

Exegetical Notes, Numbers 5:11-31

“A Jealous Husband”

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Numbers 5:11-31

Verse 11-14

Then YHWH said to Moses, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘If a man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him by sleeping with another man, and this is hidden from her husband and her impurity is undetected (since there is no witness against her and she has not been caught in the act), and if feelings of jealousy come over her husband and he suspects his wife and she is impure -- or if he is jealous and suspects her even though she is not impure --’”

- In the first case, the woman is guilty of adultery but it cannot be proven since the act was done in secret without any witness.
- In the second case the woman has not committed adultery.
- But in both cases, the husband thinks the woman is guilty of adultery.

Verse 15

“ -- then he is to take his wife to the priest. He must also take an offering of a tenth of an ephah of barley flour on her behalf. He must not pour oil on it or put incense on it, because it is a grain offering for jealousy, a reminder offering to draw attention to guilt.”

- The husband is to bring the suspected wife to the priest.
- He is also to bring a reminder offering. The offering is to remind the couple of the problem, which is not adultery because the wife may not be guilty of that sin. The issue here is the husband's jealousy which will destroy the relationship if it is not resolved.

Verse 16-26

“The priest shall bring her and have her stand before YHWH. Then he shall take some holy water in a clay jar and put some dust from the tabernacle floor into the water. After the priest has had the woman stand before YHWH, he shall loosen her hair and place in her hands the reminder offering, the grain offering for jealousy, while he himself holds the bitter water that brings a curse. Then the priest shall put the woman under oath and say to her, “If no other man has slept with you and you have not gone astray and become impure while married to your husband, may this bitter water that brings a curse not harm you. But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and you have defiled yourself by sleeping with a man other than your husband” -- here the priest is to put the woman under this curse of the oath – “may YHWH cause your people to curse and denounce you when he causes your thigh to waste away and your abdomen to swell. May this water that brings a curse enter your body so that your abdomen swells and your thigh wastes away.”

“Then the woman is to say, “Amen. So be it!” “The priest is to write these curses on a scroll and then wash them off into the water. He shall have the woman drink the bitter water that brings a curse, and this water will enter her and cause bitter suffering. The priest is to take from her hands the grain offering for jealousy, wave it before YHWH and bring it to the altar. The priest is then to take a handful of the grain offering as a memorial offering and burn it on the altar; after that, he is to have the woman drink the water.”

- This is an elaborate ritual designed to scare the guilty woman into confession and to protect the innocent woman from harm. The woman is threatened with the loss of her family, her health, and her ability to carry children. She is told that if she drinks the water and is guilty she will endure great suffering. Certainly a guilty woman would confess her sin rather than drink the bitter water.

Verse 27-28

“If she has defiled herself and been unfaithful to her husband, then when she is made to drink the water that brings a curse, it will go into her and cause bitter suffering; her abdomen will swell and her thigh waste away, and she will become accursed among her people. If, however, the woman has not defiled herself and is free from impurity, she will be cleared of guilt and will be able to have children.”

- The water, which contains nothing so potent as to cause the horrible things which are threatened in these verses is said to have power to incriminate the woman if she is guilty.

Verse 29-31

“This, then, is the law of jealousy when a woman goes astray and defiles herself while married to her husband, or when feelings of jealousy come over a man because he suspects his wife. The priest is to have her stand before YHWH and is to apply this entire law to her. The husband will be innocent of any wrongdoing, but the woman will bear the consequences of her sin.”

- The woman assumes all the risk under this rule but the issue behind it all is her husband’s jealousy.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *A Jealous Husband*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship* & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen. They are used here by permission.)