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The disorderly body

Considerations of The Book of Numbers, 19 and ritual impurity after contact with a corpse

Introduction

Under the headline of ‘the body and religion,’ this article deals with the idea of ritual bodily impurity after coming into contact with a corpse in the Hebrew Bible.¹

The evanescence and impermanence of the human body testifies to the mortality of the human being. In that way, the human body symbolizes both life and death at the same time; both conditions are perceivable in it. In Judaism, the dead body is considered as ritually impure. Although, in this context it might be better to substitute the term ‘ritually damaged’ for ‘ritually impure’: ritual impurity does not refer to hygienic or moral impurity, but rather to an incapability of exercising—and living—religion. Ritual purity is considered as a prerequisite for the execution of ritual acts and obligations.

Mary Douglas assumes that impurity or dirt represents something which is out of place (1984: 52). It depends spatially and categorically on something which in contrast represents the prevailing order. It is not primarily medical acquirements which define the behaviour but the imaginations of a classified and controlled environment. Even nowadays something is classified as dirty when it disrupts or endangers the prevailing order. The logic of purity depends on the logic of a world order, the existence of which is endangered by impurity. Especially the boundary of the human body, as well as other border areas or limitations, receives ritual attention. Everything going in or out is ritually accompanied as well. Danger to the body symbolizes danger to the whole society, because the physical body is a microcosm of the social body, in other words, society as Douglas defines it (1984: 151). The physical body expresses the living social reality of the whole community.

1 For a critical linguistic reading I have to thank MA Heike Reifgens and Dipl.Bibl. Simone Gawandtka.

The dead body depends on a sphere which causes the greatest uncertainty because it is not accessible for the living. According to Mary Douglas's concepts, the dead body is considered ritually impure because it does not answer to the imagined order anymore, or rather because it cannot take part in this order anymore. This is impurity imagined as a kind of contagious illness, which is carried by the body.

In what follows, this article deals with the ritual of the red heifer in Numbers 19. Here we find the description of the preparation of a fluid that is to help clear the ritual impurity out of a living body after it has come into contact with a corpse. For the preparation of this fluid a living creature—a faultless red heifer—must be killed. According to the description, the people who are involved in the preparation of the fluid will be ritually impure until the end of the day. The ritual impurity acquired after coming into contact with a corpse continues as long as the ritual of the Red Heifer remains unexecuted, but at least for seven days.

Textual evidence for ideas of impurity in the Hebrew Bible

The guidelines for the cult in Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy assume without question that contact with a corpse (*nefesh*) causes ritual impurity. The laws of purity and impurity are regarded as God's law, which is to say, they are implemented by God himself. Observance of these laws makes the nation of Israel holy (Plaut 2001: 106). The physical ritual impurity is characterized by temporary exclusion from attendance at the cult's ceremonies and does not apply to questions of hygiene and cleanliness, or to moral errors. The cultic action is perceived as ritual communication and secures a confrontation with God, therefore ritual impurity concerns participation in the cult. Cultic purity is the normal state which reflects the cosmic order of life (Hieke 2009: 44). It is a neutral, not transferable, physical status (Plaut 2001: 106).

Loss of this normal state makes the person unable to confront his or her god. He or she is not permitted confrontation because it is dangerous for themselves and the whole group respectively. The encounter with God necessitates conscientious and detailed preparation by the person so that he or she does not receive physical damage in this confrontation.² Ritual impurity stands in the way of a risk free association with God.

2 Lev. 16:2: '... and the LORD said unto Moses: 'Speak unto Aaron thy brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place within the veil, before the ark-cover which

Ritual impurity ensues mainly from three sources: (a) contact with animal carrion (Lev. 1) and human corpses (Num. 19), (b) every kind of human discharge (lochia, menstruation blood, ejaculate, vaginal fluor), and (c) skin diseases and other abnormalities of the body's surface (Lev. 13–14). Jacob Milgrom puts all these sources of ritual impurity in the vicinity of the sphere of death (Milgrom 1991: 733, 1001–2). While this assertion applies to (a), (b) and (c) do not necessarily lead to physical death. However, all three sources of danger could (temporarily) weaken the human body and lead to the loss of the person's normal state, or rather make it impossible to come near to God.

The person who has come into contact with a corpse has lost some vital sacred power as a result of this experience. Before that person can enter the presence of the Lord in his sanctuary he or she must be raised back up to the 'normal' level. (Baumgarten 1993: 445.)

Becoming ritually impure is possible for certain groups of people, such as priests (discussed in Leviticus), for the whole nation of Israel as a collective and as individuals (discussed in Numbers), and finally for the land of Israel itself (discussed in Deuteronomy). Through positive counteractions such as washing, or the passing of a certain time-span, the temporal loss of the connection with God can be surmounted.

Below, I will deal with the ritual impurity of individuals and the social group respectively after contact with a human corpse. While in Leviticus this impurity is briefly mentioned (Lev. 22:4–8), the matter is discussed in detail in Numbers 19, and therefore the purpose of this chapter is the following exemplification.

Structure and exegeses of Numbers 19

The 19th chapter of the fifth Book of Moses gives an answer to the question of how to respond in the event of coming into contact with a human corpse. It is determined that the person who has had contact needs to undergo a cleansing process by being sprinkled with a fluid made out of the ash of a faultless red heifer (*parah adumah*) and spring water. The sprinkling on the third and seventh day after contact with a corpse has a cleansing effect. However, the

is upon the ark; that he die not; for I appear in the cloud upon the ark-cover' (JPS 1917). Further preparations follow in Lev. 6:3, cf. also Exod. 19:10–15.

people involved in preparing this fluid also become ritually impure for the rest of the day (Num. 19:7, 8, 10). In Mishna this chapter gets a whole tract for commentary (sixth order, fourth tractat: *pārāh*). The Jewish tradition numbers this rite of the red heifer among the four instructions of the Tora which man should follow even though their deeper sense remains closed to him or her.³ In the Hebrew Bible, this rite is mentioned just one more time (Heb. 9:13); the rabbinic literature, on the other hand, takes the rite up in many cases and interprets its obscurity as evidence of Israel's obedience to God.

Structure

In Numbers 19, seven objects and people are mentioned seven times: (1) the heifer and its ash, (2) things that are burnt, (3) the sevenfold sprinkling, (4) people who need to wash their clothes and themselves, (5) people and objects which are contaminated secondarily, (6) people and objects which need to be purified, and (7) priests. This systematic composition attests the structural uniformity of the chapter (Hieke 2009: 54; Milgrom 1990: 437).

The first part of the chapter (19:1–10) deals with the preparation of the special ash that is necessary for confecting the water of lustration (*mē niddā*). The second part (19:11–22) deals with the aforementioned water of lustration. The ash has to be that of a red heifer, which must not have spots or other deformities or abnormalities. That is God's law (19:2). The heifer must be taken outside of the camp for slaughtering (19:3) and the priest should sprinkle some blood on the meeting tent⁴ seven times (19:4)—as in the blood ritual of redemption in Lev. 4:6 and Lev. 4:17. For that reason, Philip J. Budd assumed that this comes from an older, autonomous rite, which has been embedded in the sacrificial ritual of Numbers 19 (Budd 1984: 211). The action itself can be interpreted as for the apotropaic protection of the sanctum from contamination by the killed heifer, as Baruch A. Levine assumes (1993: 472).

After the sprinkling the meeting tent comes the complete burning of the heifer (19:5), that is, including bowels, blood, skin, and dung, together with additional offerings which symbolize the blood of the killed animal in their colouring; cedar-wood, hyssop, and scarlet (cf. Frick 2002: 231; Milgrom

3 The other instructions are: a man has to marry the childless widow of his dead brother (Deut. 25:5–10), nobody should wear clothes made of two kinds of yarn (Deut. 22:11), and a scapegoat has to be sent into desert for Azazel (Lev. 16), cf. Malino 1995: 147.

4 Cf. Exod. 27:21: 'tent of meeting'; construction of a decomposable and mobile tent-sanctum, which is the central place of encounters with God until the time of King David, cf. *inter alia* Busink 1970.

1981: 65, 69; Levine 1993: 462–3).⁵ Yet it is not until Numbers 19:7 that one learns which purpose this action serves: the remains of the heifer are to be collected by a ritually pure man, and they will become ingredients of the special fluid, which itself should be used for lustration by sprinkling people and objects with hyssop. The clothes and bodies of the people who have been involved in the preparation of the ash must be washed afterwards, and they stay ritually impure until nightfall (19:7, 8, 10).

The second part of the chapter begins with the basic principle that everybody who comes into contact with a human corpse will be ritually impure for seven days (19:11). As per Horst Seebass, the number of days comes from the common mourning time span (2003: 258). Becoming contaminated by a corpse can happen, on the one hand, when one stays in the same house/tent, or rather under the same roof as the corpse (19:11, 14–16). On the other hand, contamination can occur outside of the house/tent by means of war victims, not buried corpses. But also a burial place itself can effect ritual impurity (19:16).

From the ash of the completely burnt heifer, the purifying fluid is to be prepared (19:17) by adding spring water, that is, running or living water. With this fluid every impure person or object is to be sprinkled by a ritually pure person with the help of hyssop (19:18).

Lines 13 and 20 of Numbers 19 deal with the sanctions to be executed if the necessary purifying ritual is not accomplished and someone ritually impure enters the sanctum. The sanctum will then also become impure, and the contaminated person must be cut off from the assembly (19:13, 20, so called *karet*-sanction⁶). Without the purifying ritual the contaminated person remains ritually impure for more than seven days, or more precisely for as long as he or she does not perform the ritual. Furthermore, the contamination spreads to the people and objects that come into contact with the impure person.

And so, ritual impurity is imagined as some kind of contagious illness that can be dispelled through isolation and certain counter-actions. Without nullification, the impurity would, plague-like, spread, and the sanctum and the encounter with God for the whole assembly would be threatened.

5 Hyssop as auxiliary means for coating the blood also occurs in Pesah, cf. Exod. 12:22.

6 It has been disputed what kind of judgement this sanction really follows: execution by a human court, divine punishment ahead of time, or exclusion from the assembly, cf. Piattelli 1998: 53.

Exegeses

This textual example shows clearly the uncertainty that is caused by the sphere of death. Death disrupts the order of life; it breaks off contact between the living and the dead, as well as of the living with each other. Talking of redemption (Num. 19:13) does not only apply to the separation from the bereaved, but also to the separation from God.

The circumstances that cut one off from God should be called sin or evil (Hieke 2009: 58). It has nothing to do with moral wrongdoing, but with the exposure of the connection to God by an abnormal event; in the case of death, the most abnormal event ever.

The characteristic difference with the ritual of redemption in Leviticus 4 is the complete burning of the heifer, including bowels and blood, which is also poured over the altar.⁷ Together with the offerings of hyssop, cedar-wood, and scarlet, the complete burning symbolizes the total destruction of life and an orchestration of death respectively (Rudman 2003: 74–5). By burning the blood, the ash becomes ritually pure, and it is possible to use the ash for the preparation of the purifying fluid, the water of lustration (Seebass translated *mē niddā* ‘water of deposit or dissociation’, 2003: 257). *Niddā* is also used as a term for menstruation (Lev. 12:2, 5 and 15:19–26). The shared element in these two nomenclatures, water of lustration and menstruation, is the act of dissociation: while during menstruation, something is excreted—blood and placenta—both contain the possibility of creating new life. However, in this case, the term refers to the sphere of death because now no new life will come. The women have come near the domain of death. By the same token, the water of lustration dissociates affected people or objects from the area of death that they came near to after coming into contact with a human corpse. The ritual of the red heifer and the water of lustration demarcate the area of death as a dissociation from the area of living:

Asche war dem Tod zugeordnet, und wenn sie in diesem Fall eine die Todesverunreinigung beseitigende Wirkung hatte, verhielt sie sich wie ein Gegengift zum Gift: Die Wirkung hob die Kultunreinheit auf (Seebass 2003: 256).

Actually, Numbers 19 speaks of two kinds of impurity. Both require different, severe and long-term processes of purification: the contact with a corpse causes ritual impurity for seven days and requires the ritual described above.

7 The burning of the blood here is singular in the Hebrew Bible, cf. Levine 1993: 462.

The people and objects should be sprinkled on the third and on the seventh day, so that redemption follows on the evening of the seventh day (Num. 19:19). Contact with the ash of the heifer and the water of lustration, although it has purifying effect, causes ritual impurity for the rest of the day. After washing their clothes and bodies, these people are ritually pure again. Evidently, ritual impurity after contact with a human corpse is apparently more serious than contact with ash of a ritually killed animal (cf. Lev. 1).

Further considerations

In the mindset of Numbers 19, death appears to be basically closer, more present and actual, than it does for us today in the age of hospitals, hospices, and mortuaries. Death becomes threatening and befalls the living; it is experienced immediately. Death remains in the direct vicinity of the living in the form of the corpse. It interferes with the living order. The disorder affected by this event is physically perceivable in the imagination of a ritual—bodily—impurity. The corpse is considered to be impure, but on the other hand, so are the living who have come into contact with it. In recourse to Mary Douglas, the impurity occurs because the corpse and the people coming into contact with death are outside of the living order. They are near to a realm of fear, upset, and unconsciousness—to be precise, the dead person belongs to this realm now. Most importantly the dead body is out of the order of the living, and the expression of this status is the idea of ritual impurity.

Through the death of a closely related person, one's own mortality and death become present. Mourning preserves this status of destabilization. A ritual can help to overcome destabilization and restore the order of life. This ritual needs to eliminate the bodily imagined impurity and reconstitute the relationship to God and to the other people in the assembly. The described ritual in Numbers 19 is an example of the attempt to convert the experienced disorder caused by death into an ordered state. The restitution of the organized and orderly status happens bodily: water of lustration should be sprinkled on the body of the living, contaminated person, and so the 'illness' of impurity is healed.⁸

8 As one may say, the ritual of the red heifer is the living analogy to burial rites in which the dead body is ejected from the social group. The question of the practicability of this ritual or the attempt at damning the superstitious praxis of the cult of the dead by this ritual could not be discussed here. For further information see Seebass 2003: 248–52, 262–3 and Levine 1993: 472–9. References to the cult of the

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dead can be found in Deut. 14:1; Lev. 19:27–8; Ps. 106:28 and especially in 1 Sam. 28:3–25.

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