

Analysis of a Rite of Crisis in Numbers 5:11-31 through a World View Theoretical Model

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ABSTRACT

In Numbers 5:11-31 a rite of crisis is described for the resolution of a marital impasse. A husband may accuse his wife of a breach in their relationship due to her unsubstantiated marital infidelity. Using a world view theoretical model, this paper analyzes the ritual by addressing research questions associated with the seven universal categories of world view. The first category considered, Causality, explores the issue of cultural order by asking: What is the type and nature of this ritual behavior? Discussion centers around whether the rite creates a new order, reinforces an existing order, or ensures order is restored.

The category of Classification researches the issue of symbolic order. What symbolic expressions of belief animate this ritual behavior? The investigation determines whether symbolic ritual forms and meanings are identical or separate realities and the extent symbols provide community identity and represent important values. The third world view category of Relationship is concerned with the issue of cosmic moral order, answering: What notions of ritual behavior are toward relations with the divine?

The fourth world view category, other, considers the issue of social order. The research question here explores the nature of the ritual as a social instrument by identifying socially prescribed ritual speech, ritual roles, and ritual statuses. The issue of personal order in the Self category ponders the nature of self-motivation toward ritual behavior in the rite of crisis. Of most concern are the definitions and expressions of personal identity, self-purpose, and hopeful outcome. Finally, the world view categories of Time and Space are combined to investigate the issue of enacting order. What are the notions of ritual enactment that reinforce, control, and transform reality? The analysis concludes with the type of resolution resulting from the ritual and the degree to which the ritual is successful.

Keywords: world view, rite of crisis, marriage, Old Testament.

INTRODUCTION

World View is recognized as a culturally specific cognition that arranges thoughts and ideas about the world which, in turn, produce culturally specific behavior (1). These cognitions are thought to be a kind of cultural blueprint for social function (2). LeVine (3) describes world view as representing “a past that is culturally present as tradition” (p.227). World view is an unconscious structural mechanism operating to organize and define the nature of reality, the interpretive process or technique of reality, and the behavioral mechanism to cope with this perception of reality. World view is that which the person understands to be naturally so, and beliefs are based upon these mostly unconscious assumptions.

The fundamental organizational pattern of all world views is comprised of seven universal

categories: Self, Other, Relationship, Classification, Causality, Time, and Space (4). Each universal category exists as an arrangement of ideas and behavior specific to each culture as a means of making sense of the life experience. While the seven universal categories are firmly rooted in each culture, the content of these categories remains variable across cultures and religious systems. It is these content variances which distinguish one world view from another.

The seven universal categories of world view theory are a fundamental tool in sorting out world view understanding. World view theory from its inception has been concerned with exploring universal categories simply because a universal structure may be used as a basis of cross-cultural comparison of ideology and behaviors (5). Investigating the content of universals is a methodological tool for religion,

holy writ, and the ritual practices associated with a particular religious context. The analysis presented here addresses a rite of crisis from Numbers 5:11-31 performed for the resolution of a marital impasse. Using a world view theoretical model, this paper analyzes the ritual by addressing research questions associated with the seven universal categories of world view:

- Self: Issue of Personal Order
- Other: Issue of Social Other
- Relationship: Issue of Cosmic Moral Order
- Classification: Issue of Symbolic Order
- Causality: Issue of Cultural Order
- Time and Space: Issue of Enacting Order

Each category has a primary research question which is delineated in greater detail by the subsequent outline of the section.

There has been a great deal of interest and literature devoted to the study of ritual both in religious studies and anthropology. This includes a plethora of definitions and explanations for ritual. Geertz (6,7) believes religious ritual integrates thought and action. Ritual activities fuse concepts of order with the mood and motivation for action. It is the point at which notions about order and motivation may more easily be observed. Ritual is the world as lived and imagined bound together under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms. Rappaport (8) understands ritual is a basic social action in which authority is intrinsic and order; indeed, “in performing a ritual the participants accept, and indicate to themselves and to others that they accept, the order encoded in that ritual” (p.6).

The purpose of ritual is to bring order and control by defining, modeling, and communicating social relations including the supernatural (9: p.89). It is the acting out of religious and social relationship in order to express, reinforce, and alter relations. Ritual is created to maintain tradition. Ritual performance objectifies social values and religious beliefs. In this way, ritual action reveals thought and state of mind.

The rite of crisis in Numbers 5:11-31 has characteristics associated with rituals with elements that differentiate it from other ways of acting in a socio-religious context. Often a ritual activity is a strategic version of something simple or complex in everyday life. The Numbers 5 ritual was created to deal with a

jealous husband. The adultery accusation is formalized in Numbers 5 which suggests added significance associated with rituals in general. Further, the Numbers 5 ritual follows a fixed agenda to make the ritual action weighted with importance. Ritual fixity of time, place, or behavior have become a matter of authority. Pandian (10) notes a general characteristic of rituals is having results that may not be what was intended. The rite of crisis in Numbers 5 is one such ritual in which the accuser’s intent was not always guaranteed.

RITE OF CRISIS IN NUMBERS 5:11-31

The Biblical Text for Numbers 5:11-31 Is As Follows

The Lord spoke to Moses: **5:12** “Speak to the Israelites and tell them, ‘If any man’s wife goes astray and behaves unfaithfully toward him, **5:13** and a man has sexual relations with her without her husband knowing it, and it is hidden that she has defiled herself, since there was no witness against her, nor was she caught – **5:14** and if jealous feelings come over him and he becomes suspicious of his wife, when she is defiled; or if jealous feelings come over him and he becomes suspicious of his wife, when she is not defiled – **5:15** then the man must bring his wife to the priest, and he must bring the offering required for her, one tenth of an ephah of barley meal; he must not pour olive oil on it or put frankincense on it, because it is a grain offering of suspicion, a grain offering for remembering, for bring in iniquity to remembrance.

5:16 “Then the priest will bring her near and have her stand before the Lord. **5:17** The priest will then take holy water in a pottery jar, and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle, and put it into the water. **5:18** Then the priest will have the woman stand before the Lord, uncover the woman’s head, and put the grain offering for remembering in her hands, which is the grain offering of suspicion. The priest will hold in his hand the bitter water that brings a curse. **5:19** Then the priest will put the woman under oath and say to the her, “If no other man has had sexual relations with you, and if you have not gone astray and become defiled while under your husband’s authority, may you be free from this bitter water that brings a curse. **5:20** But if you have gone astray while under your husband’s authority, and if you have defiled yourself and some man other than your husband has had sexual relations with you....” **5:21** Then the priest will put the woman under the oath of the curse and will say to the

her, “The Lord make you an attested curse among your people, if the Lord makes your thigh fall away and your abdomen swell;5:22 and this water that causes the curse will go into your stomach, and make your abdomen swell and your thigh rot.”Then the woman must say, “Amen, amen.”

5:23 “Then the priest will write these curses on a scroll and then scrape them off into the bitter water. **5:24** He will make the woman drink the bitter water that brings a curse, and the water that brings a curse will enter her to produce bitterness. **5:25** The priest will take the grain offering of suspicion from the woman’s hand, wave the grain offering before the Lord, and bring it to the altar. **5:26** Then the priest will take a handful of the grain offering as its memorial portion, burn it on the altar, and afterward make the woman drink the water. **5:27** When he has made her drink the water, then, if she has defiled herself and behaved unfaithfully toward her husband, the water that brings a curse will enter her to produce bitterness – her abdomen will swell, her thigh will fall away, and the woman will become a curse among her people. **5:28** But if the woman has not defiled herself, and is clean, then she will be free of ill effects and will be able to bear children.

5:29 “This is the law for cases of jealousy, when a wife, while under her husband’s authority, goes astray and defiles herself, **5:30** or when jealous feelings come over a man and he becomes suspicious of his wife; then he must have the woman stand before the Lord, and the priest will carry out all this law upon her. **5:31** Then the man will be free from iniquity, but that woman will bear the consequences of her iniquity”(11).

WORLD VIEW ANALYSIS OF RITE OF CRISIS IN NUMBERS 5:11-31

Causality: Issue of Cultural Order

Rituals enact a causal chain of behaviors that result in stabilizing cultural order by eliminating the chaos threatening that order. The research question to be asked begins with identifying the type and nature of a particular ritual action. There are various types of rites the first of which creates new order (see Table 1). Rites of transformation transitions an individual and their community through the life experience by adapting to the changing state of reality. Gennep (12) refers to rites of transformation as transition rites or liminal rites. A transition ritual is a change in the status, roles, identity, and/or

membership of an individual. There are three major classifications of transition rites: 1) life-cycle rites or rites of passage, 2) induction rites, and 3) pilgrimages as rituals of penitence, fulfillment of vows, and exploring spiritual realms (13).

Table1. World View Ritual Questions for Causality Category

Causality: Issue of Cultural Order	
Research Question: What is the type and nature of this ritual behavior?	
a.	Rites of Transformation to create new order?
b.	Rites of Intensification to reinforce existing order?
c.	Rites of Crisis to ensure survival?

A second kind of ritual is rites of intensification intended to reinforce existing order. There is ritual reaffirmation of existing cosmic, social, personal, cultural and/or symbolic order. Rites of intensification are also referred to as rites of restoration or renewal. The major characteristics of intensity rites are their cyclical nature such as a Muslim Friday service, Christian Sunday service, daily Buddhist food offering to spirit houses, daily Hindu care for gods, New Year festivals, birthdays, harvest celebrations, etc.

The ritual performed in Numbers 5 is the third type of ritual, a rite of crisis. If one’s world is falling apart, then a crisis ritual is paramount to ensure survival. The purpose of rituals for crises is to safely bring a person and their community through danger that has placed life experience in chaos. This often is invoked during famine, drought, flood, epidemics, war, and social breaches with divine consequences, repeated accidents or just plain strange occurrences. What is common to all rites of crises is to “enable people to survive emergency situations.” (13: p.302). The rite of crisis in Numbers 5 was an intentional ritual to keep the marriage bond intact. Historically, nothing threatens a marriage more than infidelity.

Classification: Issue of Symbolic Order

The research question from the world view category of classification ponders what symbolic expressions of belief animate the ritual behavior in the Numbers 5:11-31 text. Many religious practitioners distinguish between ritual forms and their meanings because they value meaning over the form or symbol used. Many do not distinguish between the meaning and form. For these practitioners, the meaning and the consequences lie in the act itself such as a

Buddhist chant bringing luck or one not attending church in order to worship because attending church is itself an act of worship. For those separating ritual realities, the bread of communion is only a symbol of spiritual reality; for those seeing identical reality, the bread of communion becomes the actual body of Christ.

Symbolic ritual forms and meanings in the case of Numbers 5 are taken as identical realities (see Table 2). The water from the pottery jar and the floor dust sprinkled in the water are forms inseparable from the meaning each hold in the ritual. The water symbolized holiness and the dust was considered dirty. The dust and water mingled together to become bitter. Bitterness was defilement and defilement brought a curse. What is interesting here is the allowance for innocence. The priest was required to place the accused woman under the authority of the curse. In some sense, the curse meaning of the water and dust determined guilt or innocence.

Table 2. World View Ritual Questions for Classification Category

Classification: Issue of Symbolic Order
Research Question: What symbolic expressions of belief animate this ritual behavior?
a. Symbolic ritual forms and meanings are either identical or separate realities?
b. Symbols provide community identity & unity?
c. Symbols channel power of faith?

Rituals provide a religious community with a “common fellowship and history” and “common identity” (13: p.293). Active, living rituals are a reminder of world view values to those participating and their association with those values. The jealousy ordeal in Numbers 5 engaged the symbols of the holy water and dust to uphold the value of a righteous wife. There can be no unity in a sexually defiled marriage. To fully participate in the religious life of the community, an accused wife was obligated to be vindicated or punished and the husband compelled to free himself from jealous tendencies.

There are a select number of symbols that take on significance in a religious community. Dominant symbols have layers of meanings with levels of significance to the individual. A pertinent question is, how do ritual symbols in Numbers 5 channel power of faith? The priest placed his faith in the bitter water (holy water and dust) to carry out the terms of the curse. He therefore believed in the power of the bitter water to condemn or vindicate. A jealous

husband was empowered to demand the bitter water confirm his suspicions. An innocent wife was able to cling to her faith believing in the power of marital faithfulness and holiness before Yahweh.

Relationship: Issue of Cosmic Moral Order

In religious ritual, the world view category of relationship is concerned with the issue of cosmic moral order (see Table 3). As people participate in a ritual and relate directly or indirectly with the supernatural, the ritual process is imbued with supernatural power to change reality or, in the case of Numbers 5, resolve a marital crisis. Understanding the notions of ritual behavior toward relations with supernatural Other can be quite diverse. The rite of crisis in Numbers 5 was performed because of suspicion a divine law was broken. Divine power was conceived for use by a priestly servant to judge the accused.

The covenantal relationship between Yahweh and the Hebrews is seen in a microcosm of the Numbers 5 ritual. Yahweh gave new meaning to Abraham’s existence that became the meaning of human existence for all Hebrews. That relationship was commitment to Yahweh and obedience to his commands. A Hebrew wife committed herself to her husband so much so that if he died before the gift of children, she married his kin and bore children under her deceased husband’s name. It was essential a wife bear children to fulfill her marital duty so that the deceased have continuity of lineage. Milgrom (14) suggests the wife’s infidelity was akin to an act of idolatry. A wife must obey her husband and honor his instructions. She was expected to be faithful to her marital vows and satisfy her social role as a married woman. As Yahweh provided existential meaning for the Hebrews, the husband gave life meaning for his wife, her devotion, and her duty.

Table 3. World View Ritual Questions for Relationship Category.

Relationship: Issue of Cosmic Moral Order
Research Question: What are the notions of ritual behavior toward relations with supernatural Other?
a. Give meaning to human existence?
b. Establish dialogue with the supernatural?
c. Draw on the power and resources of the supernatural?

The priest was the conduit through which an irate husband could establish a dialogue with the supernatural. An accusation such as the jealous

husband has made requires some sort of communication with the divine. It was certainly no small consequence for a woman to lose the ability to bear children. To ask for divine power for this action, one was required to ceremoniously enter into dialogue with Yahweh. And this was exactly what Yahweh did when he spoke to Moses in Numbers 5 and commanded this ritual. Paraphrased Yahweh said, “You want to accuse your wife? Then you are going to have to do it under my authority!”

The rite of crisis in Numbers 5 was a utility to protect the innocent and condemn the defiled all through the process of divine intervention. It may have been easy to accuse but where, oh where, is the evidence? There is nothing in the text to suggest the ritual was meant to manipulate Yahweh into negative use of his power. A jealous husband acting irrationally simply may have felt the situation required the highest power available.

Other: Issue of Social Order

Ritual may be thought of as a structured agreement by which a religious community teaches and maintains socio-religious morés. In the case of Numbers 5, the sacred environment and sacred members of the temple retained the primary responsibility of enforcing proper ritual behavior and ritual language (13).

In this case, the ritual speech was drafted by Yahweh himself and communicated to Moses. Given the oddity of the text in relation to all other Old Testament texts and even Rabbinic literature, the social community seemed to have little influence on the wording uttered by the priest.

The significance of the rite as a social instrument was found in underlying relationships between the wife and her husband. These two familial roles were paramount to a functional, healthy kin community. The Numbers 5 ritual allowed the socio-religious community to reinforce social role relationships and responsibilities (see Table 4).

Table4. World View Ritual Questions for Other Category.

Other: Issue of Social Order
Research Question: What is the nature of ritual as a social instrument?
a. Ritual speech and behavior socially prescribed?
b. Social encounter underlying relations between Self and community Other?
c. Structure personal roles in community?

Self: Issue of Personal Order

As mentioned before, a Hebrew wife was obliged to submit herself under the authority of her husband. Her identity was redefined the moment she entered into the marital covenant. Her personal identity as a woman, wife, and mother and the success in these roles was contingent on her husband’s satisfaction with her and her ability to bear children. Self purpose therefore rested on her devotion to her husband and her duty as a wife and mother (see Table 5). The wife’s hair being disheveled during the ritual symbolically represents her identity being taken away. Her identity was in question throughout the ritual until she was vindicated (15).

The Numbers 5 ritual reaffirmed the personal identity expected for a Hebrew wife. Adultery elsewhere was a capital offense. Here in the Numbers 5 text, suspicion without evidence carried the threat of barrenness. Nonetheless, the ritual language reinforced the expectation of wifely fidelity. It also reiterated the curse of barrenness that would be leveled against the guilty.

Children as the key purpose and value as a wife was at the forefront of the ritual. It was a rite of crisis for the wife in that her very purpose in life was under threat. It was uncommon for Hebrew woman to place herself in such a dangerous ritual situation. Perhaps it was more the case of jealous motivation by the husband to appease his suspicions and reassert his marital authority.

Table5. World View Ritual Questions for Self Category.

Self: Issue of Personal Order
Research Question: What is the nature of Self-motivation toward ritual behavior?
a. Definition and expression of personal identity?
b. Definition and expression of Self purpose?
c. Definition and expression of hope?

The Numbers 5 ritual itself iterated in verses 19 and 28 that no curse would visit the innocent wife. This operated as an expression of hope for the accused. It may also be regarded as a hopeful sign for the husband that his wife had in fact been faithful.

This included the hope of adding children to the kin group which was highly valued. It is noteworthy that a curse reaping barrenness was a punishment on both husband and wife; the curse reaping no ill effect was a blessing to both husband and wife.

Time & Space: Issue of Enacting Order

The plain offering of barley meal without oil or incense was the feed of animals. This represented the immoral nature of adultery and reinforced, at the outset, the seriousness of the rite (16). The wife’s barrenness represented the severe curse of *kerat* - being cut off without children (17). Time and space have thus become disorderly.

The issue of enacting order carries with it who or what is in control of this rite in this context (see Table 6). Of course, adjudicating the accusation was viewed as beyond human ability. Divine control squarely placed the decision in the hands of Yahweh (18). This is a significant understanding especially contentious among Old Testament scholars. The text and ritual must be considered in what the biblical context reveals about Yahweh. He demanded obedience and holiness but his punishment was never considered unfair either to a man or woman. Sasson (19) viewed the Numbers 5 ritual as a presumption of innocence using the bitter water of divine judgment. It may be that Briggs (20) was correct in his arguments that the ritual transformed the jealous accusation in what he describes as “suspicious of the suspicion” (p.288).

Table6. World View Time & Space Ritual Questions for Category.

Time & Space: Issue of Enacting Order
Research Question: What are the notions of ritual enactments that reinforce, control, and transform reality?
a. What are the notions of ritual enactments that reinforce or renew reality?
b. What are the notions of ritual enactments that Control reality?
c. What are the notions of ritual enactments that Transform reality?

The rite of crisis in Numbers 5 describes a kind of “ritual prescription” for a “spirit of jealousy” (21: p.55). The consequences for adultery in biblical Hebrew life was death for a wife (Deut. 22:22). The Numbers 5 rite offers a counter ritual to verify guilt when the accusation was unsubstantiated. The divine used the text and ritual behaviors to control the immediate marital crisis. Jealousy, more times than not in the Old Testament, was a male trait acted out in violent behavior (22).The ritual transformed the reality of a male dominated society in which men exercise control over their wives to the ultimate and final control of Yahweh. The result was

necessary limits placed on the control of women by men.

CONCLUSION

Numbers 5:11-31 describes a rite of crisis to determine a wife’s fidelity. The Numbers 5 text pictures in detail a unique ritual that includes a barley grain offering from the husband, an oath and a curse spoken by the priest, and a drink of holy water containing dirt and residue from the written curses directed toward the wife. A jealous and suspicious husband may bring their wife to a priest of Yahweh with a grain offering of suspicion. Bringing the wife to a place invoking the presence of Yahweh and disheveling her hair, the priest stripped her of identity and compelled her to drink to the water containing dust from the tabernacle floor and the ink of curses. The written curses were immersed in this bitter water and considered a conduit of divine judgment. The curse determined her identity both personally and socially. Consequently, those guilty of adultery aborted the fetus should she be pregnant, and she would be forevermore unable to conceive children and face ostracism from community. If the wife was innocent, then she would be able to conceive and her identity as a holy servant of Yahweh, a dutiful wife to her husband, and her personal identity as a mother restored.

The rite of crisis in Numbers 5 infused divine power, accessed through both spoken and written curses, into a drink causing barrenness in the body of an unfaithful wife. The power of the curse-inducing water was the potential to reveal the truth and set judgment in motion. The bitter water contained written curses to cause miscarriage if the woman was pregnant through infidelity. The drink had no effect on those with no wrongdoing. The ritual was Yahwistic in nature. The tetragrammaton is mentioned no less than 13 times in the text. The authority of the ritual was clearly placed in the hands of Yahweh and under his authority. Thus the rite was performed with the belief the divine was present and administered by a priest of Yahweh. The Numbers 5 rite of crisis followed basic Hebrew ritual requirements with an offering to Yahweh and invoking a curse with the potential for judgment (15).

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