

# Numbers 5:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Then the priest shall charge the woman with an oath of cursing, and the priest shall say unto the woman, The LORD make thee a curse and an oath among thy people, when the LORD doth make thy thigh to rot, and thy belly to swell;

## Analysis

This verse prescribes the oath formula for the suspected adulteress undergoing the bitter water ordeal, invoking covenant curses if she is guilty. The priest makes the woman swear 'with an oath of cursing'—the Hebrew 'shevu'at ha-alah' (שְׁבֻעַת הָאֵלָה) combines oath and curse, creating a self-imprecation that invites divine judgment if guilty. The specified curse—"The LORD make thee a curse and an oath among thy people, when the LORD doth make thy thigh to rot, and thy belly to swell"—describes visible physical consequences that would publicly demonstrate guilt. The 'thigh' (Hebrew 'yarek', יָרֵךְ) is a euphemism for reproductive organs, and the swelling belly may indicate inability to bear children or miscarriage if pregnant by adultery. The public nature of the curse ('among thy people') emphasizes that covenant violations have communal consequences—sin doesn't remain merely private. This ordeal's severity reflects marriage's sacred covenant status and adultery's serious violation of that covenant. While troubling to modern sensibilities, this law protected women from false accusations by requiring divine judgment rather than human presumption, and it deterred adultery by establishing accountability.

## Historical Context

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The ordeal of bitter water (Numbers 5:11-31) is unique in ancient Near Eastern legal traditions, though trial by ordeal was known in various cultures. Mesopotamian law codes (especially Middle Assyrian laws) describe water ordeals for suspected adultery, but Israel's version was distinct in several ways: it appealed to God's direct judgment rather than magical forces, it included specific liturgical elements involving the tabernacle and priesthood, and it could exonerate the innocent woman rather than merely punishing the guilty. The law protected women against capricious accusations while taking adultery seriously. The 'bitter water' was created by mixing dust from the tabernacle floor with holy water and the dissolved ink from the written curses, creating a ritual drink. If the woman was innocent, no harm would result; if guilty, the described physical symptoms would manifest. The law's placement in Numbers 5 alongside laws about restitution and Nazirite vows emphasizes the holiness God requires in His covenant community.

## Related Passages

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**James 2:17** — Faith and works

**Hebrews 11:1** — Definition of faith

## Study Questions

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1. How does the appeal to divine judgment rather than human presumption protect the potentially innocent while maintaining accountability for sin?
2. What does this law's severity teach about the sacred covenant nature of marriage in God's eyes?

## Interlinear Text

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וְהִשָּׁב יַעַ	הַכֹּהֵן	אֶת	לְאִשָּׁה ה	וְלִשְׁבָּע ה	לְאֵל ה	וְאָמַר
shall charge	Then the priest	H853	the woman	and an oath	of cursing	shall say
H7650	H3548		H802	H7621	H423	H559
הַכֹּהֵן	לְאִשָּׁה ה	בְּתֵת	יְהוָה ה	אוֹתָהּ	לְאֵל ה	
Then the priest	the woman	doth make	The LORD	H853	of cursing	
H3548	H802	H5414	H3068		H423	
וְלִשְׁבָּע ה	בְּתֵת וְ	עַמָּהּ	בְּתֵת ת	יְהוָה ה	אֶת	יָרֵכָהּ
and an oath	among	thy people	doth make	The LORD	H853	thy thigh
H7621	H8432	H5971	H5414	H3068		H3409
וְאֶת נֶפֶשׁ לָת	בִּטְנָהּ	צָרָהּ:				
to rot	H853	and thy belly	to swell			
H5307		H990	H6639			

## Additional Cross-References

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**Nehemiah 10:29** (Curse): They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into 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 judgments and his statutes;

**Joshua 6:26** (Curse): And Joshua adjured them at that time, saying, Cursed be the man before the LORD, that riseth up and buildeth this city Jericho: he shall lay the foundation thereof in his firstborn, and in his youngest son shall he set up the gates of it.

**1 Samuel 14:24** (Curse): And the men of Israel were distressed that day: for Saul had adjured the people, saying, Cursed be the man that eateth any food until evening, that I may be avenged on mine enemies. So none of the people tasted any food.

**Jeremiah 29:22** (Curse): And of them shall be taken up a curse by all the captivity of Judah which are in Babylon, saying, The LORD make thee like Zedekiah and like Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire;

