



Numbers - Chapter Five

I Numbers 1:1-10:10 - Israel Prepares to Enter the Land (continues)

Summary of Chapter Five

In preparation for the march to the Holy Land, the camp of Israel must be purged of all uncleanness. The first priority is to cleanse the camp by removing all people who are themselves unclean and who could therefore make others they come into contact with also unclean in the sight of God.

Anyone guilty of wrongdoing against a neighbour must make restitution for the harm they have done, making a full confession of their guilt. If payment cannot be made to the individual or their close relatives, then it is made to the priests.

If a married woman commits adultery which cannot be proven, or if her husband suspects her of committing such an act then he shall bring her before the priest and make an offering. The priest will then make a bitter potion that the woman must drink. If it makes her ill then she is deemed guilty of the act of adultery; if she remained well then she is cleared of guilt.

I.d. Numbers 5:1-6:27 - Cleansing the camp

The concept of uncleanness, i.e. that which disgusts and angers God, is most important in the Bible, and in its OT form is explained most fully in Leviticus Chapters 11-16. The NT shows that some things labelled unclean in the OT period, e.g. particular foodstuffs, were so designated for didactic reasons only until Christ came; refer to the comments made on Mark 7:19, Acts 15:1 and 15:19-21, Galatians 2:11-12, 4:10 and 5:1.

Uncleanness ranges in seriousness from mild uncleanness caused by marital intercourse (Leviticus 15:18), to moderate uncleanness caused by skin diseases (Leviticus Chapter 13), to severe uncleanness triggered by sins such as idolatry,

adultery, and homicide. Severe uncleanness led to the Canaanites losing the land, and the same fate could befall Israel (Leviticus 20:22-23).

People who were unclean were forbidden to participate in worship, and their uncleanness could somehow infect the tabernacle, which would make it impossible for God to dwell there. The Day of Atonement was designed to cleanse the tabernacle once a year in order to ensure God's continuing presence with his people; refer to Leviticus Chapter 16. These regulations in Numbers Chapters 5-6 are preventative: they aim to eliminate uncleanness from the camp so that the tabernacle will remain pure and God will stay with his people as they journey to Canaan. The principle that only the purified can belong to the kingdom of heaven is reaffirmed in Ephesians 5:5, and Revelation 21:27 and 22:14-15.

I.d.i Numbers 5:1-4 - Unclean Persons

The unclean are excluded from the tribal encampments of Chapter 2 and must live in places such as caves or wilderness tents, separated from the people as confirmed by: <<*He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp*>> (Leviticus 13:46), and: <<*Now there were four leprous men outside the city gate, who said to one another, 'Why should we sit here until we die?'*>> (2 Kings 7:3).

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ² Command the Israelites to put out of the camp everyone who is leprous, or has a discharge, and everyone who is unclean through contact with a corpse; ³ you shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp; they must not defile their camp, where I dwell among them. ⁴ The Israelites did so, putting them outside the camp; as the Lord had spoken to Moses, so the Israelites did.

Numbers 5:1-4

Put out of the camp everyone who is leprous. As Israel prepared to march to the Promised Land, the leper (Leviticus Chapter 13), those with a bodily discharge (Leviticus Chapter 15), and any priest who would touch a dead body, except that of a close relative (Leviticus 21:1), were commanded to be put out of the camp of Israel until ceremonially clean. Now God said that Israel must do what he had previously commanded. On the uncleanness caused by death, refer to Numbers 19:11-22.

It was not that any of these things made a person, or proved them to be a notorious sinner, although that was often wrongly assumed; but leprosy, unclean discharges, and dead bodies were reminders of the effects of sin from which Israel must separate as they prepare to march towards the Promised Land. Might this also be an analogy of human sinful nature inherited from

Adam? Even as a leper does not choose leprosy, but inherits it, so human sinful nature is not chosen, but inherited from Adam. Of course, people choose their individual acts of sin, but human sinful nature was inherited. Clearly, at this stage in Israel's progression to the Promised Land, they have been organised and ordered by God, now they will be challenged to purity. God is looking to make Israel a Promised Land people, and that means a purified people.

You shall put out both male and female. Neither male nor female was to be excluded from this command. Neither perceived sympathy nor perceived superiority could spare someone the consequences of sin's ravages.

Where I dwell among them. The primary reason for this commanded separation is because God lives in the camp of Israel, so sin and its effects must be separated from the whole camp. God is concerned with far more than individual acts of sin; he demands the sinful nature be addressed. Only in Jesus can the sinful nature, the old man, be crucified, and the nature of Jesus, the new man, be granted to those who believe in him as new creations. God cannot abide with the old man, but can with the new man. A Christian cannot be a Promised Land person if the ravages of sin are openly evident in their life. Certainly, Promised Land people are not sinlessly perfect; but they are not openly, obviously, walking in the sinful nature, well illustrated by those set outside the camp.

I.d.ii Numbers 5:5-10 - Confession and Restitution

This law extends the scope of Leviticus 6:1-7, which deals with the case of someone stealing his neighbour's property and then taking an oath denying the fact. This amounts to taking God's name in vain contrary to the law: <<**You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name**>> (Exodus 20:7), a most serious offense. If the offender later recognises his guilt and confesses it, he must return his neighbour's property plus 20 percent and offer a ram as a guilt offering.

Verses 5-10 deal with the situation when there is none of the victim's family to receive the restored goods: in this case it is to go to the priest along with the sacrificial ram. Verses 9-10 generalise this principle: the priest who offers a sacrifice keeps for himself the parts that are not burnt. The NT affirms that reconciliation with one's fellow man is required of those who would be at peace with God; refer to Matthew 5:23-26 and 6:14-15.

⁵ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ⁶ Speak to the Israelites: When a man or a woman wrongs another, breaking faith with the Lord, that person incurs guilt ⁷ and shall confess the sin that has been committed. The person shall make full restitution for the wrong, adding one-fifth to it, and giving it to the one who was wronged.

Numbers 5:5-7

The person shall make full restitution for the wrong. Because restitution is commanded, this is obviously a case of sinning against another person, such as the case of theft (Leviticus 5:14-6:7), or withholding from God that which belongs to him: <<*Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me – the whole nation of you!*>> (Malachi 3:8-9).

Adding one-fifth to it. The restitution previously commanded must now be made, repaying that which was taken or withheld, and adding a 20% penalty. This is the same value as the modern day standard rate value added tax in the UK!

⁸ If the injured party has no next-of-kin to whom 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 the guilty party.

Numbers 5:8

The restitution for wrong shall go to the Lord. If there is no surviving kinsman to make restitution to, then the restitution payment must go to the Lord. The payment of restitution was just as important, if not more important, for the guilty one paying it as it was for the victim receiving it.

⁹ Among all the sacred donations of the Israelites, every gift that they bring to the priest shall be his. ¹⁰ The sacred donations of all are their own; whatever anyone gives to the priest shall be his.

Numbers 5:9-10

Every gift that they bring to the priest shall be his. Certain offerings, such as the peace-offering of Leviticus Chapter 3, were intended to have a portion of the offering returned, like a good piece of meat, so they and their family could have a fellowship meal with the Lord.

Whatever anyone gives to the priest shall be his. This command is a reminder of the absolute right the offerer had to share in such offerings; it is essentially a way to preserve an open door of fellowship with the Lord, the priest could not take the offerer's portion away, and a king could not tax it away. In the midst of this chapter on the separation from sin, God therefore reminds Israel of the purpose of this separation, fellowship with God. This, ultimately, is the reason to pursue purity: <<*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God*>> (Matthew 5:8).

I.d.iii Numbers 5:11-31 - Concerning an Unfaithful Wife

This ritual is an acted-out prayer that God would show whether a man's suspicions about his wife's fidelity were justified. Adultery, like other sexual sins, causes grievous uncleanness, and so must be eliminated from Israel. The test is designed to distinguish between actual but un-witnessed adultery (vv.12-14a) and unwarranted suspicion (v.14b).

The actions all underline the seriousness of the sin of adultery. When an adulterous man and woman were caught in the act, they faced the death penalty in Israel: **<<If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel>>** (Deuteronomy 22:22), and indeed elsewhere in the ancient Near East. On this occasion the husband is merely suspicious. To confirm or dispel his suspicions the woman must offer a sacrifice (vv.15-16), drink water containing dust from the floor of the tabernacle, i.e. dust from the presence of God (v.17), and accept a curse against herself that her womb swell and her uterus drop (vv.19-22) if she is guilty.

It is not clear exactly what this threat means for the focus is on the members of her body with which she may have sinned, but it could be a threat of a miscarriage. Ultimately, though, the guilty wife is threatened with childlessness, a catastrophe in Biblical times, whereas the innocent is assured she shall be free and shall conceive children (v.28); as confirmed by: **<<Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the Lord had closed fast all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife>>** (Genesis 20:17-18).

¹¹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ¹² Speak to the Israelites and say to them: If any man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him, ¹³ if a man has had intercourse with her but it is hidden from her husband, so that she is undetected though she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her since she was not caught in the act; ¹⁴ if a spirit of jealousy comes on him, and he is jealous of his wife who has defiled herself; or if a spirit of jealousy comes on him, and he is jealous of his wife, though she has not defiled herself; ¹⁵ then the man shall bring his wife to the priest. And he shall bring the offering required for her, one-tenth of an ephah 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.

Numbers 5:11-15

If any man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him. This unique passage deals with the problem of a spirit of jealousy in a marriage. Obviously, unfounded jealousy has spoiled many a marriage, and justified jealousy has forced attention on confronting the sin of adultery; in this passage, God gives Israel a way to deal with it.

Jealousy is one of the most destructive of human emotions: <<For jealousy arouses a husband's fury, and he shows no restraint when he takes revenge>> (Proverbs 6:34), <<Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who is able to stand before jealousy?>> (Proverbs 27:4), and: <<Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame>> (Song 8:6 NIV).

If a spirit of jealousy comes on him, and he is jealous of his wife. Sometimes jealousy in a marriage is revealed to be completely justified; at other times it is found to be completely false. Either way, God knows it means something must be dealt with, and here he gives Israel a way to do it. Often, a spouse knows if the other has given their body, or their heart, to another, no matter how desperately one tries to hide it. At other times, jealousy is totally unjustified, but also needs to be resolved.

Then the man shall bring his wife to the priest. The jealous husband was to bring a certain amount of barley flour, and this grain only, not accompanied by any oil or frankincense, things which customarily accompanied a grain-offering.

It is a grain-offering of jealousy. For the normal procedure for a grain-offering, refer to Leviticus Chapter 2. The omission of oil and frankincense shows this is not a joyful occasion.

Bringing iniquity to remembrance. It was not that perhaps the wife committed adultery and did not 'remember' it; it was not for the husband or wife to remember, but for the whole community to remember the terrible nature of either adultery or false accusation. Bearing false witness is ranked equally as a sin along with adultery in the Ten Commandments.

¹⁶ Then the priest shall bring her near, and set her before the Lord;
¹⁷ the priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. ¹⁸ The priest shall set the woman before the Lord, dishevel the woman's hair, and place in her hands the grain-offering of remembrance, which is the grain-offering of jealousy. In his own hand the priest shall have the water of bitterness that brings the curse.

¹⁹ Then the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, ‘If no man has lain with you, if you have not turned aside to uncleanness while under your husband’s authority, be immune to this water of bitterness that brings the curse. ²⁰ But if you have gone astray while under your husband’s authority, if you have defiled yourself and some man other than your husband has had intercourse with you’ – ²¹ let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse and say to the woman – ‘the Lord make you an execration and an oath among your people, when the Lord makes your uterus drop, your womb discharge; ²² now may this water that brings the curse enter your bowels and make your womb discharge, your uterus drop!’ And the woman shall say, ‘Amen. Amen.’

Numbers 5:16-22

Take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. This water was made bitter from the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle; and while the woman held the grain-offering in her hand, which was a reminder to her of her fellowship with God, the priest pronounced an oath over the woman.

The priest shall set the woman before the Lord. In his oath, the priest would solemnly announce that if the woman was innocent of the accusation of adultery, she would be free from this bitter water that brings a curse. However, if she was in fact guilty of adultery, she would be under the curse. The effect of the curse was to make your womb discharge, your uterus drop; causing miscarriage or childlessness. After the priest said this, the woman had to respond: Amen, i.e. ‘so be it’. She had to agree that if she was innocent, she deserved vindication; but if guilty, she deserved the punishment of the curse. She was not allowed the option of saying, “well, I did it, but it was really all right in the sight of God. After all, we loved each other, or my husband neglected me.” At the very least, this ceremony demanded that sin be called sin, whether the woman was guilty or innocent!

Unbind or dishevel the woman’s hair was an act of shaming, or perhaps of mourning, as confirmed by: <<*And Moses said to Aaron and to his sons Eleazar and Ithamar, ‘Do not dishevel your hair, and do not tear your vestments, or you will die and wrath will strike all the congregation; but your kindred, the whole house of Israel, may mourn the burning that the Lord has sent*>> (Leviticus 10:6), and: <<*The priest who is exalted above his fellows, on whose head the anointing-oil has been poured and who has been consecrated to wear the vestments, shall not dishevel his hair, nor tear his vestments*>> (Leviticus 21:10). Paul concludes: <<*but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering*>> (1 Corinthians 11:15). This is an act of

uncovering or removing a woman's glory before her God, causing both personal and public shame for the woman.

And the woman shall say, 'Amen. Amen.' All Israelites, men and women, were people of the covenant and would readily agree to be judged by God, throwing themselves on his mercy, as demonstrated by those who had returned from exile: *<<The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to adhere to the law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their kin, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord and his ordinances and his statutes>>* (Nehemiah 10:28-29).

²³ Then the priest shall put these curses in writing, and wash them off into the water of bitterness. ²⁴ He shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings the curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter her and cause bitter pain. ²⁵ The priest shall take the grain-offering of jealousy out of the woman's hand, and shall elevate the grain-offering before the Lord and bring it to the altar; ²⁶ and the priest shall take a handful of the grain-offering, as its memorial portion, and turn it into smoke on the altar, and afterwards shall make the woman drink the water. ²⁷ When he has made her drink the water, then, if she has defiled herself and has been unfaithful to her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, and her womb shall discharge, her uterus drop, and the woman shall become an execration among her people. ²⁸ But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, then she shall be immune and be able to conceive children.

Numbers 5:23-28

Then the priest shall put these curses in writing, and wash them off into the water of bitterness. After reading the curse, and hearing the woman's agreement, the priest would write the oath on a scroll, and scrape the dried ink into the bitter water. Think of what made the water bitter: both the 'holy dust' of the tabernacle floor, and the oath containing a curse to the sinner! The combination of seeing the holiness of God and the penalty to sinners truly is bitter!

The priest shall take the grain-offering of jealousy out of the woman's hand. After this, the priest would offer the grain-offering, a picture of fellowship and thanks to God, and the accused woman would drink the bitter water.

The water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, and her womb shall discharge, her uterus drop. Over time, the judgement of God would be evident. If she came down with some kind of internal disease, especially affecting her womb, it would be seen as evidence of her guilt. However, if she was free from disease, and continued to bear children, it would be seen as vindication.

The rabbis also said that if the woman was guilty, the same disease would come upon the man she had committed adultery with; but they also said that even if the wife had been guilty, but her husband had been guilty of adultery also, the bitter water would have no effect on her. However, this seems more like folk law or even superstition rather than the will of God.

²⁹ This is the law in cases of jealousy, when a wife, while under her husband's authority, goes astray and defiles herself, ³⁰ or when a spirit of jealousy comes on a man and he is jealous of his wife; then he shall set the woman before the Lord, and the priest shall apply this entire law to her. ³¹ The man shall be free from iniquity, but the woman shall bear her iniquity.

Numbers 5:29-31

The man shall be free from iniquity. Even if the man has falsely accused his wife of adultery he bears no guilt for his error. The woman must bear the guilt for giving her husband cause to become jealous and therefore she shall bear her iniquity. One must simply trust that this is a law from God and that he will not allow the potion make any innocent woman become ill.