

Numbers 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 May 2022

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 5. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp everyone who is leprous, or has a discharge, and everyone who is unclean through contact with the dead.

You shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell. And the people of Israel did so, and put them outside the camp, as the Lord said to Moses, so the people of Israel did.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel. When a man or woman commits any of the sins that people commit by breaking faith with the Lord, and that person realises his guilt, he shall confess his sin that he has committed, and he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it, and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong.

But if the man has no next of kin to which restitution may be made for the wrong, the restitution for wrong shall go to the Lord for the priest, in addition to the ram of atonement with which atonement is made for him.

And every contribution, all the holy donations of the people of Israel, which they bring to the priest, shall be his. Each one shall keep his holy donations. Whatever anyone gives to the priest shall be his.

[1 : 0 8] And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel. If any man's wife goes astray and breaks faith with him, if a man lies with her sexually, and it is hidden from the eyes of her husband, and she is undetected, though she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her, since she was not taken in the act, and if the spirit of jealousy comes over him, and he is jealous of his wife, who has defiled herself, or if the spirit of jealousy comes over him, and he is jealous of his wife, though she has not defiled herself, then the man shall bring his wife to the priest, and bring the offering required of her, a tenth of an ephor of barley flour.

He shall pour no oil on it, and put no frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance. And the priest shall bring her near, and set her before the Lord.

And the priest shall take holy water in an earthenware vessel, and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle, and put it into the water. And the priest shall set the woman before the Lord, and unbind the hair of the woman's head, and place in her hands the grain offering of remembrance, which is the grain offering of jealousy.

And in his hand the priest shall have the water of bitterness that brings the curse. Then the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, If no man has lain with you, and if you have not turned aside to uncleanness while you are under your husband's authority, be free from this water of bitterness that brings the curse.

But if you have gone astray, though you are under your husband's authority, and if you have defiled yourself, and some man other than your husband has lain with you, then let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse, and say to the woman, The Lord make you a curse, and an oath among your people, when the Lord makes your thigh fall away, and your body swell.

[2 : 48] May this water that brings the curse pass into your bowels, and make your womb swell, and your thigh fall away. And the woman shall say, Amen, Amen. Then the priest shall write these curses in a book, and wash them off into the water of bitterness.

And he shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings the curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter into her, and cause bitter pain. And the priest shall take the grain offering of jealousy out of the woman's hand, and shall wave the grain offering before the Lord, and bring it to the altar.

And the priest shall take a handful of the grain offering as its memorial portion, and burn it on the altar. And afterward shall make the woman drink the water. And when he has made her drink the water, then if she has defiled herself, and has broken faith with her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her, and cause bitter pain.

And her womb shall swell, and her thigh shall fall away, and the woman shall become a curse among her people. But if the woman has not defiled herself, and is clean, then she shall be free, and shall conceive children.

This is the law in cases of jealousy, when a wife, though under her husband's authority, goes astray and defiles herself, or when the spirit of jealousy comes over a man, and he is jealous of his wife.

[3 : 58] Then he shall set the woman before the Lord, and the priest shall carry out for her all this law. The man shall be free from iniquity, but the woman shall bear her iniquity. Numbers chapter 5 contains laws relating to three different issues, to maintaining the cleanness of the camp, to addressing debts in situations where there had been a breach of faith, and to potential cases of adultery.

The first of these matters, dealt with in verses 1 to 4, concerns the removal of those who are leprous, those who have discharges, and those who are unclean on account of contact with the dead.

As we see in Leviticus chapters 13 and 14, lepers would have been excluded from the camp for a considerable length of time, until their process of cleansing had been performed. Those who had discharges of an abnormal kind, would have been excluded from the camp for seven days, until they were cleansed.

Those with more typical omissions, would only have been unclean until evening. Finally, those who had had contact with the dead, would have gone through the process described in Numbers chapter 19, being removed from the camp for seven days.

Contact with an animal corpse, as described in Leviticus chapter 11, would only have led to uncleanness until evening. The cleanness of the camp needs to be maintained, because the Lord dwells in the midst of the people, and in the midst of their camp.

[5 : 15] This law is not recorded in an abstract legal context. Immediately after the law is given, we are told that the people observed it, putting unclean persons outside of the camp, as the Lord had commanded them.

The second section of this chapter, in verses 5 to 10, deals with cases of restitution, where someone had committed a breach of faith with the Lord. The breach of faith had been committed against the Lord, but here the focus is upon restitution to the wronged human party.

Full restitution, plus an added 20%, had to be made. If the person who had been wronged, was not alive, or no longer accessible, and had no living next of kin, the sum for the restitution had to be given to the Lord for the priest.

This was an addition to the ram of the reparation offering. Such cases are described from a slightly different perspective in Leviticus chapter 6, verses 1 to 7. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, If anyone sins and commits a breach of faith against the Lord by deceiving his neighbour in a matter of deposit or security, or through robbery, or if he has oppressed his neighbour, or has found something lost and lied about it, swearing falsely, in any of all the things that people do and sin thereby, if he has sinned and has realised his guilt, and will restore what he took by robbery, or what he got by oppression, or the deposit that was committed to him, or the lost thing that he found, or anything about which he has sworn falsely, he shall restore it in full, and shall add a fifth to it, and give it to him to whom it belongs on the day he realises his guilt.

And he shall bring to the priest as his compensation to the Lord a ram without blemish out of the flock, or its equivalent, for a guilt offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him before the Lord, and he shall be forgiven for any of the things that one may do, and thereby become guilty.

[6 : 57] While the especial focus of Leviticus is upon what is due to the Lord in such an instance, in numbers it is the wronged human party that is in the foreground. While verse 6 spoke of a situation of breaking faith with the Lord, in verse 12, the beginning of the final section of the chapter, there is a law addressing a situation where a woman breaks faith with her husband.

We should perhaps notice a parallel here. The ritual of jealousy seems very strange to the modern reader. It seems like a mixture between a superstitious magical ceremony, a medieval trial by ordeal, and a paternity test on a tasteless talk show.

What's it doing on the pages of scripture? Readers might also be troubled by the seeming misogyny of such a law, A wife can be made subject to an ordeal for which no corresponding right exists for husbands, and if the woman is found guilty, she faces serious consequences, though nothing is said of any consequences faced by the man with whom she has committed adultery.

As we try to understand this law, there are a number of things that we should recognize at the outset. First, the primary cause for the performance of the right is jealousy. It is easy to presume that since the jealousy is the husband's, the right exists principally for the sake of him as the accusing party.

However, we should be cautious here. One doesn't have to envisage the extremes illustrated by a character such as Othello to recognize that a husband's jealousy can be a profoundly destructive and vengeful force, as we see in places like Proverbs chapter 6 verse 34.

[8 : 26] For jealousy makes a man furious, and he will not spare when he takes revenge. The ritual of jealousy served to arrest the cycle of jealousy before it could be expressed in a husband's violent abuse or the violence of the lynch mob.

The jealous party had to surrender judgment into God's hands, thus preventing the escalation of jealousy into violence or the utter and final annihilation of all marital trust.

The ritual of jealousy, by preventing the unhalted rise of jealousy, protected vulnerable parties from violence, took judgment out of human hands, and served to exonerate the innocent.

The falsely suspected party could call the jealous party to put up or shut up, receiving divine vindication through the right, and being delivered from any stain on their character.

For anyone who has been falsely accused or suspected, the benefit of such a right should be immediately apparent. In such a manner, the jealousy right served both parties, by providing a way to avoid the destructive cycles of jealousy.

[9 : 27] Such a ritual held the potential of possibly salvaging marriages that might founder on the rocks of suspicion. Second, the efficacy of the right of jealousy depended upon the divine deliverance of a decisive verdict.

By itself, drinking the bitter water, while unpleasant, could not produce the terrible effects associated with the guilty verdict. The right involved no human judgment whatsoever, put everything into God's hands, and would only operate through divine action.

Our ability to accept the right is closely related to our preparedness to accept that God might provide decisive judgment in such a manner. The law more generally, as we see in places like Deuteronomy chapter 27, was backed up by divine sanctions, with divine judgment coming directly upon persons who were not caught by human authorities, or committed wrongs that were not subject to human laws.

The ritual of jealousy is unusual in the way that such judgment is delivered directly and openly. Third, speaking strictly, it was not an ordeal. Typically, trial by ordeal involves undergoing a dangerous and or painful trial, such as plunging one's hand into boiling water, or carrying a heated iron across a room.

On the basis of one's survival and or condition after such an ordeal, a human court would judge you to be innocent or guilty. Such ordeals were often at a high risk of producing false positives.

[10 : 48] The ritual of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5, however, involved little risk of false positives. The right itself, while not a pleasant experience, was not inherently dangerous or painful.

It also, we should remember, involved no human judgment at all subsequent to the ordeal, but placed the judgment and punishment entirely in God's hands. In all of this, then, we should recognize ways in which the right of jealousy served to address a crisis situation in the law, where a lack of knowledge could lead to the breakdown of all trust in a marriage, and a vulnerable party could suffer under a false accusation.

The ritual promised divine vindication or judgment in a way that arrested these negative processes. As I've already noted, the Mosaic law is underpinned by divine sanction for both individual and nation.

No one can escape divine justice, even though they may escape human justice. Evildoers can be directly punished by the Lord, and this judgment is typically presumed to come in this life.

Even though it might be delayed, the person who bore their iniquity was liable to receive direct punishment from God. Secret sinners were subjected to a terrible series of curses, who were not presumed to escape judgment for their sin, merely because they evaded human detection.

[12 : 00] The entire law was underwritten by this assurance. It seems to me the question that we should be asking is why the case of the woman suspected of adultery was treated differently from other cases, where punishment of unknown guilty parties could be left in God's hands and waited for patiently.

It seems to me that the three key reasons for this are, first, the destructive force of unchecked jealousy within marriage, a force that makes it much harder to go on than suspicions in any other context.

Second, the vulnerability of the suspected party to the violence of her husband or the mob. Third, the fact that the unfaithfulness of the wife was a greater threat to the order of the family than that of the husband, as it threw the legitimacy of the children into question, in a society where that really mattered.

The right of jealousy was a petition for immediate divine judgment that would bring matters to a head in a situation where continued unresolved suspicion could prove deeply destructive. It could assure a man that children were his and grant both the children and the mother the security that comes with that clearly defined status.

Considering all of these things, we should not be surprised if such a voluntary rite was nonetheless a welcome one. Looking at the rite itself, we can see that it's precipitated by a situation where the wife has committed a trespass or committed a breach of faith against her husband.

- [13 : 17] This is language that's more typically used of man's relationship with God. The analogy between spiritual unfaithfulness to the Lord and unfaithfulness to a human husband is an important one.

The husband is to bring his wife to the priest along with an offering. The offering seems to be a sort of standalone tribute offering, similar to those described in Leviticus chapter 2. However, in contrast to those offerings, it is not offered with oil and with frankincense, items that are added because the offering is supposed to be a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

This offering is for the purpose of memorializing possible sin. So naturally, elements that make an offering pleasing to the Lord would not be added. The priest takes holy water in an earthen vessel.

This is presumably drawn from a labor of cleansing and then holy dust from the ground of the tabernacle and places this in the water. The strange character of this ritual invites symbolic interpretation.

Perhaps the earthen vessel, as we see in places like 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 7, is an image of the human being, formed of dust and water. The reproductive capacity of a human being, particularly a woman, is connected with images of water in scripture.

- [14 : 24] The woman is described as having a fountain or is associated with a well. Perhaps the image here is of waters made bitter through pollution. If she is unfaithful, the woman has become like those waters that she is given to drink.

However, if she is faithful, those waters find no root in her. There also seem to be various ways in which this particular ritual alludes to events within the biblical histories, strengthening a case for symbolic interpretation.

The woman's head is uncovered in the Lord's presence. Her hair is let loose. Perhaps in such a manner, she is symbolically removed from the representation and protection of her husband, standing alone before the Lord.

Perhaps the purpose is to remove her from the symbolic sphere of her husband's household and to place her before the Lord for immediate personal judgment, apart from her husband's representation. The memorial offering is placed in her hands and when it's later offered, it will bring her to God's mind and judgment will be cast in her case.

The connection of the memorial offering with the meals of communion is important to notice in this context. There may also be a connection here with vocational rites, where offerings were placed in people's hands in places like Leviticus chapter 8, verses 25, 27, and in the next chapter of Numbers in verse 19.

- [15 : 37] In all of these cases, the worshiper is offering up their labor or work for divine approval or judgment. The woman is placed under a self-maledictory oath. She calls down judgment upon herself if she has been unfaithful.

Her cooperation is expected as her preparedness to undergo the rite is an act of pleading innocence before the divine court and petitioning God for public vindication. The priest writes up the self-maledictory curses in a book and then wipes or blots them out into the bitter water.

Perhaps we're supposed to see this as the water bearing the two chief prosecutors of the divine order, the law, the word of God from heaven, and the land, the dust that mediates God's curse upon mankind.

The law condemns the guilty and the land spits them out. In drinking the bitter water, the woman will take these two witnesses into her insides and their effect will determine her case one way or another.

The woman must drink the water and the priest offers the wave offering and burns its memorial portion. If she is guilty, the bitter water shall become bitter inside her and its curses shall make her a curse.

[16 : 43] If she is not guilty, it will have no effect. The efficacy of the rite arises from the memorial bread offering, which invokes God's judgment upon the one who offered it. The bitter water is the means of the punishment or vindication.

If the woman is guilty, there will be a marked and visible effect, presumably accompanied by considerable pain or discomfort. Her belly will swell and her thigh will rot. As in the case of the laws concerning leprosy, people speculate about the exact character of this judgment.

Perhaps it is a prolapsed uterus. The most significant outcome of the judgment will be her subsequent inability to bear children. This would have been a devastating judgment in Israelite society.

The guilty woman will bear her iniquity through the rite, but her husband would be free from iniquity, as we see in verse 31. This strikes me as a significant detail. It suggests that the husband is also being exposed to judgment in some way, even though he is not being publicly vindicated or condemned in the rite in quite the same way as his wife.

The jealousy of the husband, who has also been unfaithful, will presumably not be vindicated in the rite of jealousy, even though they would both bear their guilt in such a case. God will punish unfaithful husbands in his own time, but the openness of his judgment on adulteresses frees faithful-wives from unjust suspicion or accusation.

[18 : 01] Like much of the rest of the Old Testament law, the purpose and meaning of the rite of jealousy greatly exceeds the limited and immediate use it proposes. This is a law that ought to be read against the backdrop of various biblical narratives, to which it seems to have important analogies.

We might think of the images from prophecies like Jeremiah chapter 25 in verse 15 and 16. Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me, Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.

They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them. A similar image is used in the book of Revelation. The Lord tests unfaithful people by giving them the cup of his judgment to drink.

As unfaithful people drink that cup, they are brought to ruin. We have already noted the significant fact that this law is introduced by the discussion of a breach of faith, language that is typically used of unfaithfulness to the Lord.

There is both a connection and an analogy between faithfulness to the Lord and faithfulness to one's spouse. By teaching the testing of the unfaithful wife at the instigation of the jealous husband, this passage highlights a prominent biblical theme, that of the Lord as the jealous husband of his people, testing the faithfulness of his bride.

[19 : 16] I am not the first to see a connection between the ritual of jealousy and the events of Exodus chapter 32. In that passage where Moses was with the Lord on Mount Sinai, the children of Israel committed spiritual adultery against the Lord who brought them up out of Egypt.

They worshipped a golden calf and ate communion meals with Egyptian idols. Moses came down the mountain with the stone tablets of the testimony to see the Israelites sinning in this manner.

He responded by breaking the tablets of stone, burning and grinding the calf to powder, scattering it on the water and forcing the Israelites to drink it. The Levites were then instructed to kill 3,000 of their Israelite brethren, after which Moses interceded for the nation and the people were plagued.

The ritual of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5 could be seen as closely related to the rite of jealousy that the Lord performed upon his adulterous bride Israel by the hand of Moses. The relationship between the two events becomes even clearer if, as we might suspect, the broken stone tablets of the testimony in Exodus chapter 32 verse 19 are added to the powdered calf that is scattered on the waters in the following verses.

The curses of the law represented by the broken tablets of stone and the prosecution of the land or dust represented by the powdered calf would correspond to the dust from the tabernacle floor and the blotted out writing of the curses in Numbers chapter 5.

[20 : 36] A further possible connection between the two passages can be found in the use of the expression blotted out. In the ritual of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5 the words of the curse were blotted out and placed into the water which was then drunk by the woman.

If she had sinned the curses would take their full effect and she would be blotted out herself as she was rendered barren and a byword. If she had not sinned the curse would have no effect and there would no longer be any handwritten curses standing against her.

She would have a completely clean slate relative to the accusation of the law. The idea of blotting out occurs in various contexts and scripture most notably contexts of judgment.

Judge nations or people are blotted off the face of the earth or the land. The land is like a palimpsest a manuscript from which a former text has been scraped or washed off so that a new one can be written.

The curse being washed or blotted out into the water and drunk precipitates its taking effect leading to the blotting out of the person who's rebelled against God. The logic of this can be seen very clearly in somewhere like Deuteronomy chapter 29 verse 20 The Lord will not be willing to forgive him but rather the anger of the Lord and his jealousy will smoke against that man and the curses written in this book will settle upon him and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven.

[21 : 53] What happens to the unfaithful woman in the ritual of jealousy is an image of what happens to unfaithful people more generally. The reference to a root bearing poisonous or bitter fruit in verse 18 of Deuteronomy chapter 29 could also be considered in the light of the ritual of jealousy.

Rabbi David Foreman suggests a connection between the ritual of jealousy and the story of the flood. The Lord speaks about erasing man or blotting man out from the surface of the earth in Genesis chapter 6 verse 7.

The Lord is jealous on account of the unfaithfulness of humanity particularly manifested in sexual relations. He strikes the earth with the waters of a curse. However, one man is vindicated and exonerated through all of this.

The Lord remembers Noah. Numbers chapter 5 speaks of the spirit or wind of jealousy coming over a man but in Genesis chapter 8 when the Lord has judged mankind a different wind comes over the surface of the waters and things are changed.

Once mankind is delivered through Noah from the waters of the flood the Lord promises never again to curse the ground and calls them to come out and to have children. A further related passage can be seen at the end of Exodus chapter 15 in verses 22 to 26.

[23 : 05] Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter.

Therefore it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses saying, What shall we drink? And he cried to the Lord and the Lord showed him a log and he threw it into the water and the water became sweet.

There the Lord made for them a statute and a rule and there he tested them saying, If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God and do that which is right in his eyes and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians for I am the Lord your healer.

In the story of Marah we have a sort of rehearsal of the test of jealousy. The Lord walks his people through a test of jealousy testing them showing them the ways in which they could enjoy all of his blessings as they were faithful to him and did not commit a breach of faith.

If they look to him as their faithful husband they will find that the bitter waters of testing become for them a sweet drink that is pleasant to them. A sort of ritual of jealousy continues to have a place within the life of the church.

[24 : 15] As the church we are called to be a chaste virgin to Christ and godly ministers are called to guard us with a godly jealousy as we see in 2 Corinthians chapter 11 verse 2. In 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 27 to 24 in the teaching concerning the Lord's Supper we see a rite that precipitates future judgment leading to people suffering illness or even dying if they are unfaithful as they participate in it.

Those who take the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner eat and drink judgment to themselves. The Lord's Supper can be a means of precipitating the judgment upon spiritual adultery. It invokes divine remembrance and action.

Considering the sacrificial system we can see a connection between the Lord's Supper and the tribute offerings those offerings memorialized the past sacrifice and called for divine action on the basis of it.

The meaning of Jesus' words in remembrance of me has been dulled in many people's consciousness to a mere subjective reminder of Christ's death. However, biblically speaking the meal offering was a memorializing offering invoking divine attention.

The memorializing meal offering could also play a vocational purpose as the offering called for divine approbation or condemnation of the person and their labors. In worship we are performing a sort of jealousy ritual.

[25 : 31] The divine testimony with all of its blessings and curses is declared to us. We give our amen and then in conjunction with the memorializing tribute offering the testimony is taken inside of us to discern our faithfulness.

We drink the cup of testing the cup of Christ's blood which testifies against or for each heart with all of the blessings and curses of the new covenant while all spiritual adulterers call for the most bitter of consequences.

The rich blessing is given to all of those who are depending upon the faithfulness and forgiveness of Christ the cup draining Brigham. Emmanuel Shalev notes the way that Numbers chapter 5 connects with previous commandments that we have encountered in the book of Leviticus.

Numbers chapter 5 verses 2 to 3 connects with Leviticus chapter 15 verse 31 Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.

There the focus is upon the tabernacle in Numbers chapter 5 verses 2 and 3 the focus is upon the camp. The principle of holiness addressed to the tabernacle in Leviticus chapter 15 is concerned with the camp more broadly in Numbers chapter 5.

[26 : 41] In the book of Numbers commandments that related to the most holy realm in the book of Leviticus are now related to more general realms. What was once focused on not defiling God's place now speaks about the danger of defiling man's place.

We saw something similar in the second section of this chapter when read in parallel with Leviticus chapter 6 verse 1 to 7. In those verses in Leviticus the focus is upon the action done towards the Lord and in Numbers the focus is upon the manward character of that fault.

Something similar is going on in the rite of jealousy. The language of a breach of faith focuses upon sins against the Lord yet here it concerns a woman's unfaithfulness to her husband. Once again principles that are first applied in relationship with the Lord are now being applied in relationship with other human beings.

Further similarities can be seen in the character of the Nazarite who is someone who is dedicated to the Lord in ways that have many parallels with the high priest as we see in the chapter that follows.

A question to consider can you see any parallels to the ritual of jealousy within episodes within the gospel of John?■■■■■