

# Numbers 5:16-22

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/num/num-5/numbers-516-22/>

*Verses 16-22 describe the ritual performed by the priest in order to determine the guilt or innocence of the woman suspected of adultery. It included the drinking of the “water of bitterness” which, depending on her guilt or innocence, would affect her physically. The ritual included the pronouncement of a curse that would go into effect if she was guilty of adultery. The accused woman would then agree to the terms of the curse.*

In the first part of the ritual, *the priest shall bring her near and have her stand before the Lord* (v. 16). This probably means that she was brought to the entrance to the tabernacle. The priest also was to take *holy water in an earthenware vessel* (v. 17). The *holy water* was water that had been in the LORD’s presence in the tabernacle. It was possibly water from the laver and thus was blessed. The water was put into an *earthenware vessel* which had little value.

Then, the priest was instructed to *take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water* (v. 17). Even dust in the tabernacle was holy because it was in the LORD’s presence. The dust could represent the mortality of humans (Psalm 103:14) or the curse of death because of sin (Genesis 3:19; Ecclesiastes 3:20, 12:7).

Then, in verses 18-22, *the priest* (v. 18) had several duties to perform:

- First, he had *the woman stand before the Lord*. This restates what was said in verse 16. It emphasized the fact that this was a sin against the LORD as well as an act of unfaithfulness to the husband.
- Second, he *let the hair of the woman’s head go loose*. The significance of loosening the woman’s hair is not known precisely. In Leviticus 10:5 and Leviticus 21:10, loosened hair was a sign of mourning. In Leviticus 13:45, a person with a skin disease was to wear loosened hair as a sign of uncleanness or mourning. It is possible that both ideas were involved here.
- Third, he was to *place the grain offering of memorial in her hands, which is the grain offering of jealousy, and in the hand of the priest is to be the water of bitterness that brings a curse*. The precise meaning of the phrase *water of bitterness* hinges on the meaning of the Hebrew word for *bitterness* (“marah”), and its meaning has been widely debated. Some have taken it to mean “proof,” “testing,” “rebellion,” and even “flow.” It seems best to retain the meaning as “bitter,” and this could refer to both its taste when drunk as well as the consequences of drinking it if guilty.

The next part of the ritual involved the priest presenting the two possible outcomes. At the outset, *the priest shall have her take an oath* (v. 19) and then *say to the woman* what were the two possible outcomes.

First, the priest was to state the first possibility—that *if no man has lain with you and if you have not gone astray into uncleanness, being under the authority of your husband*. If this was true, then the priest proclaimed that she *be immune to this water of bitterness that brings a curse*. The *water of bitterness* was the water mixed with the dust of the tabernacle. In other words, if the woman was truly innocent of adultery and she drinks the bitter water, she would not experience any bad results.

Verse 20 contains the other possibility—that she had indeed been unfaithful to her husband. If the woman had *gone astray, being under the authority of your husband, and if you have defiled yourself and a man other than your husband has had intercourse with you* (v. 20), then there were grave consequences. The priest was instructed to

- *Have the woman swear with the oath of the curse* (v. 21).
- *Say to the woman, “the Lord make you a curse and an oath among your people by the Lord’s making your thigh waste away and your abdomen swell.”* This probably means that the woman no longer had the ability to have children. Often, the “thigh” represented the sexual organs, and if so here, this could mean that, along with the abdomen swelling, the woman’s reproductive organs would be damaged and she would become incapable of bearing children. This is confirmed in verse 28 that states the woman shall be free to conceive children if she is not guilty.

So, the idea was that *this water that brings a curse shall go into your stomach, and make your abdomen swell and your thigh waste away* (v. 22).

In response to the priest’s statement, *the woman was to say, “Amen. Amen.”* The Hebrew word “Amen” has as its root meaning the idea of certainty. By saying this, the woman accepted the words of the priest.

In conducting this ceremony, the woman is putting herself at great peril if she is guilty. But if she is not guilty, the husband should be placed in a position to release his suspicion, and restore the relationship with his wife.

This ceremony then would provide a protection for women, to give them a means to clear their name of suspicion. In ancient societies, male muscle-power was essential to survival. It was essential for protection as well as for provision. For a woman to lose the protection of a husband put her in severe jeopardy. This sentiment is expressed by the widow Naomi when encouraging her daughter-in-law Ruth to return to Moab and find a husband to marry there (Ruth 1:8-13).

## **Biblical Text**

**<sup>16</sup> Then the priest shall bring her near and have her stand before the Lord, <sup>17</sup> and the priest shall take holy water in an earthenware vessel; and he shall take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. <sup>18</sup> The priest shall then have the woman stand before the Lord and let *the hair of the woman’s head go loose, and place the grain***

offering of memorial in her hands, which is the grain offering of jealousy, and in the hand of the priest is to be the water of bitterness that brings a curse. <sup>19</sup>The priest shall have her take an oath and shall say to the woman, “If no man has lain with you and if you have not gone astray into uncleanness, *being under the authority of your husband*, be immune to this water of bitterness that brings a curse; <sup>20</sup>if you, however, have gone astray, *being under the authority of your husband*, and if you have defiled yourself and a man other than your husband has had intercourse with you” <sup>21</sup>(then the priest shall have the woman swear with the oath of the curse, and the priest shall say to the woman), “the Lord make you a curse and an oath among your people by the Lord’s making your thigh waste away and your abdomen swell; <sup>22</sup>and this water that brings a curse shall go into your stomach, and make your abdomen swell and your thigh waste away.” And the woman shall say, “Amen. Amen.”