

The *Sotah* Ritual in Numbers 5:11-31

By Ashby L. Camp

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Numbers 5:11-31 prescribes a religious ritual by which a man who suspected his wife of committing adultery could obtain a definitive answer from God on whether she had engaged in that conduct.¹ The availability of the ritual discouraged wives from committing adultery, knowing that their sin could be revealed if their husbands merely suspected them, incentivized them to confess their sin to avoid the ritual and its consequences, and allowed those who were wrongly suspected of adultery to be completely vindicated and to have that cloud over their marriage removed. The shame of a husband who was shown publicly to have wrongly accused his wife of adultery would restrain husbands from initiating the rite frivolously.

In short, Num. 5:11-31 instructs a man who suspects his wife of having committed adultery to bring her to the priest with a specified grain offering. The priest sets the woman before the Lord, unbinds her hair, and has her commit herself on oath to the procedure and its results. The priest waves the grain offering and burns it on the altar and then has the woman drink the "water of bitterness." This is a concoction consisting of holy water, dirt from the tabernacle floor, and ink from the rite's curses that were washed off a scroll into the earthenware container. If she has not committed adultery, she will suffer no adverse effects after drinking the mixture. On the contrary, she will be blessed to conceive children (v. 28). But if she has committed adultery, the Lord will use the occasion of the ritual to bring her bitter pain (v. 27), make her "thigh fall" and "body swell" (vv. 21, 22, 27), and make her a curse among her people (v. 21).

The Hebrew word rendered "thigh" is *yārēk*. It is used as a euphemism for male genitals or loins in Gen. 24:2, 46:26, and Ex. 1:5 and here appears to refer to female genitals. Athalya Brenner states:

ירך, 'thigh', is another euphemism for genitalia. Like 'legs/feet', 'thigh' for 'genital organs' operates by physical contiguity. 'Thigh', as well as 'flesh', may indeed designate female sexual organs too; admittedly, however, such applications are less frequent than to male sexual organs. Thus we find a woman's בשר ('flesh') in the sense of 'genitalia' in Lev. 6.20, 15.19; and a female 'thigh', ירך – in Num. 5.22, 21, 27.²

Causing the guilty wife's genitals to "fall" (*nāpal*) is a metaphor for causing them to fail, for rendering them ineffective in terms of their purpose of procreation.³ In other words, it is a curse of sterility, however God may accomplish that biologically. As Victor Hamilton notes, "in Num. 5:23 [sic] 'thigh' is a euphemism for the sexual organs, and the phrase 'causing her thigh to

¹ The ritual is known as the "water of bitterness" and as the "*sotah* ritual," the latter referring to the accusation that the woman had gone astray (the Hebrew word *sotah* means "a woman who has gone stray").

² Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and 'Sexuality' in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Brill, 1997), 38.

³ See, e.g., Josh. 21:45, 23:14; 1 Sam. 17:32; and 1 Ki. 8:56, where the word is commonly rendered "fail."

sag' refers to the woman's inability to conceive children."⁴ It is the opposite of the promise to conceive children that is given to the innocent woman who is subjected to the ritual (v. 28).

The Hebrew word rendered "body" is *beṭen*. Its only occurrence in Numbers is in regard to the ritual in chapter 5. It can mean "womb," but it also can mean "belly/abdomen", or even more broadly, "body." For example, it is commonly rendered "body" in Ps. 31:9, 44:25, and Mic. 6:7. Though many believe the word in Numbers 5 refers to the woman's womb, all the other references in Numbers to a woman's womb use the more specific word *reḥem* (Num. 3:12, 8:16, 12:12, 18:15). ASV, RSV, and ESV render *beṭen* as "body" in at least one of its three occurrences in Numbers 5.

I think it is more likely that *beṭen* in Numbers 5 refers to the body generally, but even if one restricts the meaning to the abdomen, the swelling is not a means of rendering the woman infertile. That invisible consequence is expressed as her "thigh falling." Rather, it is an objective indication that the woman was guilty, that she had in fact committed adultery. Her swollen body (or abdomen) was a visual and unmistakable announcement of her guilt by God, and as such, need only have been a brief condition. With her guilt having been conclusively established, she would become a pariah in the community, and her husband presumably would divorce her in accordance with Deut. 24:1.⁵

Some claim the *sotah* ritual is a case of God performing an abortion of an illegitimately conceived child. Old Testament scholar James Smith responds:

There is no indication in this chapter that the rotting [falling] thigh and swelling belly have anything to do with abortion of a child. The theory that the husband is seeking a priestly-sanctioned abortion for the child of another man is a desperate attempt to find some justification for the barbaric practice of abortion in Scripture. There is no mention in the chapter of an unborn baby or pregnancy. The punishment of the woman (if she were guilty) was physical affliction of her reproductive organs which made future conception impossible.⁶

Rather than read into the *sotah* ritual the death of a child who was already conceived, which would include any child from the husband, one should assume from the silence that nothing was done in that regard. The curse of sterility pertained to the future, and the swelling of the body or abdomen was a temporary indicator of guilt that had no effect on a child in the womb. The unfaithful wife and any child she was carrying were left to live with the consequences of her adultery, which as I say, commonly would include her being divorced.

⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 18–50*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 331 (fn. 24).

⁵ The "nakedness of a thing" (*'erwat dābār*) mentioned in Deut. 24:1 as the basis for the divorce probably refers to sexual misconduct, to the wife having broken faith with her husband sexually. Assuming the death penalty applied to adultery that was exposed by the *sotah* ritual, it is implied in Num. 35:30-32 that, except in cases of premeditated murder, perpetrators of capital crimes under the Mosaic law could have their death sentences commuted by offering a "ransom" or "substitute." See, Ashby Camp, [Another Look at Divorce and Remarriage](#), 2-5.

⁶ James E. Smith, *Numbers, a Commentary* (N.P.: Lulu, 2018), 51.