

119

GROUP STUDY GUIDE

Answering Atheists: Understanding the Test for Adultery (Numbers 5:11-31)

TEACHING SUMMARY

This teaching examines the ritual in Numbers 5 for a husband's suspicion of adultery when there are no witnesses proving the accusation. It distinguishes an actually unfaithful wife from an innocent wife under suspicion. Because suspicion cannot establish guilt in a human court, the teaching presents the priestly procedure as a way of placing judgment in God's hands.

The wife takes an oath and drinks the water used in the ritual. The teaching explains that an innocent woman is vindicated, while a guilty woman receives a supernatural judgment. It emphasizes that the mixture is not presented as a naturally harmful means of deciding guilt. The result depends on divine intervention rather than the husband's assumption or a human court's verdict.

The teaching interprets the procedure as protection from unresolved jealousy, damaging rumors, and unjust divorce. A priest serves as a mediator rather than leaving the woman's fate to her husband. The possibility of clearing her name and restoring peace is central to this reading. It also argues that the guilty woman is not subjected to execution or further penalties imposed by people in this exceptional case.

A comparison with other trials by ordeal highlights the teaching's understanding of presumed innocence. In the dangerous ordeals it describes, an accused person needed miraculous protection to survive and be acquitted. In its reading of Numbers 5, a miracle would instead be required to bring judgment. This reversal is presented as a major difference from those other procedures.

The teaching also addresses the claim that the passage describes an abortion. It compares English translations and discusses the Hebrew terms *naphal* and *yarek*, rendered as falling and thigh or side. Although it acknowledges uncertainty about the precise physical condition described by the curse, it favors barrenness as the outcome, contrasting it with the innocent woman's continued ability to bear children.

Finally, the teaching notes that the passage never states that the woman is pregnant and attributes any judgment to God rather than to the ingredients of the drink. Even under the alternative interpretation it rejects, it argues that divine action would not authorize people to end unborn life. Its conclusion emphasizes mediation, vindication of innocence, limits on human punishment, and protection for women.

SUMMARY POINTS

- The passage concerns suspected adultery without witnesses sufficient to prove the charge.
- The woman may be guilty or innocent; suspicion alone does not establish guilt.
- A priest mediates rather than leaving the outcome in the husband's hands.
- The woman takes an oath and drinks the ritual water.
- The teaching attributes judgment to divine intervention rather than a naturally harmful mixture.
- It interprets the process as an opportunity to clear the innocent woman's name and restore peace.
- It argues that human authorities may not add execution or further penalties to the divine judgment.
- The comparison with dangerous ordeals emphasizes presumed innocence.
- The precise physical curse is treated as uncertain, with barrenness offered as its result.
- The teaching rejects the claim that Numbers 5 authorizes abortion.

FILL-IN-THE-BLANK

Basic

1. The passage examined in the teaching is Numbers _____.
2. The husband's accusation lacks proof from _____.
3. The mediator who conducts the ritual is the Levitical _____.
4. Before undergoing the ritual, the woman takes an _____.
5. The ritual drink is called the water of _____.
6. The teaching says that an innocent woman can have her name cleared and peace restored in her _____.

Challenging

1. The teaching contrasts the biblical procedure with dangerous trials by _____.
2. In the teaching's comparison, Numbers 5 presumes innocence until _____ is proven.
3. The Hebrew word naphal is explained as meaning to _____.
4. The Hebrew word yarek is explained as meaning _____ or side.
5. The result the teaching associates with the curse, rather than miscarriage, is _____.
6. The teaching notes that the passage never says the woman is _____.

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does the absence of witnesses matter to the teaching's explanation of this unusual procedure?
2. What problems does the teaching say could arise if suspicion and rumors were left unresolved?
3. How does priestly mediation change the situation compared with leaving the woman's fate to her husband?
4. What difference does the teaching identify between Numbers 5 and inherently dangerous trials by ordeal?
5. How do the Hebrew terms and the promise concerning the innocent woman inform its interpretation of the curse?
6. What reasons does the teaching give for rejecting both the abortion interpretation and the claim that the passage authorizes human action of that kind?

ANSWER KEY – GROUP GUIDE

Basic

1. 5:11–31
2. witnesses
3. priest
4. oath
5. bitterness
6. home

Challenging

1. ordeal
2. guilt
3. fall
4. thigh
5. barrenness
6. pregnant