

# THE JEALOUS HUSBAND — NUMBERS 5:11-31

Rev. Dr. R. D. Anderson (last revised 15 April 2016)

## The purpose of the law

This law does not, on the surface, seem very attractive. A husband who suspects his wife of adultery, even if he has no evidence, may bring her to the tabernacle and have her undergo this seemingly degrading ritual whereby she asks the Lord to curse her if she is not telling the truth. What is more, the wife has no right to make her husband undergo the same ritual.

That some people are left with questions concerning the passage is understandable. For that reason it is worthwhile thinking about the situation around which this law is based. Understanding this law will also help us to understand our Lord and Father — and, dare I say, even His mercy towards His people!

Let me take the most difficult verse of this law as my point of departure, verse 31:

*Moreover, the man shall be free from guilt, but that woman shall bear her guilt.*

What is meant here? It is clear that it cannot be the intention to say that men are allowed to commit adultery while women are not! The rest of God's law makes that clear. If there was evidence for adultery, then both men and women had the right to appear before the elders at the gate to bring charges. Both men and women were to be punished for this sin. The possible guilt of the man here, is the guilt of wrongly being jealous of his wife, accusing her of adultery when she had, in fact, been faithful. If, after completion of this ritual, it becomes clear that the woman is accepted by God, and thus not an adulteress, there is no punishment for the wrongful accusation of her husband. If the woman dared to come before the Lord when she was *guilty* (of adultery), then there is a certain punishment for her — not the death penalty, but physical punishment from the Lord which results in the inability to bear any more children. The blessing of children is taken away from her. This fact will have meant that in practice very few *guilty* women would have dared to undergo the ritual. Would someone really dare to personally appear before the Lord in His temple and ask to be cursed? This law will have been used for women who were wrongly accused by their husbands of unfaithfulness, women who could use this ritual to ask the Lord for *justification* of their faithfulness.

It is important to note that the ritual here is not a trial by ordeal, but an oath ceremony. In other words, there is no presumption of guilt. A trial by ordeal, such as was commonly used in the ancient near East, made a person who was cast under suspicion do something very dangerous, such as jumping into a dangerous river. If the gods found the person to be innocent they would save him by enabling him or her to survive. The ritual of Numbers 5 has nothing whatsoever to do with trials by ordeal. It is a ceremony underlining the fact that the woman is asked to take a very serious oath protesting her innocence before the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

Why isn't the husband punished if it appears that he was wrongly jealous? The answer to this question has to do with the reason for this law. The law is given to provide *protection* to a woman when she encounters the social dangers of a jealous husband. This law is not concerned with marriages where there is only suspicion of adultery. If there is suspicion, the matter should be talked over. If need be, counselling should be asked for. This law is concerned with a situation where the husband has become *jealous* of his wife because of such suspicions. The husband is convinced that his wife has been unfaithful even though there is no hard evidence, and despite his wife's protestations to the contrary. This law does not tackle the problem (sin) involved with such jealousy itself. It tackles the problem of the social danger which such a wife encounters. For this reason a wrongly jealous man is not punished. And that is why a woman equally jealous of her husband does not have the right to bring him to the tabernacle for such a ritual. *The law concerns the protection of the socially weak in society.* This does not mean that such jealousy is not wrong! At the very least it shows that there is a definite breakdown of communication in the marriage relationship. But that

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly the law code of Hammurabi also requires an oath in such a case, but adds that if there is some kind of public suspicion a trial by ordeal must be held. The laws in question are as follows (transl. L. W. King):

131. If a man bring a charge against one's wife, but she is not surprised with another man, she must take an oath and then may return to her house.

132. If the "finger is pointed" at a man's wife about another man, but she is not caught sleeping with the other man, she shall jump into the river for her husband.

problem is not addressed in this law. The law intends to provide help and protection to the unjustly accused wife. If the law provided for a punishment against a jealous husband, then many husbands would never have dared to bring their wives to the tabernacle. The law would obviate its very purpose, because then such women would remain imprisoned in their homes living with the unbearable consequences of a jealous husband.

It was, especially in those times and in that culture, very easy for a husband — possessed with jealousy — to imprison his wife in a corner of the house (the women's section) and let her stay there. She would be forbidden to have any contact with the outside world. She also ran the risk of diminished food and clothing (cf. Exod. 21:10 which shows that such treatment, though not condoned by the Lord, was a real possibility). What was her escape? *If* she found a chance get out of the house, where would she go? Where would she earn an income? Some women could, perhaps, have found their way home to their parents, but that will not always have been possible. The social problems for a runaway wife were enormous. In this law, the Lord provides a way that not only can remove the enormous jealousy of the husband, but also create the possibility that the marriage can continue and be restored. And all this works *in the favour* of the wife. No law is provided for the jealous wife to bring her husband to the tabernacle for the simple reason that a husband was under no great social danger from the punishment of a tyrannous and jealous wife.

Just as will appear from many laws of the Lord, it is clear that He is concerned for the socially weak in society, the orphan, the widow, the stranger and the Levite, but also the wife who becomes the butt of a husband's wrongful jealousy. God calls upon all of us to mirror his mercy in our lives and to live the life of love for Him *and for our neighbour* which He so concretely provides for in His law.

### **The ritual itself**

1) The jealous husband brings his wife to the priest with a bare grain offering from coarse barley (as opposed to the usual grain offering finely of ground wheat). The joyous additions of oil and incense (cf. Prov. 27:9; Isa. 61:13; Ps. 45:7; 2 Sam. 14:2) are left out (just as they are left out with the sin offering, Lev. 5:11). The symbolic meal presented to the Lord is thus the simple bread of fasting or mourning.

2) The ritual itself is held outside the (fearful) presence of the jealous husband. The accused wife goes alone with the priest to stand before the LORD. There a special curse-drink of holy water together with dust from the temple floor is prepared.<sup>2</sup> She stands before the LORD as one accused, holding the bare grain offering in her hands. The mantel which normally covers her head in the temple has been removed.

In v.18 the text literally says that the woman must “uncover her head”—not a particularly clear phrase. Some translations render this as “loosen the woman's hair” but we should realise that this is only an interpretation. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament this phrase is translated as “exposing the woman's head.” In Lev. 10:6 and 21:10, where this same expression is used in regard to priests, it is translated “removing the turban from the head.” In Lev. 13:45 the expression is used for a leper and there the translation is exactly the same as what Paul speaks of in 1 Cor. 11, namely, “his head uncovered.” Around the time of Christ's birth this was also the interpretation of the Jewish theologian Philo (*De Spec. Leg.* 3.56)<sup>3</sup> who considered it to be self explanatory that a woman going to the temple would have her head covered. Married women (Jews, Greeks and Romans) always wore a shawl covering their head in public.<sup>4</sup> Philo, when describing the ritual of Numbers 5 (a ritual that was still applied in his days), says:

*Let the priest take the cereal offering from the husband and give it to the wife and remove her head covering (ἐπίκρανον) in order that she may be judged with her head bared,—stripped of the symbol of modesty that we use for wholly innocent women.*

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2 This is the only mention of “holy water” in the law. There is no consecration ritual for water. The text therefore implies water which belongs to God. The drink is thus made up of ingredients which belong to God (“holy”), water from some source in the sanctuary and dust from the temple floor.

3 Josephus also interprets Num. 5:18 in the sense of removing the shawl which covers the head of the woman, *Antiq.* 3.270.

4 It is possible that Jer. 13:22 and 26 were written against the background of this practice (i.e. that the modesty of a woman is symbolised by her head covering in public). These verses are difficult to translate, but Jeremiah says literally: v.22 “And if you say by yourself: Why has this overcome me?—because of the enormity of your unrighteousness your shawls have been raised, your heels uncovered”—that is, such a woman stands in shame because of her bare feet and uncovered head. V.26 “Yes, I shall myself raise your shawls above your head so that your disgrace may be seen.” The word “skirts” in some translations is an interpretation of the Hebrew *shul* which points to something (i.e. of clothing) which covers. This could just as easily be a shawl (used as a head covering), as a skirt.

3) The priest, with the curse-drink in his hands recites the curse formula, which the woman must accept with a double "amen." Her Lord shall protect her in her innocence. He is righteous and that is the hope and trust she may have. The Lord protects the innocent and the socially weak. He protects those who suffer under unrighteousness.

4) The priest writes the curses on a scroll and washes them into the curse-drink. The grain offering is waved and a portion offered on the altar (the rest would be his payment), whereupon the woman drinks the curse-drink. If she is innocent and trusts in her Lord, she will drink it with pleasure, for it will be proof to her husband of her faithfulness. The Lord then also promises her the blessing of children.