also Licht, *Numbers*, 187; Ashley, *Numbers*, 362-63, n. 2; GKC 144d-e.

¹⁴ As with והוציא and ושחט in v. 3, I take ושרף and ישרף here as having an unspecified subject, and render in English accordingly. The fact that the burning is “in his presence” (לעיניו) makes it all but impossible to identify Eleazar as the actor.

¹⁵ Compare Rolf Rendtorff’s interpretation of the חטאת ritual in Lev 4:3-21, where he argues that “the anointed priest” who conveys sacrificial blood into the Tent of Meeting (vv. 5, 16) is to be distinguished from “the priest” who performs the ritual manipulations with that blood (vv. 6-7, 17) (*Leviticus* [BKAT 3.1-3; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985-92] 155-56); for my critique of Rendtorff’s interpretation of the text and the ritual, see *Blood Ritual*, 113-14.

considerable disagreement about what information is conveyed by the final two words of v. 9.¹⁶

After we have identified textual “givens,” we may begin the process of conscious gap-filling, noting the details that may be added to enhance understanding or to construct an image of actual practice. Some of these acts of gap-filling may have only minimal significance for the understanding of the text; nevertheless, readers are in the habit of performing them. For example, it is reasonable to imagine that the blood of the cow was collected in some kind of vessel, or that it was otherwise available in such a form that Eleazar could dip his finger into it, although the text does not specify this.

Other modes of gap-filling have more significant interpretive implications. We must, for example, have some sense of the broad ideological context in which the text was composed. For example, we must understand what purity and impurity meant in ancient Israel, or at least in the circle of Israelite priests who composed this work. This understanding is based on the study of all of the available evidence and attempts to provide us with the sort of information we need—but which the text itself does not supply.

4. THE FUNCTION OF THE RED COW BLOOD RITE: TWO INTERPRETIVE OPTIONS

Turning from the broad context, I focus now on the blood manipulation action prescribed in v. 4, and note that a very crucial piece of information is lacking. *The text does not tell us why Eleazar sprinkles the blood.* We are told what Eleazar does, but, as Gorman observes, “The text offers no specific explanation for this act.”¹⁷ Scholars often fail to note that this is the case prior to offering an explanation for the ritual performance. This tends to cause problems when we attempt to judge the merits of interpretations on the basis of their use of textual evidence. For this reason, I have emphasized the fact that no explicit explanation is given. It should also be noted that we can really only begin to look for an explanation of the gesture if we start with the assumption that the ritual action does have a purpose that can be discovered. We must assume that there was an intended purpose for the gesture *and* that we can somehow find out what this purpose was.

Explanations of the blood rite can be divided into two broad categories. The dominant view among interpreters is that the sprinkling has an effect on the blood and, by extension, the cow from which it was

¹⁶ The consonantal text (*ketib*) has what appears to be a 3ms pronoun (הוא), which most logically would indicate the ash. The Massoretic vocalization (*qere*), however, provides for reading a 3fs pronoun, which would indicate the cow itself. Jacob Milgrom (“Paradox of the Red Cow,” 90) accepts the *ketib*, understanding the ash to be identified as a תטאת. I see no reason, however, to ignore the *qere*, which reflects an ancient Jewish interpretation of the text. Thus, I understand the red cow itself to be identified as a תטאת. See also Num 19:17, which clearly identifies the cow as the תטאת in distinction from its ash. See also Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 464.

¹⁷ Gorman, *Ideology of Ritual*, 204.

taken.¹⁸ According to Jacob Milgrom, for example, the effect of the blood-sprinkling is that “the blood becomes consecrated.”¹⁹ Furthermore, the sprinkling act that consecrates the blood also “consecrates the red cow as a purification offering.”²⁰ In contrast, a few scholars maintain that the blood is sprinkled towards the Tent of Meeting to effect the purification or protection of the Tent.²¹ In brief, the two positions divide on the question of whether the sprinkling of the blood has an effect on the blood or on the place towards which the blood is sprinkled.

Scholars on both sides of the divide turn from this text—which, after all, is silent on the question—to other texts in an attempt to determine what explanation would make most sense within the context of ancient Priestly thought. Jacob Milgrom, who offers the most cogent case for understanding the blood-sprinkling as affecting the blood and the cow, looks to texts in which sprinkling of some substance is associated with consecration, with making the substance holy. He notes that, in the rituals set forth in Leviticus 14 for purifying a person who has recovered from a skin disease, oil is first sprinkled “before Yhwh” (Lev 14:16, 27) and then applied to the body and head of the person being purified. It appears that the sprinkling fits the oil to be used in the purification ritual, that is consecrates it—although the texts in question do not actually say so. Milgrom also notes that Lev 16:19 states that the sprinkling of blood on the altar of burnt offering in the courtyard of the Tent of Meeting purifies and consecrates the altar.²²

There are, in my view, some significant problems with Milgrom’s explanation. First, Milgrom does not distinguish the sprinkling of blood to consecrate that upon which the blood is sprinkled from

¹⁸ See Th. C. Vriezen, “The Term *Hizqā*: Lustration and Consecration,” *Ost* 7 (1950) 201-35, here 209; Milgrom, “Paradox,” 89; idem, *Numbers*, 124; Gorman, *Ideology of Ritual*, 204-5; Bernd Janowski, *Sühne als Heilsgeschehen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982) 227, n. 211; Noth, *Numbers*, 140; George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912) 250; J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Numbers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934) 197; Angel M. Rodriguez, *Substitution in the Hebrew Cultus* (Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 3; Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1979) 124; Davies, *Numbers*, 197-98; Josef Scharbert, *Numeri* (NEchtB 27; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1992) 77.

¹⁹ Milgrom, “Paradox,” 89.

²⁰ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 124. See also Noth, *Numbers*, 140: the sprinkling “is presumably to be understood as signifying a dedication of the blood and thereby of the slaughtered animal as a whole (cf. Lev. 4.6 *et al.*).”

²¹ See Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 462, 471-72; idem, *In the Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974) 75; N. Kiuchi, *The Purification Offering in the Priestly Literature: Its Meaning and Function* (JSOTSup 56; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987) 123-24. Levine simply asserts, without argument, that the blood-sprinkling is directed at the purification or protection of the shrine. Kiuchi attempts to mount an argument for this understanding of the gesture. See also Norman H. Snaith, (*Leviticus and Numbers* [Century Bible; London: Thomas Nelson, 1967] 271-72), who identifies the blood-sprinkling as “a de-sinning rite” (271) to be counted among “cleansing rites” (272).

²² Milgrom, “Paradox,” 89.

sprinkling to consecrate the blood itself. Within the Priestly textual corpus, there is not a single unambiguous instance of the *sprinkling* of blood being explained as bringing about its consecration. It is true that blood is taken from the altar and used to effect the consecration of Aaron and his sons at their ordination to the priesthood (Exod 29:21; Lev 8:30), and that the prior application of the blood to the altar seems to have consecrated the blood for this use.²³ Milgrom does not, however, cite these texts to support his interpretation, apparently not regarding them as relevant to the discussion. This is not surprising, given that the blood is not sprinkled towards the altar. Rather it is splashed onto it. Furthermore, it is not used to purify but to consecrate. As Milgrom suggests, it partakes of the holiness of the altar and then transmits that holiness to Aaron and his sons. The situation with the blood of the red cow is significantly different. The only texts that do seem to indicate that sprinkling consecrates the substance that is sprinkled are the verses from Leviticus 14 cited above, although the texts in question do not state this explicitly.²⁴ However, there is a serious problem with using these texts as evidence. Oil and blood are not conceptualized in the same way in Priestly thought. Oil has no inherent power; it must be infused with holy potency to have any effect. In contrast, blood seems to be treated as inherently powerful.²⁵ When blood is used in purification rituals nothing special is done to prepare it. Note, especially, Lev 14:5-7: within the same ritual complex with the oil manipulation we find blood sprinkled in a purification ritual with no prior act that might be said to have consecrated it. Note, also, Exod 29:20 and Lev 8:23-24 where blood is daubed on the bodies of Aaron and his sons, again with no preparatory act. Its ability to purify what is impure seems to be regarded as inherent. We are led to ask, then, why blood should need to be consecrated in the case of the red cow when it does not need to be consecrated in any other setting. Milgrom has, in fact, argued against suggestions that other acts of blood-sprinkling consecrate the blood.²⁶ I conclude, therefore, that Milgrom's interpretation is not persuasive when evaluated in terms of the evidence he cites to support it.

We may turn, then, to the other interpretive option. N. Kiuchi notes that in Num 19:18, 19 sprinkling of the ash mixed with water purifies the person or thing upon which it is sprinkled. Given this, "it appears reasonable to infer that in v. 4, too, the sprinkling of blood is

²³ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 533-34.

²⁴ Vriczen ("Hizqza," 214-18, 233-35) argues that other acts of blood-sprinkling at the shrine (see Lev 4:6, 17; 16:14-15) are also for the purpose of consecrating blood. Milgrom (*Leviticus 1-16*, 233), however, vigorously rejects this claim.

²⁵ It may also have been conceptualized this way. According to Gen 9:4 (P) and Lev 17:11 (H), blood is, or contains, the "life" (נפש) of each creature. However, Lev 17:11 is the *only* biblical text that explicitly links the identification of blood with "life" to its use in the cult. As this is a text of the H tradition, secondary to the P stratum of the Pentateuch, it is far from clear what role the identification of blood with "life" played in Priestly thinking about sacrificial blood. For elaboration on this point, see Gilders, *Blood Ritual*, 12-25, 158-80.

²⁶ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 233.

somehow related to the purification of the Tent.”²⁷ We may also note that in Leviticus 14 the purification of the person healed of a skin disease begins with a ritual in which the blood of a bird is mixed with water and sprinkled on the person being purified. The same ritual is observed when a house has been infected with a fungal growth on its walls (Lev 14:5-7; 50-52). In the shrine cult, the interior of the Tent of Meeting is sprinkled with blood, apparently, to purify it (Lev 16:14-16). In this instance, the sprinkled blood comes from a **תִּטְאָה** sacrifice. The next interpretive move is to note that the red cow is identified as a “purification offering” (**תִּטְאָה**) in Num 19:9. Since the blood of the **תִּטְאָה** is used to purify the shrine, one may conclude that the blood of the red cow is sprinkled in order to purify the Tent, or to pro-actively protect it from impurity coming from the dead. Thus, Baruch Levine characterizes the blood-sprinkling as a means “to protect the abode of the resident deity from contamination.”²⁸ Levine’s simple assertion that the blood-sprinkling purifies and protects the shrine is clearly rooted in understanding it as functioning like the blood-sprinkling in all other **תִּטְאָה** offerings.

This interpretation is persuasive. It is supported by evidence marshaled within the framework of standard historical critical scholarship. It seems to make sense of the text as we have it. Yet, I cannot escape a distinct sense that some important questions remain unanswered. Specifically, it seems odd that blood should be used prospectively to protect the shrine.²⁹ In every other instance of the **תִּטְאָה**, blood is used to deal with already existing impurity. We seem to have a unique situation in Numbers 19.

One way of dealing with this problem is to take a cue from Jacob Milgrom’s reflections on the text.³⁰ Milgrom suggests that the author of Numbers 19 sought explicitly to identify the red cow as a **תִּטְאָה**, even though it is quite different from what we would term the “normative” **תִּטְאָה**. He suggests, therefore, that Numbers 19 represents an attempt to integrate what was originally a non-Priestly ritual into the Priestly ritual system. We can speculate that the original ritual involved the slaughter and burning of a red cow and the use of its ashes pretty much as described in the present text. To fit this ritual into their system, the priests whose ceremonial system is reflected in Numbers 19 added the blood manipulation to explicitly identify the ritual with the shrine cult and the **תִּטְאָה** sacrifice, which was directed at impurity. Yet, despite being identified as a **תִּטְאָה**, the red cow ritual remains distinctive. It is not performed in the sanctuary sphere, but outside the encampment. This is not usually the locus of sacrificial activity. Rather, it is the place where the remains of certain types of **תִּטְאָה** sacrifices are disposed of by burning (Lev 4:12, 21; 16:27). Furthermore, unlike the regular **תִּטְאָה**, the blood is not actually applied directly to the shrine or its furniture. It is simply sprinkled towards the shrine.

²⁷ Kiuchi, *Purification Offering*, 123.

²⁸ Levine, *Presence of the Lord*, 75.

²⁹ For related questions about the notion of ritual actions being directed prospectively at dealing with impurity, see Albert I. Baumgarten, “The Paradox of the Red Heifer,” *VOT* 43 (1993) 443-44.

³⁰ Milgrom, “Paradox,” 90-95, esp. 95, n. 26.

Can we overlook this fact and conclude with Levine and Kiuchi that the sprinkling still purifies or protects the shrine and its furniture? Furthermore, should we accept the suggestion that this is a prospective purification? It appears that we have not yet been able to answer the question I raised at the outset of this discussion. We are still uncertain about why Eleazar sprinkles the blood. I have, so far, considered only the significance of the gesture within the context of the ritual performance and defined this significance in instrumental terms, following the approach of other interpreters. There is, however, another way of addressing the question.

5. INDEXICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE BLOOD RITE

I return to the observation I made above about the normal location of blood manipulation within the precinct of the Tent of Meeting. When we consider the significance of the blood manipulation represented in Num 19:4 in light of the standard practice of cultic blood manipulation, we may note that although the red cow blood manipulation takes place outside of the shrine complex it is, nevertheless, oriented towards it. As Levine notes, the action indicates a connection between the blood and the cult place: “A relation to the Sanctuary is also expressed by the requirement that blood from the cow be sprinkled in the direction of the Sanctuary.”³¹ Does this connection have to do with how the cult place affects the blood or with how the blood affects the cult place? Must we decide between these options?

In answering these questions, we may turn from discussion of the possible instrumental *effects* the act might have on the blood or the shrine to consideration of the act as an indexical *sign*, drawing on the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce. According to Peirce, when dealing with signs, we must distinguish between three types, *symbol*, *icon* and *index*.³² It is particularly important to note that signs are not always primarily symbolic in character or quality. A symbol, Peirce emphasizes, “is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object.”³³ To put it more simply, as Nancy Jay does, a symbol “is related to its object by convention.”³⁴ The meaning of a symbol, then, is assigned to it, and is not inherent in the thing itself. An index, however, “is a sign which

³¹ Levine, *Numbers*, 458.

³² For a helpful entry to Peirce’s theory of signs, see Justus Buchler, ed., *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover, 1955) 98-119. On the relevance of Peirce’s ideas for the understanding of sacrificial ritual, see Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 6-7. See also Rappaport’s subtle elucidation and critique of Peirce’s theory (*Ritual and Religion*, 54-68). For a lucid discussion of Peircian semiotics from the perspective of a different tradition of semiotics, see Gerard Lukken, *Rituals in Abundance: Critical Reflections on the Place, Form and Identity of Christian Ritual in Our Culture* (Liturgia condenda 17; Leuven: Peeters, 2005) 75-83.

³³ Peirce in Buchler, ed., *Philosophical Writings*, 102.

³⁴ Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, 6; see also Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 54, 67.

refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object.”³⁵ An indexical sign “is in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand.”³⁶ While discussing examples of indices, Peirce provides perhaps his simplest definition of an index: “A rap on the door is an index. Anything which focusses the attention is an index. Anything which startles us is an index, in so far as it marks the junction between two portions of experience.”³⁷ This explanation clarifies that Peirce’s category of the index integrally includes deliberate human actions that indicate something. Thus, in his refinement of Peirce’s theory, Rappaport refers to “Constructed Indices” which “are deliberately constructed and employed by humans to indicate whatever they do indicate.”³⁸ Such constructed indices, while dependent on human action, and thus conventional, do not depend on convention for their significance. Rather, as Jay helpfully explains, “Because the relation of sign to signified is not conventional, indices can be understood across cultural and linguistic boundaries. They *indicate* their object rather than represent it.”³⁹

When viewed in the light of Peirce’s semiotics, it is clear that the act of sprinkling the red cow blood has an indexical dimension. Whatever one might say about its conventional symbolic or instrumental significance, when one envisages the performance of the rite in the world represented by the biblical text, the gesture also points to, focuses attention on—*indicates*—the shrine. It compels attention just as a knock at the door would. The result is that the sprinkling gesture places the ritual complex and its participants into a relationship with the shrine. The gesture of sprinkling places the red cow and the shrine into a relationship with one another. Furthermore, by prescribing that Eleazar sprinkle blood towards the Tent of Meeting, the text binds the red cow ritual to other rituals performed in and around the Tent of Meeting.

In my study of Priestly sacrificial texts, I have noted another significant fact. For the Priestly tradents, the blood manipulation component of a sacrificial ritual marks the moment when the priest lays special claim to control over the ritual process and asserts his necessity for its efficacy.⁴⁰ The conventional ritual act has an indexical character, since it points to a relationship between the priest and the cult place. The power of the priest in the sacrificial process to serve as mediator between an ordinary Israelite and Yhwh is indicated by the act of taking the blood and applying it to some area of the shrine complex to which lay Israelites do not have access. The basic indexical message conveyed by this ritual act may be elaborated as follows. In order to maintain a right relationship with Yhwh, Israelites must bring sacrifices, and blood from these sacrifices must be applied to the shrine and its furnishings.

³⁵ Peirce in Buchler, ed., *Philosophical Writings*, 102.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 108-109.

³⁸ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 63.

³⁹ Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, 6.

⁴⁰ Gilders, *Blood Ritual*, 61-141 *passim*.

However, only priests may perform this application, since only they may have access to the areas of the shrine where the blood is to be applied. The ritual, thus, serves to define or qualify the relationships between the participants, namely, the lay person who brings a sacrifice, the priest, and Yhwh.

The ritual described in Numbers 19 could, potentially, pose a problem for this structure. The ritual does not take place at the shrine and its elements might not function in the process of defining the mediating role of the priest vis-à-vis Yhwh and the devotee through the manipulation of blood. This potential problem is solved by having the officiating priest sprinkle blood towards the shrine. By sprinkling blood towards the opening of the Tent, the priest indicates that he stands in this ritual act in the same position as he stands in other ritual acts. Or, rather than saying that the priest's action indicates some *idea*, we may state that the ritual act indicates, and thereby establishes or reinforces, a *social relationship*: priest are necessary mediators. Without them, lay Israelites cannot retain a secure relationship with Yhwh.⁴¹

This explanation is, of course, rooted in a theoretical model I have adopted from recent scholarship on ritual practice. It is, however, an application of theory that tries to take seriously the textual evidence available to us. I have tried to formulate it in the light of an overall assessment of the nature of cultic blood manipulation as represented in priestly writings rather than by appealing to one or two conceptual proof-texts. I will also stress that my interpretation is a product of the reading process in which I am engaged. I will not attempt to claim that I have found some inherent "meaning" which imposed itself upon me. The fact must again be stressed that no explanation of the sprinkling of the blood by Eleazar is given in the text. Unlike other texts, which do sometimes offer an explanation of a ritual action, including certain blood manipulations, the priestly tradents seem not to have seen any need to explain the manipulation in Num 19:4. This may have been because they deemed its significance to be obvious. However, it is also possible that the specific significance of the act in relation to the intended effect of the total ritual was not seen as important. My reading is based on taking this second possibility seriously. That is, I propose that the indexical assertion of priestly prerogative was a crucial factor in the sprinkling of the blood of the red cow. Indeed, the effects on the shrine or on the blood that might have been attributed to the blood sprinkling could very well have been only secondarily relevant in this instant.

My thinking here about how ritual practitioners might intentionally mobilize the indexical quality of a conventional ritual act draws on Roy Rappaport's treatment of indexicality in which he discusses the example of a dancing ritual of the Maring people of Papua New Guinea.⁴² In this ritual performance, the conventional act of dancing indicates—is an index of—a pledge of support in warfare: "Inasmuch as dancing brings

⁴¹ Here, I draw on Catherine Bell's reflections on the ways in which ritualized actions define and reinforce status relationships; see *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 169-238.

⁴² Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 57.

a pledge into being it cannot help but indicate it.” Similarly, given the clear conventional association of blood manipulation with priestly prerogative in the cult represented in priestly Torah texts, its performance cannot but indicate this prerogative. Likewise, with the conventional importance of the Tent of Meeting as the locus of Yhwh’s presence, the sprinkling towards the shrine cannot but indicate a connection between the red cow and the shrine, its sacrificial cult, and its deity. It is possible—and desirable—to make these observations even in the absence of evidence that would allow us to reconstruct a conventionally symbolic or instrumental explanation of the effect of the red cow blood-sprinkling ritual.

6. MAKING SENSE OF BIBLICAL RITUAL: SUMMARY AND FURTHER THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

In the preceding discussion, I explored several dimensions of inquiry about how to make sense of a biblical ritual, specifically the sprinkling of the blood of the red cow, which is prescribed but not explained in Num 19:4. I noted the fundamental importance of recognizing the textual nature of our access to biblical ritual. We are not observing and interpreting living practice in all of its inevitable complexity. Rather, we are reading and interpreting texts and constructing an image of practice on the basis of what is given to us in the texts and what we fill in on the basis of a variety of interpretive assumptions. The interpretation of biblical ritual, therefore, is fundamentally a text-interpretive process, and should be undertaken quite deliberately as such.

It must also be emphasized that most biblical texts reflect considerable interest in the details of ritual practice, but say very little about the significance of the ritual elements and actions. Scholars must, therefore, fill conceptual gaps if they wish to identify what the ancient Israelite authors and readers of these texts believed about the meanings of the represented ritual performances. In the case of Num 19:4, scholars have filled the conceptual gap and explained why Eleazar sprinkled the blood in two distinct ways. Most have suggested that the sprinkling towards the Tent of Meeting effected the consecration of the blood and, by extension, the red cow. Others have suggested that the blood had some effect on the Tent itself, protecting or prospectively purifying it from corpse impurity. These explanations are largely presented in instrumental terms, as identifications of what the blood manipulation does.

How should a modern interpreter go about recovering or reconstructing a “native” Israelite interpretation of ritual action? Should ritual acts be understood as symbolic vehicles that communicate “meanings,” or as instrumentally effective actions? Is the distinction between “symbolic” and “instrumental” actions a false dichotomy? I hinted at these questions above when I noted the Peircian definition of “symbol,” which I follow. If a symbol is connected by convention to its object, and if we assume that ancient Israelites interpreted their ritual actions symbolically, we must look to the ancient Israelite texts themselves for such interpretations, or we must be very clear that we are speculatively reconstructing such explanations. Perhaps there were

such symbolic explanations of the red cow blood manipulation in ancient Israel. However, they are absent from our present text.

In discussing the indexical character of the blood sprinkling action, I have suggested a supplement or alternative to attempts to identify the symbolic or instrumental meanings of ritual actions. The indexical character of a ritual performance can be identified through observation of the performance itself and does not require a “native” informant. As Jay notes in her explanation of Peirce’s concept, “Because the relation of sign to signified is not conventional, indices can be understood across cultural and linguistic boundaries. They *indicate* their object rather than represent it.”⁴³ Thus, when we have developed an image of textually represented practice, we can interpret it with reference to indexicality. The indexical quality of ritual is not necessarily consciously recognized by those who practice it. Thus, indexicality can belong to the “latent” dimension of ritual functionality.⁴⁴

However, in dealing with the red cow blood manipulation, I have noted the possibility that the indexical character of this action was deliberately mobilized by the tradents who composed the text representing the red cow ritual. I would suggest that the sprinkling towards the Tent of Meeting was employed intentionally to indicate and thereby establish a relationship between the red cow rite, the Tent, and the sacrificial cult performed at the Tent. Through the indexical sign, the red cow rite was constituted as an integral part of the Priestly sacrificial cult.⁴⁵ This is a conclusion we can draw about the possible significance of this ritual gesture in addition to, or even in distinction from, other conclusions about its meaning.

⁴³ Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, 6.

⁴⁴ On manifest and latent functions of cultural activity, see R. K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (enlarged ed.; New York: Free Press, 1968) 73-138 (esp. 114-20); for the relevance of Merton’s distinctions for interpreting ritual, see Gilders, *Blood Ritual*, 181-91; see also David P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity: Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature* (SBLDS 101; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1987) 3, n. 3.

⁴⁵ In *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible*, I discussed indexicality without adequately addressing the possibility that the indexical quality of ritual action might be deliberately mobilized by ritual practitioners or by textual tradents constructing literary representations of ritual. Instead, I treated indexicality exclusively in terms of what happens regardless of the ritual practitioner’s intentions. With this paper I supplement and, to some extent, correct the treatment of indexicality in my book.