

EXEGETICAL-THEOLOGICAL STUDY OF GOD'S HOLINESS AND PHYSICAL IMPURITY IN NUMBERS 5:1-4

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Abstract

During biblical times, three main factors deemed a person unclean: skin diseases, particularly open wounds, bodily discharges, and contact with the deceased. This state of impurity disqualified one from communal living, potentially posing a risk of contamination to the sacred tabernacle and the Lord's holy worship. Consequently, individuals afflicted with these conditions were required to isolate or be exiled from the community during their period of illness. The presence of such individuals in the camp was viewed as a potential source of defilement, particularly given God's presence within the camp (Num. 5:3). Despite the fact that skin diseases, discharges, and contact with the dead are physical, not moral impurities, they were perceived as making one unfit to stand before God. The study seeks to investigate the relationship between human physical impurities and God's sanctity within the Israelite camp, in the context of Numbers 5:1-4. An in-depth theological and exegetical examination of Numbers 5:1-4 reveals that the Israelite camp is perceived as a sanctuary of the Lord. The Israelites' camp is deemed holy, with an obligation to uphold its purity. Moreover, given the divine holiness of God who resides among His people, anyone in contact with Him must maintain ceremonial cleanliness. Any form of pollution offends His sanctity and must be stringently removed. The central notion is that God's presence must not be approached lightly.

Keywords: Skin disease, impurity, uncleanness, holiness, defilement.

Introduction

During the times chronicled in the Bible, skin ailments, notably open sores, stood as one of three significant conditions - the others being fluid discharges and encounters with dead bodies - that led to a person being considered ritually unclean (Allen, 2012). This uncleanness renders one ineligible to live in the community and makes one a potential contamination to the tabernacle and the holy worship of the Lord. As a result, such individuals were to be quarantined or banished from the neighborhood while unwell (Allen, 2012).

The presence of these categories of people was considered a source or cause of defilement to the camp especially because of the presence of God in the camp (Num. 5:3).

However, skin diseases, discharge and defilement by a corpse are physical impurities and not moral impurities. How could their presence defile the camp? Why would they need to be put out? What is the rationale behind this order? And what does this say about the nature of the camp in relation to God and relationship between fallen human nature in relation to divine nature? Hence, this study seeks to examine the relationship between human physical impurities and God's holiness in the Israelites 'camp in the context of Numbers 5:1-4. The

study will make applications to modern day Christians. This text requires an exegetical and theological study. Hence, the syntactic analysis of the text will be done. Key words will be studied to determine their contextual meanings, and usage in the Old Testament. Past scholarly work on the periscope will be reviewed. Bible both English and *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* will be the primary source.

This study is delimited to the issue of physical impurity in Numbers 5:1-4. Although, reference will be made to other passages such as Leviticus 12-15; Numbers 19, it is not the intention of this study to examine all the passages on physical impurities in the Pentateuch or the whole of Old Testament.

Israelites' camp

The notion that the encampment of the Israelites mirrors the tabernacle stems from the belief that Yahweh inhabits it, thus rendering the camp a sacred ground. This is why God commanded that individuals considered 'lepers', or those deemed unclean due to illness or exposure to death, be expelled from the camp (Num. 5:1-4). As articulated by Baruch M. Bokser, this preventative measure against contamination in the camp, along with the provision of an external location for bodily functions, significantly contributes to the concept of physical cleanliness. Bokser explains that individuals made impure by a nocturnal emission must leave the camp and bathe before sunset to return. A specific place outside the camp should be assigned for sanitary needs, with each person carrying a spike to bury their waste. The camp's holiness is vital, as God's presence aids in protection and victory. Any indecent or improper actions that might cause God's withdrawal must be avoided (Bokser, 1985).

The justification for this law is obvious: since God lives among His people and goes with them, it is forbidden to do anything unclean, repulsive, or unsuitable (Deut 23:14). As a result, the Israelites' camp is recognized as a LORD Sanctuary (Baruch M. Bokser, 1985:281). Wright (1999) observes that the sanctuary is situated in the center of a camp arranged symmetrically (Num. 2:1-34; 3:23, 29, 35, 38). Thus, this intentional layout safeguards the sanctuary and its sacred contents. "The Levites and Priests, encamped directly around the sanctuary's boundaries, are responsible for defending God's dwelling from intruders, using deadly force if required (Num. 1:51-53; 3:10, 38; 18:4-5, 7, 22-23)" (Wright, 1999). In the wilderness, God taught the children of Israel that His "tabernacle was a special place, unique and set apart from every other edifice in the camp." (Hamilton 2005:285).

Historical Background

The book of Numbers, known in Hebrew as *be'midbar*, meaning "in the wilderness," focuses on the forty-year period that the Israelite tribes spent journeying through the wilderness, from Mount Sinai to the plains of Moab (Wenham, 1981). It is explained that the period starts from the first day of the first month of the second year after the Exodus (Num. 7:1, Exod. 40:2, 17; in comparison to the first day of the second month, Num. 1:1) and ending on the first day of the eleventh month of the fortieth year (Deut. 1:3). This entire period spent in the desert is commonly referred to as "forty years" (Num 14:33, Allen, 2012). Allen indicates that the book of Numbers takes place over a thirty-eight year span of Israel's journey in the Sinai Desert after their escape from Egypt. He further explains that the book shares many similarities with Exodus and Leviticus in regards to its laws for the people, specifically those outlining the privileges and rules pertaining to the Levites and the priests (Allen, 2012).

It is observed that the people whom God rescued from bondage in Egypt and to whom He showed His favor at Mount Sinai responded with apathy, ingratitude, and recurrent rebellious behavior. As a result, this group was penalized by God, who barred them from entering the Promised Land. Instead, they were made to live out their lives in the Sinai Desert, while their children inherited the promise that was initially intended for them (Allen, 2012).

It is on record that the book “covers a span of thirty-eight years, from the first day of the first month of the second year of the Exodus (Num. 7:1, Exod. 40:2,17; cf, the first day of the second month, Num. 1:1) until the first day of the eleventh month of the fortieth year (Deut. 1:3). The whole of the desert period is usually called “forty years” (as in Num. 14: 33)” (Allen, 2012).

Historical Context

DeCanio (2010:4) asserts that “historical context of the Book of Numbers is a part of the larger historical context for the Pentateuch. Although it follows Leviticus both chronologically and canonically its historical context is more immediate with the end of Exodus and the beginning of Deuteronomy.” The record of Israel’s deliverance from bondage in Egypt to its entrance into covenant-relationship with Yahweh at Sinai is penned down in Exodus. Leviticus, which further describes the covenant stipulations, does not advance the historical narrative. However, “this narrative is picked up again in the Book of Numbers where it is recorded that Moses was commanded to order the tribes of Israel, primarily from a military perspective, in preparation for the march to Kadesh-Barnea and entrance into the Land of Promise.” (DeCanio 2010).

It is noted that the ordering, numbering, and structuring of the Israelites’ camp ended in chapter 4. Thus, the six and a half chapters which follows present various commands for ritual purity within the camp (Allen, 2012).

Literary Context

Numbers 5 contains three pericopes (Num. 5:1-4; 5-10;11-31), each is introduced by the phrase *moaLehv,mo-la, hw"hy>rBed:y>w*: “the Lord spoke to Moses saying” (Num. 5:1,5,11). This phrase appears frequently in the book of Numbers, and usually indicates the beginning of a new topical unit. Besides the demarcation function, it also indicates the “highest possible legitimacy—God’s direct speech to Moses—for the instructions that follow.” (Mwendambio, 2010).

Mwendambio (2010:44) states that Numbers 5 “is part of the instructions (Num. 1:1-10:10) given to the Israelites prior to their departure from the desert of Sinai to the Promised Land. The chapter comprises instructions preceded by the numbering of the Levites and their duties (Num. 3-4) and the law for a Nazirite and offerings brought by the leaders of Israel at the dedication of the tabernacle (Num. 6-7).”

Further, Numbers 5 is related to the other parts of the book through some phrases and concepts found in it that are repeated in other parts of the book. The examples are: the introductory formula *moaLehv,mo-la, hw"hy>rBed:y>w*: “the Lord spoke to Moses saying” which appears three times in Numbers 5 and several times in other chapters (Num. 1-4; 6-11; 13-21; 25-28; 30-31; and 33-35). Likewise, the expression *hw"hy>ynEp.li* “before the Lord” which is repeated four times in Numbers 5 and appears in several parts of the book (Num.

3:4; 6:16,20; 7:3; 8:10,11,21;10:9; 14:37; 15:15,25,28; 16:7,16,17; 17:3,5,22; 18:19; 20:3; 26:61; 27:5,21; 30:50,54; 32:20,21,22,27,29,32) (Mwendambio 2010).

Similarly, “the verb *amej*’ “to be unclean or defiled” which appears nine times in Numbers 5 and is recurrent in other passages of the book of Numbers (6:7,12; 9:10,13,15, 20; 18:15; 19:7-22; 35:34). Num. 5 is also related to the other parts of the book of Numbers through the theme of holiness which is one of the major themes of the book.” (Mwendambio 2010).

Genre of Numbers 5:1-4

Elmer Martens (2005) comments that the first half of the Book of Numbers is instructions. The pericope under study falls within this category. Being a document which contains instructions, it must be interpreted as such.

Structure of Numbers 5:1-4

The structure of this portion is clear. After the introduction, which establishes divine authority for the command (v. 1), comes the command (vv. 2-3), then a concluding formula, which details faithful implementation of the command. “The subject is the removal of that which is unclean (*tāmē*) from the camp – the dwelling of holy Yahweh (Ashley, 1993:109). Based on the above explanation, Numbers 5:1-4 can be structured as follows:

1. Introduction – v.1
2. Command – v.2
3. Rationale for the command – v.3
4. Implementation of the command – v.4

Grammatical/Lexical Analysis

In the unit under study, four things are observed – command, intensity, urgency and implementation of order. This could be established by considering the verbs used in the texts. In verse 1, Yahweh is the subject of the speech and Moses is the direct object of Yahweh’s message. וַיִּדְבֹּר יְהוָה (pielwaw consecutive, imperfect 3rd person masculine singular). This verb is intensive. The tense conveys the intensity of the message Yahweh gave to Moses.

Likewise, v. 2 begins with a command. צוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (צוה, piel imperative masculine singular). The message of God to the Israelite is not conditional, optional or a wish. The verb is imperative – a command. Concerning the word שָׁלַח, it is observed that it is used three times in verses 2-3, underscoring the urgency of expelling the carriers of impurity from the camp (Milgrom 1993).

Further, the text specifies the people affected by the command, כָּל־צָרוּעַ וְכָל־טָמֵא וְכָל־טִמְאָה (Num. 5:2). The use of כָּל implies there is no exception. This is stressed in v. 3 מִזָּכָר עַד־נְקֵבָה (both male and female). This means that both genders can be subject to these impurities. Three categories of physical impurity are mentioned in v. 2. צָרוּעַ, טָמֵא, טִמְאָה

There is the need to examine the meanings of these words as they help in understanding the context of the passage.

The Meaning of **צָרַע**, **זָב**, **טִמְאָה לְנֶפֶשׁ**

1. **צָרַע**: NAS, NAU, NKJ, RSV, etc, translate **צָרַע** as “leper.” NIV translates it as “infectious skin disease” while NJB uses “contagious skin-disease.” Donald Allen disagrees with NIV translation. He states that “infectious skin disease” may be too specific since “it is not clearly stated that the offending skin disease was infectious.” (Allen, 2012:125). Denotatively, it is defined as to “be struck with leprosy.” (Brown, Driver, and Briggs 2014:863). The meaning of this word has been debated. Philip J. Budd opines that this word “covers a wide variety of skin complaints, particularly those with open sores.” (Budd, 1984:54). Allen shares the same view. He comments that “this word was not used in the Bible to describe what we know as leprosy, usually termed “Hansen’s disease.” Allen stresses that the word does not describe just one specific disease but a number of complex disorders of skin, including swellings, eruptions, spots, and itches (see Lev 13:2) (Allen, 2012). Similarly, Gane (2009:301) buttresses that this “Hebrew term applies to a complex of conditions, including some that resemble psoriasis and vitiligo....”. It is observed that the more accurate rendering is “a scaly affection.” (Gane 2009:301).

From this brief survey of meaning it seems that the common rendering of **צָרַע** as “leper” is inappropriate because the disease condition covers a wide range of diseases.

2. **זָב**: It is observed that this Hebrew term is used in four ways in the Bible: (i) of the flow of water from the rock (Ps 78:20), (ii) of the land flowing with milk and honey (Exod. 3:8), (iii) of one pining away from hunger (Lam 4:9), and of an uncontrolled fluid discharge from a man (Lev 15:2) or a woman (v. 25). (Allen, 2012). It is further stated that “these discharges were primarily from the sexual organs and were chronic in nature.” (Ronald B. Allen, 2012:740). In Num. 5:2, the “discharges denoted by the term *zābare* those emitted by male and female genitalia, such as gonorrhea.” (Cole 2009).
3. **טִמְאָה לְנֶפֶשׁ**: In the context of Num. 5:2, **נֶפֶשׁ** is of a dead body. This term usually refers to living creatures. This usage is also found in Num. 9:6-7, 10, “and is perhaps explained as a reference to the “person” who has died and not to a dead **נֶפֶשׁ**. This is seen in a text such as Num. 19:13: whoever touches a corpse, which is the **נֶפֶשׁ** of a person who has died.” (Ashley, 1993:110,111).

It is observed that the three classes of people that are to be sent out of the camp have certain things in common: “i. the duration of uncleanness – seven days after the removal of the cause – and ii. The conception of their being a means of defiling others who came in contact with them.” (Nichol 1978).

Interpretation of the Text

Based on the study done so far, it could be understood that God’s presence in Israelites’ camp makes it a sacred place. God’s holiness cannot condone even physical impurity. Thus, God commanded Moses to remove from the camp or send out three categories of impurity bearers – everyone with scaly disease, everyone who has a discharge and all who are contaminated by dead person, both male and female. These ceremonially unclean people are to be sent outside the camp. The “outside the camp” does not refer to an unclean place, but rather to a place which is ceremonially neutral (Budd, 1984).

The reason for this exclusion is clearly stated – “they may not defile their camps” (Num. 5:3 NKJ). And what makes their camp special and sacred is God’s presence - “in the midst of which I dwell” (Num. 5:3 NKJ), (see Exod. 25:8). Thus, physical impurity can defile the camp. It is noted that the danger to the sanctuary and camp is the real point (Budd, 1984).

Application

God is Omnipresence – He is everywhere. However, God specifically instructed Moses that His people should “make Him a sanctuary that He may dwell among them” (Exod. 25:8). The modern day place of worship is regarded as God’s dwelling place. It is very expedient that children of God have awareness of God’s presence in their midst. God is holy and His space is holy, (Exod. 3:5; 23:26; Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7), His things are holy (Exod. 29:37; 30:31; 40:9, 10) and His people must be holy (Exod. 22:3; Lev 11:45).

Although, laws of impurities are no longer applicable in the modern time, God still expects His people to maintain purity. God opposes all forms of uncleanness. If God commanded the people with physical impurities to be sent out of the camp, how much more people with moral impurity. Rev 21:27 says, “Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life” (NIV). Thus, as God did not allow any physical impurity in the camp, He will not also permit any physical or moral impurity in the New Jerusalem.

Further, Paul asks the Corinthians believers, “Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?” (RSV). Human body is called God’s temple – a place where God dwells, just like the Israelites’ camp. He adds, “If any one destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are” (1Cor 3:17 RSV). Either in Old Testament time or New Testament era, God does abhors defilement of His dwelling place – physical structure or body temple. As he sent out the defiled and defiling people from the camp, he will not also permit the impure people in his presence even in the New Earth.

However, provision is made for the purification of the impure people in the Old Testament. Likewise, God has made cleansing and forgiveness possible for people with moral impurity.

Conclusion

One of the themes in the Book of Numbers is God’s holiness. Nothing unclean is allowed in God’s presence. “The rationale for excluding the ritually unclean from the tabernacle service is given in Lev 15:31: “Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, so that they do not die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.” The concern in Leviticus is with defiling the tabernacle by entering it in an unclean state; in Numbers the concern for purity is extended to the camp, because “I [the LORD] dwell among them” (5:3). Leviticus is interested primarily in the tabernacle, while Numbers emphasizes that Israel as a people is to be holy.” (Stubbs, 2009). The basic idea is that God’s presence should not be approached carelessly.

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