


Creative waters: Semantic and ritual innovation in the Book of Numbers

**Author:**Esias E. Meyer¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Esias Meyer,
sias.meyer@up.ac.za

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The article examines how water features in different rituals in Leviticus and Numbers. It starts by providing an overview of how water is used in Leviticus and Numbers for cleansing and other rituals, focusing on cases where water is mixed with something else. Then, the article focuses on three pericopes from the Book of Numbers that describe concoctions of water mixed with other substances. These concoctions are given specific names in Numbers. Lastly, the article discusses diachronic arguments about these ritual texts.

Contribution: The article shows the creativity that the authors of Numbers employed in reworking and innovating ritual texts from Leviticus.

Keywords: cleansing rituals; ritual texts; water concoctions; ritual innovation; Leviticus; Numbers 5; Numbers 8; Numbers 19.

Introduction

This article is a response to a call for papers in our faculty on 'The essence of water: A spiritual perspective'. The project's area of interest is water as one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, specifically regarding the role of water in religious systems. One recommended topic is 'Historical discussion of the origin and development of rituals using water'. This article engages with the debate on the origin and development of water rituals; however, in the case of Old Testament criticism, we are more inclined to study the origin and development of *texts*. There is very little consensus among scholars as to the exact relation between texts prescribing or describing rituals and what actually happened in any historical context.

MacDonald (2018) puts it as follows:

Some recent biblical scholarship, however, has begun to recognise that the textualisation of the cult was both innovative and transformative. Texts are not rituals, and rituals are not texts. The consequences of this lack of identity are significant. (p. 416)

After referring to the work of Catherine Bell, MacDonald continues (2018):

Textualisation results in new relationships with other ritual texts through processes of homogenisation and systematisation. In some cases, it results in rituals being endowed with 'meaning'. In other cases, it may even result in significant alteration to rituals, or even the invention of rituals where the textual logic demands it. (pp. 416–417)

This article contributes to this debate by focusing on the functioning of water in many ritual texts scattered throughout Leviticus and Numbers. I will do three things to elucidate. I will *first* provide a brief overview of how the use of water is described in ritual texts in Leviticus and Numbers. *Next*, I will focus on three texts from the Book of Numbers: Chapters 5, 8 and 19. My account of these texts will initially be mostly synchronic. *Lastly*, I will attempt to tease out the implications of these observations for our understanding of the development of ritual texts and thus venture into some diachronic debates. I will show the creativity and innovation often accompanying these textual processes.

It goes without saying that water is featured in many ritual texts in the priestly parts of the Pentateuch – especially in the Book of Leviticus and Book of Numbers. This should not come as a surprise because water is a universal component of cleansing rituals. In his 'Water: A Spiritual History', Bradley (2012) writes:

The single most important and ubiquitous spiritual function of water within all the world's major religious traditions is as a medium for ritual cleansing and purification. It is expressed in many different ways – from naked dips in cold streams to bathing in specially constructed tubs and washing hands and feet

Note: Special Collection: Interreligious Dialogue, sub-edited by Jaco Beyers (University of Pretoria, South Africa).

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before entering a place of worship – but the basic underlying principle is the same: the unique capacity of water to cleanse, dissolve and wash away dirt, conceived in spiritual and psychological as well as physical terms. (p. 26)

This description also applies to Leviticus and Numbers, as I will show.

Brief overview of water in Leviticus

In Leviticus 1:9, where we find the first reference to water in the book, we are told that the entrails and legs of the *קֹלֵב* [burnt offering], a bull in this instance, should be washed before they are burned on the altar. This action of burning clean entrails should then produce the famous ‘pleasing odour to the Lord’ (NRSV).¹ Moses executes the same action in Leviticus 8:21 as part of the rites of ordination described in Leviticus 8, which also involves an *קֹלֵב*. This washing is not a cleansing ritual but rather a way to prepare the animal’s carcass for the *קֹלֵב* sacrifice,² which is usually regarded as the most important sacrifice.³

In the rest of Leviticus, water is often prescribed in cleansing rituals *after* exposure to impurity, or it sometimes forms part of cleansing performed *before* one can participate in a particular ritual. Thus, at the beginning of Leviticus 8 (v. 6), Moses washes Aaron and his sons. Aaron also washes his body in Leviticus 16:4 before performing the sacrifices of the day of Atonement. After performing the sacrifices, Aaron is supposed to wash himself again. Examples of people exposed to impurity include the person who took the goat for Azazel into the wilderness in Leviticus 16:26 and the one who burns parts of the sin offerings outside the camp in verse 28 of the same chapter. The relevant persons must launder their clothes and wash their bodies in both instances. The same applies to a person who ate from the carcass of an animal that had died naturally (Lv 17:15). The priest who touched an unclean thing may eat only from the sacred donations after washing himself with water (Lv 22:6).

In Leviticus 15, we also have prescriptions for laundering and washing. Any person touching a man who suffers from an irregular discharge shall launder his clothes, wash himself and wait until the evening to become clean again (v. 5). The same applies to anybody who had indirect contact with him. For a person who has been in contact with the bed of a woman who experiences regular blood flow or anything that she sat on, the same process of laundering, washing and waiting also applies (v. 19). A man who has a regular emission of semen must wash his body with water and wait until evening (v. 16). Without water, cleansing is not possible, and without cleansing, or a state of purity, participation in the cult is not allowed.

1. See also verse 13 with regard to a sheep or goat as *קֹלֵב*. Strangely enough, none of the other blood sacrifices in Leviticus 3–5 needs to be washed before burning parts of it.

2. Hieke (2014:176) argues that the contents of intestines are difficult to burn and so need to be removed before burning can take place.

3. See discussion in Watts (2013:157–175). For Watts (2013:157), the *קֹלֵב* is the most ‘paradigmatic’ offering.

Speaking of the cult, one should also add that water is not the only liquid used for cleansing in Leviticus and Numbers. One other important liquid is, of course, blood. Blood and water are usually not mixed, with one or two exceptions, but both play roles in certain rituals. And if Milgrom is correct, which a lot of scholars think he is, then blood functions in ways similar to water in the sense that it ‘washes away’ or ‘removes’ undesirable elements from the sanctuary.⁴ This happens *literally* with water, but blood has more of a metaphorical or symbolic meaning.

Another liquid that is also featured from time to time is oil. Apart from being an ingredient of the *מִנְחָה* [grain offering] in Leviticus 2, oil called *שֶׁמֶן הַמִּשְׁחָה* [anointing oil] is used in the ordination ritual of Aaron and his sons in Leviticus 8. In 8:10, the oil is used to anoint the tabernacle and to sanctify (Pi [שְׁכַח]) everything in it. In 8:11, this oil is sprinkled seven times on the altar, which results in the consecration (Pi [שְׁכַח]) of the altar. In verse 30, Moses takes anointing oil and blood from the altar and sprinkles them on the clothes of Aaron and his sons. The blood on the altar is the leftover of a bull as a purification offering or of a ram as a burnt offering or as an ordination offering. Oil is also used during the third phase of the cleansing ritual of Leviticus 14, where it is sprinkled seven times before the Lord (v. 16). It is also applied to the person who has healed from skin disease (vv. 17 and 18) in a fashion reminiscent of Leviticus 8.

But to return to water, in all of these cases just mentioned in Leviticus, we read about water only, just simple *מַיִם*, what we would call H₂O today. On one occasion, though, the noun ‘water’ is modified by an adjective. In Leviticus 14, we read of ‘living water’, or *מַיִם חַיִּים*, a concept usually understood as water from a natural source, not water stored by humans.⁵ Natural sources would then include streams and fountains. Grammatically, *מַיִם חַיִּים* is a textbook example of the attributive usage of the adjective.

In Leviticus 14, we find the most elaborate cleansing ritual in the Book of Leviticus.⁶ After the person who suffered from *צָרַעַת* [skin disease] has been healed, he needs to go to the priest and proceed through a three-phase ritual. As part of the first phase, two clean living birds, cedarwood, crimson yarn and hyssop are required. One of the birds must be slaughtered over *מַיִם חַיִּים*. This is the only time that *מַיִם חַיִּים* is required in Leviticus; all the other occasions refer to just *מַיִם*. This might also be one of the few instances where water and blood are mixed, but the text is not explicit. Verse 5 says the bird must be slaughtered over the living water, and then, verse 6 requires that the living bird must be dipped in the blood of

4. For Milgrom (1991:1080), the verb *כָּפַר* has the basic meaning of ‘rub’ or ‘rub off’ and is related to the Akkadian *kuppuru*, which means purge. In this understanding, blood functions as a ritual detergent. Milgrom (1991:1081) thinks that *כָּפַר* ‘in all instances of the *חַטָּאת* offering bears this meaning exclusively’. Although many scholars agree with Milgrom, they often disagree on what exactly is ‘rubbed clean’. For Milgrom, it is always the sanctuary. For other scholars, this action could also apply to people (e.g. Gane 2005:380; Nihan 2007:177–187). See Lam (2020) for a recent challenge to Milgrom’s view.

5. See Milgrom (1991:836–837), Hartley (1992:195), Sklar (2023:382–383), etc.

6. See discussion in Meyer (2023:1–3).

the dead bird before being allowed to fly away. But dipped into which blood? Presumably, the blood mixed with the living water, with all the other substances added. As Hartley (1992:195) points out, one bird will not supply enough blood to dip another bird, so the blood needs to be supplemented with water. The mixed blood must then be sprinkled [נזה] seven times on the person who was healed from צרעת. Thus, this text prescribes a ritual that utilises a mixture of water, blood and other ingredients used in a cleansing ritual. This is the only mixture of water and something else in Leviticus, but this concoction of blood, water and other ingredients is never given a name.

Numbers also has its fair share of ritual prescriptions, often requiring ordinary water. Some of these are cleansing rituals, others are rites of passage and others are a bit of both. In many of them, water plays an important role. There are examples where ordinary water is used. For instance, the priest in Numbers 19:7–10 who adds the same ingredients as those mentioned in Leviticus 14 to the burning heifer to produce the ash shall wash and launder and be considered unclean until evening, or the person who burns the heifer or collects the ash shall do the same. Also, the clean person who sprinkles the unclean ones in 19:18–19 shall do the same. However, on three occasions in the Book of Numbers, water is not enough, but it needs to be fortified with other substances. And these mixtures are indeed given original names.

Named concoctions in Numbers

Numbers 5:11–29

Numbers 5:11–29 is the infamous pericope about the jealous husband who suspects that his wife is unfaithful but has no proof.⁷ Two other pericopes in verses 1–4 and 5–10 precede this one. From a diachronic perspective, these pericopes allude to most of Leviticus and even some chapters in Numbers, especially Numbers 19 (Frevel 2020:258). Verses 1–4 take a more extreme position towards people exposed to dead bodies or suffering from irregular discharges of bodily fluids than Leviticus does by putting them outside the camp. I understand this pericope as supplementing Leviticus 15 and Numbers 19 by explicitly stating that people suffering from certain impurities must stay outside the camp (also Frevel 2020:258–259). This idea is taken over from Leviticus 13:46, where the person suffering from skin disease is also put out of the camp until they are healed and have gone through the cleansing rituals described in Leviticus 14. The second pericope, verses 5–10, is about embezzlement and revisits issues in Leviticus 5 around the אשם [guilt] sacrifice and the trespass of מעל [sacrilege]. In both pericopes, one can thus see how the authors of Numbers went beyond Leviticus by creating stricter regulations and by filling certain gaps in the Levitical texts, especially Leviticus 13–15 and Leviticus 5.

7. It should not come as a surprise that many feminists have commented on this text and the patriarchy it exudes. Although the text is often referred to as 'the *sōta* case' (e.g. Frevel 2016:145) from the verb שטה 'to go astray', feminist scholars point out that the actual problem in the text is a jealous husband. See Lipton (2009:108) or Gudme (2021:54).

But to return to verses 11–29, in this pericope water functions differently from its functioning in Leviticus and most other cases in Numbers. Water is not used in a cleansing ritual here, but for internal use. In verse 17, a priest is instructed to take holy water in an earthen vessel and add dust from the tabernacle floor to it. Grammatically, מים קדשים [holy water] is the same as מים חיים [living water], with an adjective modifying the noun in an attributive way. Some scholars actually think both expressions refer to the same thing, namely, fresh water, but others disagree.⁸ In verse 18, the priest is to set the woman before the Lord with her unique מנחה [grain offering] and deliberately dishevel her hair. Achenbach (2003:506) argues that the dishevelled (qal pass. part. of פרע) hair evokes Leviticus 13:45, where the person who was diagnosed with צרעת needs to loosen his hair and leave the camp while shouting 'unclean, unclean'. The priest then presents the woman with מים המרים המצרים. Levine (1993:196) thinks this formulation 'reflects alliteration and internal assonance'. Although המרים and המצרים are not etymologically related, they 'sound very much alike, and both evoke unfavorable associations'.

Grammatically, מים המרים [water of bitterness] is a construct relation, which is followed with the participle of the root ארר (pi [to curse]) modifying the noun in an attributive way. The NRSV translates this as the 'water of bitterness that brings the curse'. Similarly, Seebass (2012:132) refers to 'Flüchwasser zur Bitterkeit'. The implication of this term is fairly clear in the sense that this water mixture has a negative connotation. In verses 19–22, the priest first makes the woman take an oath before putting the oath in writing. As Wenham (1981:90) points out, it is 'most unusual in the Bible for descriptions of biblical rituals to include the words that accompanied them'. The writing is then washed into the water, adding a third ingredient to the concoction: ink. The water will function in a nearly magical way to make the woman infertile if she were guilty of unfaithfulness. Gudme (2021:56) argues that this is 'a form of divination since it seeks hidden information from the gods'.

As I said at the beginning, this ritual is fairly unique. I do not see any cleansing elements here, and although I see some links with Leviticus, there are important differences. The מנחה referred to here is different from the מנחה of Leviticus 2, as barley is not used there (Frevel 2016:145). Furthermore, Seebass (2012:136–137) points out that no oil or incense is added here as Leviticus 2 prescribes. The only similarity one finds takes us to Leviticus 5 (vv. 11–13) again, which describes an offering of wheat flour without oil and incense, but this is only allowed for very poor people who need to bring a חטאת [sin offering] (Frevel 2016:146). Also in verses 15 and 18, one finds two further constructs that give different names to the מנחה, namely, מנחת קנאות and מנחת הזכרון. Levine (1993:194)

8. Budd (1984:61) argues that the author is drawing on ancient customs referring to some holy spring. He thinks that this interpretation is in line with the LXX. Levine (1993:195) thinks it either means 'pure water' or 'living water'. Wenham (1981:94) thinks the text refers to water 'from the laver between the altar and the tent of meeting'. This certainly makes sense because why else would the water be holy? Also, dust is taken from the sanctuary floor. If Wenham is correct, it means all the ingredients for the mixture come from what is available in the sanctuary. See also Milgrom (1990:39) or Achenbach (2003:505) for a similar argument.

translates this as ‘a grain offering occasioned by envious feelings’ and ‘the grain offering of record’. These are unique concepts. One verb in this pericope that occurs in Leviticus (Chapter 5 again) is the verb *מעל*, which *always* refers to a sin against *God* in Leviticus (Milgrom 1990:37; Olson 1996:37). In verses 12 and 27, the wife allegedly commits this offence against her *husband*. If the author of this pericope was thus familiar with Leviticus 2 and 5, he went out of his way to devise a lot of reinventions, and the text leaves us with more differences than similarities.

Numbers 8:5–26

The next reference to water is in Numbers 8:7. Numbers 8 describes the ‘ordination’ or ‘dedication’ of the Levites (Olson 1996:48). The chapter reads like a reappropriation of ritual elements from the Book of Leviticus. The chapter presents itself as a kind of ordination ritual for the Levites, but it reads more like a cleansing ritual. The command is given to Moses in verse 6 to cleanse the Levites (pi of טהר), and his first act in verse 7 is to sprinkle *מי הקטאת* on them. Canonically speaking, the last time that Moses was the subject of the verb *נזה* [hif] was in Leviticus 8:30, where he sprinkled anointing oil and blood on Aaron and his sons. In that chapter, Aaron and his sons were ordained, which leads to the expectation that something similar would happen to the Levites. Why else is Moses suddenly the subject of this verb again? In Leviticus 8:30, the result was the sanctification of Aaron and his sons, expressed with the verb *קדש* [pi]. Yet here in Numbers 8, the language of sanctification is not used, and the Levites are only to be cleansed. Stökl (2018:494) points out that in ‘Numbers 8:5–15 the root *קדש* is carefully avoided’. It is only in verses 16–19 where an explanation is given that the Levites replaced the firstborn and they (the firstborn) were consecrated. Levites are holy only in a very indirect way.

Thus, the expectation of ordination (or sanctification) is toned down and replaced by cleansing. For instance, the Levites must launder their clothes and shave their body hair (v. 7), much like the person who recovered from skin disease in Leviticus 14, and they are separated from the Israelites to have a unique position with YHWH, but their position is not as special as that of the priests.⁹ Another obvious element of a cleansing ritual is the classic combination of two bulls as a *קטאת* and an *עלה* in verse 12 (Nihan 2007:169–170). I imagine that the author felt the need to give the Levites their own ‘ritual’, similar to what the Aaronides had in Leviticus 8 and 9. This ritual had both to evoke Leviticus 8 and 9 and to be different from Leviticus 8 and 9 to not infringe on Aaronide’s authority. But to return to the cleansing itself: Moses must sprinkle *מי הקטאת* on them. Once again, this kind of water is named utilising a construct.

It is not clear what this water is, nor how it should be prepared, as we had with the *מי הקריים* of Numbers 5. A further question is what *קטאת* refers to. The word can refer either to sin or to the sin or purification offering. This in itself is one of the joys of the Hebrew word *קטאת* in priestly texts. The term

9. Quite a few scholars have posited this view. See discussion in Seebass (2012:214).

can sometimes refer to the problem of sin and, on other occasions, to the solution to the problem, i.e., the purification offering.¹⁰ Levine (1993:274) thinks the latter option is unlikely, ‘because no water is directly associated with such sacrifices’. Also, Lam (2020:342) argues that *קטאת* refers to sin here and translates with ‘waters (that get rid of) sin’. But then one could argue that the fact that the verb *נזה* is used points to the offering. This verb is used almost exclusively with the *קטאת* sacrifice (Janowski 1982:224); the only exceptions are the cases of the water mixture of Leviticus 14 and the oil mixture of Leviticus 8, where the same verb is used (Janowski 1982:244 n. 203). Still, the term remains ambivalent, and we do not know what is in this water. Is it some mixture, or is it just water that has been given a more lofty name? Seebass (2012:215) thinks it might be the latter. For him, the term describes ‘Klares Wasser’, so the name rather points to the intended effect of the water. Should we thus translate it with ‘water of/for sin’ or ‘water of/for purification offering’? Most translators and commentators translate it as ‘water of/for purification’.¹¹ *מי הקטאת* would actually pass as a good name for the next concoction in Numbers 19.¹²

Numbers 19:1–22

In Numbers 19:1–10, we find prescriptions for the creation of a ritual detergent, which is called *מי נדה*. This concoction is a mixture of ashes and water. The process of producing the ashes is still perplexing scholars. Eleazar is to take a red heifer without defect, on which no yoke has ever been, and slaughter it outside the camp. Eleazar must then sprinkle some of the blood seven times towards the tabernacle. The verb, once again, is *נזה*, the verb associated with the *קטאת* sacrifice. Then, the whole heifer must be burned, and while the heifer is burning, the priest needs to throw cedarwood, hyssop and crimson yarn into the fire. These ingredients are the same as those found in the first phase of the Leviticus 14 cleansing ritual. The priest and any other person involved in this place shall bathe their bodies, launder their clothes and remain unclean until the evening. The ashes must be stored outside the camp by a clean person. Then, in verse 9, we read that ‘it’ is a *קטאת*. The pronoun’s referent is unclear because the consonantal text is masculine, but the Masoretes pointed the word as feminine. For Milgrom (1990:160), it is either the cow (feminine) or the ashes (masculine). When the water is mixed with the ashes, it is called *מי נדה*, and one wonders why this water cannot be called *מי הקטאת* as we had in Numbers 8. That name would have been appropriate.

This mixture is to be used in three cases specified in the second half of the chapter (vv. 11–22), namely, contact with a corpse (vv. 11–13), the death of a person in a tent (vv. 14–15)

10. For a more detailed discussion of this debate, see Meyer (2022:7–14) or Nihan (2007:179–186) or Hieke (2014:88–91). See challenge by Lam (2020) who argues for the traditional translation of ‘sin offering’.

11. Including Olson (1996:48), Milgrom (1990:61), Wenham (1981:108), Budd (1984:92), Levine (1993:269), etc., Seebass (2012:209) also translates this as ‘Reinigungswasser’.

12. Olson (1996:48–49) suggests that this water might refer to the water created in Numbers 19. Milgrom (1990:61) offers a similar argument. Wenham (1981:108) and Budd (1984:93) are uncertain. Levine (1993:274) finds the identification of the two terms ‘improbable’.

and contact with corpses during war (v. 16). Verse 17 actually specifies that when the concoction is prepared, running water (again [מֵי חַיִּים]) should be used. Thus, the formulation takes us back, once again, to Leviticus 14, the only other case where מֵי חַיִּים was used.

But to return to מֵי נְדָה: the meaning of this construct has been extensively debated by scholars. It is usually translated as ‘water for cleansing’, thus similar to the מֵי הַטְּהָרָה of Numbers 8. מֵי נְדָה is usually used for the impurity associated with menstruation. Lam (2020:342) translates with ‘waters (to get rid of) impurity’. מֵי נְדָה is clearly a very negative term. Erbele-Küster (2017:122) describes the term as ‘pejorative and polemical’ and says that the term becomes ‘a literary indication of what is outside the system’. Yet here in the construct relation, it describes something that is used in a cleansing ritual and that allows somebody who has been relegated to a position outside of the community (because of exposure to death) to return to the community. So in short, one finds three cases where water is grammatically qualified by means of a construct relation, but the semantic outcomes differ:

- The clearest case is the מֵי הַמְּאָרְרִים of Numbers 5. ‘Bitter’ is usually a negative term; thus, the construct defines a kind of water that is bad or has a clear negative connotation. This negative connotation is even further intensified through the added participle. It is not only ‘bitter water’ or ‘water of bitterness’, but if you add ‘which is cursing’, there cannot be any doubt about its quality. Here, the construct adds a straightforward meaning. It does not mean that the water necessarily tastes bitter but rather has a ‘bitter’ (i.e. awful) effect (Wenham 1981:95). This bitter water is not used in a cleansing ritual but internally to determine the guilt or innocence of a woman suffering from a jealous husband.
- On the other extreme, we have the מֵי נְדָה of Numbers 19. מֵי נְדָה always has a negative connotation, but in a construct with water, you have ‘water of or for cleansing’. The end result has the opposite (i.e. positive) meaning. The water removes the detrimental consequences of exposure to death, allows somebody outside the community to return to the fold or, put differently, the water with a negative name that does a positive thing.
- The מֵי הַטְּהָרָה of Numbers 8 is more ambivalent and depends on how one understands הַטְּהָרָה. If the term refers to sin, then this example is similar to Numbers 19, thus acquiring an opposite (i.e. positive) meaning, but if the term refers to a purification sacrifice, then the construct leads to a straightforward meaning. I think that the latter is the most probable, based on the verb used with the water, but because the term הַטְּהָרָה itself is so ambivalent, it is not easy to say.

Conclusion

I presented these ritual texts from Numbers by first looking at the use of water in cleansing and other rituals in Leviticus, and I have no doubt that Leviticus is the older text and that

Leviticus often provides the building blocks for later reinventions or reappropriations of ritual texts in the Book of Numbers. Thus, Leviticus is the first text to present the idea of a watery mixture in Leviticus 14. We did not go into this, but there are good arguments positing that one finds the remnants of a very old ritual that precedes the Priestly text in the first phase of Leviticus 14 (Meyer 2023:2). Leviticus 14 never gives its mixture a name, but naming occurs on three occasions in Numbers, where the construct is used to create a new technical term. But what is the possible diachronic relationship between Numbers 5, 8 and 19?

One way to respond is to look for the text that is the furthest away from Leviticus, thus the text that offers the greatest discontinuity or creativity when compared to Leviticus. In this case, it is clearly Numbers 5:11–29. The text has a new way of using the verb מָעַל and a different kind of מִנְחָה, and it does not use water for cleansing but for internal application. Also, if one were to look to the first pericope at the beginning of the chapter (vv. 1–4), it would seem that there is a clear allusion to Numbers 19, and the text fills a perceived gap in Numbers 19. The latter text prescribes seven days of being unclean but never mentions being put out of the camp. Thus, in the light of these observations, one could argue that Numbers 5:11–29 is the youngest text – yet the matter is also not that simple. Older scholars thought that the text preserves an older ritual. Thus, Budd (1984:63) is convinced that the ‘ordeal was an ancient custom’. These older scholars presume that there was a straightforward relationship between text and historical ritual. These very differences might bear witness to an older ritual text, and so, the difference from Leviticus could also be explained in this way. Either this text is a new invention substantially digressing from Leviticus, or these very digressions are remnants of something older and precede Leviticus.

Things are a bit clearer concerning the diachronic relation of Numbers 8 and 19 to Leviticus. Both texts show continuity and creativity when compared to Leviticus. Numbers 8 echoes Leviticus 8 and some aspects of Leviticus 14. In a sense, it reinvents or reappropriates ritual texts from Leviticus without changing them. The historical context of this text is probably a time when the power struggle between Levites and priests was acute, and this text gives some limited status to the Levites, but they are still not on par with the Aaronides. Numbers 19 draws a great deal from Leviticus 14 and texts about the הַטְּהָרָה sacrifice. It might also preserve an older priestly memory of a הַטְּהָרָה that was not a sacrifice, but more of an elimination ritual (Meyer 2022:16). Some scholars have pointed to the growing importance of the problem of impurity because of corpses¹³; the further one moves into the Persian period and Numbers 19 bears witness to that development. Yet, as soon as we start offering historical arguments, we presume there is a closer link between text and historical rituals.

Both Numbers 8 and 19 share the same understanding of impurity and the function of cleansing rituals with Leviticus;

¹³See, for instance, Achenbach (2009:364–366) and Kazen (2015:454–459).

neither can be read without the earlier book. But reading these texts like this points to the ongoing textual engagement with ritual texts, especially rituals involving water. Although both Leviticus and Numbers refer to the use of water in different rituals and Leviticus even describes its own concoction (Lv 14), the authors of Numbers were much more creative in giving names to their concoctions.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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