

Num. 19:1

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: 2 This is the ritual law that the Lord has commanded:

Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid.

3 You shall give it to Eleazar the priest. It shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. 4 Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the Tent of Meeting. 5 The cow shall be burned in his sight—its hide, flesh, and blood shall be burned, its dung included— 6 and the priest shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson stuff, and throw them into the fire consuming the cow... 9 A man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the cow and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place, to be kept for water of lustration^a for the Israelite community. It is for cleansing. 10 He who gathers up the ashes of the cow shall also wash his clothes and be unclean until evening.

This shall be a permanent law for the Israelites and for the strangers who reside among you.

Nili Fox, “Numbers,” *Jewish Study Bible*

Generations have puzzled over the color of this cow. The best explanation is that it is a brown, or reddish-brown cow with no spots of other color on it.

George Buchanan Gray, “Numbers,” *ICC*

Upon which a yoke hath never come] (לֹא-עָלָה עָלֶיהָ עֲלִיָּהּ) 1 S. 6⁷ †; cp. Dt.21³ (אִשָּׁר לֹא-מִשְׁכָּה); cp. the *αξυγες* and *injuges* of the Greeks and Latins. The animal is to be one that has never been used for profane purposes. This provision is not made for cows offered as sacrifices. The cows of 1 S. 6⁷ are indeed ultimately sacrificed (v.14); but they were not selected for this purpose. Neither the heifer of Dt. 21, nor the red cow (see below) is offered as a sacrifice; but in each case the animal is selected for a special sacred purpose, and for this reason must be one that has not previously been used for ordinary domestic purposes: cp. the case of the firstborn, Dt. 15¹⁹.

Deut. 15:19 You shall consecrate to the Lord your God all male firstlings that are born in your herd and in your flock: you must not work your firstling ox or shear your firstling sheep.

Jacob Milgrom, “Numbers,” *JPS Torah Commentary*

no yoke has been laid That is, it must not be used for profane purposes. This stipulation is made in Deuteronomy 21:2 and 1 Samuel 6:7, where the animals were not intended for sacrifice. Indeed, the rabbis teach that worked animals are not disqualified as sacrifices.⁷ However, the firstling, a sacrificial animal, may not be worked.⁸ Thus work animals probably could be sacrificed but no sooner were they consecrated as sacrificial animals than no benefit could be derived from them. The Hittites also (see the Comment to 13:29) regarded the working of sacrificial animals as a capital crime.

Deut. 21:3

The elders of the town nearest to the corpse shall then take a heifer which has never been worked, which has never pulled in a yoke...

Bernard Levinson, "Deuteronomy," *Jewish Study Bible*

3: *Never been worked . . . never pulled in a yoke:* The heifer's immaturity and physically intact state symbolize the human victim's innocence (similarly, Num. 19:2).

Jeffrey Tigay, "Deuteronomy," *JPS Torah Commentary*

which has never been worked, which has never pulled in a yoke This gives the heifer a ritual character, though its slaughter is not actually a sacrifice (see Excursus 19). The same qualities are required of firstlings, the red cow, and the cows that the Philistines sent to pull the wagon on which they returned the Ark of the Lord to Israel.

1Sam. 6:7

Therefore, get a new cart ready and two milch cows that have not borne a yoke; harness the cows to the cart, but take back indoors the calves that follow them.

Shimon Bar-Efrat, "Samuel," *Jewish Study Bible*

7: As a mark of reverence for the Ark, the cart and the cows transporting it should not have been defiled by previous use. Cows were kept for work rather than for milk or meat; milch cows would have young calves and naturally be drawn to them.

ABARBANEL: **On which no yoke has been laid.** This alludes to the yoke of service to other gods.

Jeffrey Tigay, "Deuteronomy— Excursus 19" *JPS Torah Commentary*

Because of its puzzling elements, rabbinic texts list this ceremony, along with the goat sent to Azazel on the Day of Atonement and the red heifer (Lev. 16; Num. 19), among the commandments for which there is no apparent reason and which other nations and the impulse for evil challenge. ² Rabbinic sources report that the ceremony was abolished in the first century c.e. because murder had become common and was committed openly; even if the authorities did not know who the killer was, it was highly unlikely that nobody knew, as verse 1 requires. ³

Since Deuteronomy explains a good half of its laws, ⁴ the fact that it leaves such puzzling elements unexplained looks intentional.