

ABSTRACT

SPRINKLING AT THE TEMPLE ENTRANCE: A FORGOTTEN TEMPLE RITUAL

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Philo repeatedly describes the custom of sprinkling water mixed with the ashes of the red heifer on people entering the Temple, even if they are ritually pure. Since this custom contradicts biblical and rabbinic law, which requires this sprinkling only for corpse impurity, scholars have claimed that Philo's testimony does not reflect a ritual actually practiced in first-century Jerusalem. This paper reevaluates the evidence, pointing out hitherto overlooked aspects of rabbinic and early Christian texts that support Philo and affirm the existence of the custom – a ritual which resembles contemporaneous Hellenistic purification practices. This paper also demonstrates how the Rabbis reinterpreted the particulars of this ritual, trying to reconcile them with their concepts of purity. For the Rabbis, a purification ritual should be performed only after a defilement, and not, as implied by some Second-Temple sources, as an act of transition between different levels of sanctity or purity.