

**Unfaithfulness in the Covenant Community:
Uncleanness, Suspicion of Adultery
Numbers 5**

Review

- Lessons from the Wilderness
- Addressing the Census Numbers
- Responsibilities of Levites: Guarding the Sanctuary and the Holy Presence of God

Overview of Issues in Chapter Five

- Implications of membership in God's covenant community
- Practical "threats" to the sanctity (purity) of the Israelite encampment: physical uncleanness; unresolved sins against other members of the community; hidden adultery
- The second and third are described as "breaking faith"

Uncleanness that Defiled the Community (5:1-4)

- Example cases: infectious skin disease (see Lev 13) or bodily discharge (Lev 15)
- Contact with corpse, the most serious of defilements
- Sent outside camp—temporarily until cleansed

Wronging Other Members of the Community (5:5-10)

- Guilty party had also wronged the Lord (verse 6)
- Confession and restitution to the wronged party
- In absence of human recipient of the payment of restitution, it was to be given to priest
- Atonement

Covenant Implications in the Case of Adultery

- Marriage is the central human relationship that portrays God's covenant "marriage" with His people
- God's jealousy in the case of idolatry (adultery) is entirely warranted – the second commandment forbidding idolatry (Exodus 20:4-6) includes God's declaration that He is a jealous God. It is indicative of relentless love.
- Adultery warranted the death penalty if the participants were caught (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22)- two or three witnesses were necessary

What Are the Particular Challenges in Cases of Adultery?

- If women in question did this, they were rarely caught in the act (5:12)
- Suspicion and jealousy often rage out of control (5:14)
- How were these to be addressed faithfully in God's covenant community? It was a matter of God's Presence in their midst. They could not tolerate anything that defiled the community.
- Two distinct possibilities underlie the ritual: she was guilty but there was no proof; she was innocent and her husband's accusation was groundless

Procedures—detailed description is unusual but the procedure was important to establish either innocence or guilt before the Lord

- She was taken to the priest – this is not public; in a context where jealousy could cause injury or death, going to the priest was a merciful provision.
- This was not a "death ordeal." She presented herself for vindication.
- Grain offering for jealousy – barley [lowliest sacrifice]; no anointing oil or incense [absence of joy]; "reminder offering to remember iniquity" (verse 15)
- Stand before the Lord—noted twice
- Holy water [from laver?] and dust [symbolic connections] from floor of Tabernacle [God's presence]

- Priest loosened her hair [symbolic of uncleanness], she held the jealousy offering, he held the water, and recited the curse, the precise nature of which was ambiguous!
- [thigh fall and belly to swell could be interpreted as visible evidence or a reference to barrenness; see verse 28]
- Woman accepted the conditions of the curse—Amen; amen!
- Curse written and then washed into the bitter water
- Grain offering—reminder of guilt—waved before the Lord and partially burned on altar
- Woman drank the bitter water
- If she was guilty, the physical manifestations would cause people to curse; if she was not guilty, there would be no effects and she would be able to bear children

Why is this procedure in Torah? What are possible implications? How does this procedure demonstrate God's justice and mercy?

- In a male-dominated culture, this served to protect the woman against false accusations and private emotional acts of vengeance
- Because the situation would also be a matter of shame for the husband, a man would not do this easily as it reflected on his own honor. Both were coming before the Lord.
- The verdict was entirely dependent on the Lord; if she was guilty, the physical results would make that evident. It took the matter entirely out of human hands. And it was not lethal; in some ANE cultures, she may have been subjected to the river ordeal, which was fatal. [CHECK]
- If she was guilty, she could be carrying another man's child and that would have an impact on inheritance rights

Wider Cultural Contexts

- There seems to have been a concern for marital fidelity, and a measure of protection for the woman that was wider than the Israelite Torah
- Significant parallels from the Code of Hammurabi (129-132)

"If the wife of a citizen has been caught while lying with another man, they shall bind them and throw them into the water. If the husband of the woman wishes to spare his wife, then the king in turn may spare his subject" (129)

"If a citizen's wife was accused by her husband, but she was not surprised with another man, she shall make an affirmation by god and then may return to her house" (131)

"If the 'finger is pointed' [gossip] at the wife of a citizen because of another man, but she is not caught sleeping with the other man, she shall throw herself into the river for the sake of her husband." (132)

This "jump into the river" is explained in an earlier part of the Code:

"If a citizen brings a charge of sorcery against another citizen, but has not proved it, the citizen against whom the charge of sorcery was brought, upon going to the river, shall throw himself in, and if the river overpowers him, his accuser shall take over his estate; if the river shows the accused to be innocent and he has come forth safe, the one who brought the charge, then the one who brought the accusation shall be put to death, while he who leaped into the river shall take possession of the house that had belonged to his accuser." (2)

Echoes and Intertextual Connections

- Parallels with the golden calf incident: idolatry/adultery; Moses made Israelites drink water with burned and "powdered" calf
- John 8
- The *Sotah* (Mishnah)