

NUMBERS

Lesson 7 - Chapter 5 Conclusion

We have been studying the 5th chapter of Numbers (and I promise you we'll finally finish it tonight). It is the story of a woman suspected of adultery but who does NOT confess it. This is an entirely different situation than the woman who has been caught in the act by her husband, there are witnesses, and the woman does **not** proclaim innocence. In the 2nd case the procedure is simple: she is taken outside the camp and stoned to death. But in the first case a trial must be held to determine guilt or innocence since the facts are in doubt.

But in the 1st case since there is only suspicion and no witnesses, how does one go about determining if this woman is telling the truth and that she has remained faithful to her husband? The answer the law of Numbers 5 prescribes is trial by God. The elements of the trial are these: the woman's suspicious husband brings her to the Tabernacle and a Levite priest will then conduct a special ritual as part of the procedure. The ritual consists of the priest writing an oath on a scroll and then washing it off into a cup of water. The water is called holy water in many translations but in fact holy water is the same thing as living water. That is, living water is but water from a moving source like a river, stream, or artesian fountain. Living water is required for all holy priestly ritual, and thus it is called holy water. Then some dust is gathered from the Tabernacle floor and put into the cup of water along with the ink of the letters of the oath. Understand that the key to the letters of the oath is God's name. An oath is not an oath if God's name is not invoked.

The woman drinks the water and then only the passing of time will give the results. If the woman is never able to bear children, she was guilty and this is her punishment. If she is able to have children, she was innocent and the children are her reward.

Last week we read a well-known NT story about a group of men who brought to Jesus a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery, and they wanted to know what Jesus would do about it. Let's review that story because I think it has a firm connection to Numbers 5 as its underlying meaning. In fact, we're going to spend considerable time tonight on the New Testament passage as means of demonstrating the necessity of knowing Torah before we do serious study of the New Testament.

READ JOHN 8:1 - 11

This story in the NT book of John **MUST** be taken in the context of the Torah, as should all stories and observations and commentaries that form the New Testament. If we try to separate this event from our understanding that Yeshua was a Torah observant Jew, and is Himself the

author of the Torah, then we're going to miss the point on many of the things written about Him and in many of His recorded sayings.

The dragging of this woman accused of adultery before Jesus was simply a test (or a trap) by these Rabbis and Scribes who brought her to see if they could get Him to say something against the Law of Moses and thus He would be automatically discredited.....it was a political ploy in a time of great political upheaval, Temple corruption, and intrigue in Judea.

There are some things that need to be carefully explored about this story if we are to grasp its meaning. First, I well understand that this is one of the most beloved stories in the New Testament and so I am likely to tread on some folks feelings about it and I apologize in advance for challenging the conventional wisdom on this matter. This passage is most typically used to demonstrate a couple of things: 1) that Jesus is all merciful, and 2) that sinners have no right to judge anyone else. Those conclusions have become doctrines and mainstays of Christian institutions. We can debate on another occasion as to whether one or both or neither or those conclusions ought to be a proper Christian doctrine. But today I am going to suggest to you that the point of **this** particular story in John 8 probably has nothing to do with Yeshua's mercy or of His requirement that only sinless people ought be witnesses against another person or who can rightfully carry out judicial punishments on others.

Let's look at what happened here because there are some oddities about this story that have perplexed and upset many scholars and bible translators. This unnamed woman is brought before Yeshua and He is told that she has committed adultery. Since her guilt is apparently not the issue the only question these men have for Yeshua is what he thinks her punishment ought to be. In the most accepted Christian interpretations of this passage the outcome essentially has Yeshua telling the men that unless they have lived a sin free life they have no right to accuse her or to carry out any kind judicial punishment on this women (in this case, stoning). Further after these man have skulked away from the area in shame Jesus determines in His mercy to ignore the crime the woman has committed (which according to the Law is among the worst of sins that can be committed), lets her off the hook, and says to be on her way and to not sin any more. There are to be no repercussions becausewell.....because Jesus has determined there shouldn't be any. And this story is explained as a great demonstration of His limitless mercy.

While I believe in a merciful Savior and am deeply grateful for that indispensable attribute of His, I see the application of mercy as an improbable interpretation of this rather problematic story. Let me tell you something that most folks don't realize: it is that this particular story about Yeshua has so troubled Bible councils and Bible interpreters that to this day you'll find it in some Bible translations and others will not even include it. This controversial narrative has been removed and added back in to the New Testament canon many times over the centuries. Why? Because what is stated simply doesn't add up; it doesn't seem to follow the pattern of Jesus' life, His pronouncements or His other actions, and it even calls into question His compliance to the very Torah that He and all the Apostles claim that He followed perfectly.

Here's the basic problem: absolutely no element of trust or faith in Yeshua is involved in this narrative; belief was never asked of this women. It is not even implied that this woman had any

idea who Yeshua was. There was no acknowledgment of His status as the Messiah or as being of divine origin. She didn't ask for forgiveness nor was it offered per se. The second problem is that adultery was indeed a God-ordained capital offense as found in the Torah. It is so serious that it is part of the foundational principles for the entire Bible, the Ten Commandments.

CJB Exodus 20:13 *"Do not murder. "Do not commit adultery*

Adultery was so heinous in God's eyes that it was put on the same level as murder.

CJB Leviticus 20:10 *"If a man commits adultery with another man's wife, that is, with the wife of a fellow countryman, both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.*

No ifs, ands, or buts; a woman who commits adultery must be executed.

Now, was Yeshua familiar with this law? Did He agree with it?

CJB John 1:1 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 All things came to be through him, and without him nothing made had being.*

Jesus is the Word of God, He wrote the Torah so it's hard to imagine that He now disavowed its contents.

Here's the thing: we will find no other story about Jesus that even remotely implies that He simply dismisses civil and criminal law breakers from the responsibility of their crimes. Rather He rescued folks from the spiritual consequences of their trespasses. But there was always a caveat: faith in Him as God's Messiah. No trust in Him, no forgiveness and redemption.

Yet, by most interpretations, that is exactly what happened here. For some reason Jesus simply waved his hand, dismissed the crime, and said not to do it again. Unlikely.

Now there is also a second aspect to consider and it involves the "let he who is without sin cast the first stone" comment. The standard interpretation would have it that as sinners we have no business pointing out the sin in someone else. Some have gone so far as to say that in its strictest sense Jesus is teaching that only a completely sinless person can be a reliable witness to a crime, or that only a completely sinless person can be a person who orders judicial punishment, or that only a completely sinless person can execute capital punishment. Such an idea is simply unworkable and it would bring any kind of justice system to a standstill. By that standard no one can be accused, tried, convicted, or punished because there is no such thing as a sinless person to prosecute criminals.

Therefore this common interpretation cannot be correct, as many scholars have complained for literally hundreds of years. I do not think the story should be removed, because I think it happened and was correctly recorded. I believe that the problem lies in trying to make it fit

predisposed agendas rather than interpreting it in its Jewish cultural context.

Notice the circumstances. It is said by the accusers that she was "caught in the act" of adultery. But, was she? Were these upright and honorable men who were bring this woman to Yeshua? No, these were representatives of a notorious and corrupt Temple system that sought to rid itself of this upstart young Rabbi named Yeshua who was making their lives a lot harder.

There is no way to know for sure whether the accusation of this group was true; I suspect that these men likely did not make a truthful statement or certainly the woman's husband would have been there to make the accusation; in fact by the Law such a thing was required. Add to that there is no admission of guilt of the woman recorded here; she was simply silent. Further Christ told her to go and sin no more.....not to go and NOT commit adultery anymore. But, assuming the unlikely, that it was a truthful statement that she had actually been caught in the act, Torah required that there be AT LEAST 2 witnesses (including her husband in this case) who had to testify against a person accused of a capital crime.....and adultery was a capital crime.

Even more it was required that the witnesses in a capital case begin the execution process. If this were applied to modern day, it would be the equivalent of the witnesses who were required to pull the lever for the Gas Chamber. The standard Jewish method of execution was stoning; and it was a requirement of Torah that the witnesses were not only present at the execution but THEY must be the first to throw the stones at the condemned person.

There was a reason for this: it was a deterrent to false testimony. If a witness lied and it led to the death of an innocent person, then by their being part of the execution process they would have blood on their hands; they become murderers and would themselves be subject to execution. That's a pretty big incentive not to give false or frivolous testimony in a capital case.

Thus we have Jesus saying, "Let he who is without sin throw the first stone". Who throws the first stone in a Jewish execution? The witnesses. It is my opinion that when Jesus said "he without sin", He was likely not referring to sin in general He was referring to the sin of bearing false witness, and maybe to some degree these men's impure motives for making this accusation in the first place. In this instance the PURPOSE of the false witness against the woman was to entrap Jesus (as the story itself makes clear). Yeshua called their bluff in a maneuver that would make Perry Mason proud. He told them that the witnesses should just go ahead and pick up their execution stones and throw them at her now, UNLESS they were participating in a sin; that is they weren't telling the truth. Because if they were lying, or just going along with an assumption of this woman's guilt without actually knowing, and got caught then they would be open to capital punishment.

I think there is nothing here but a false accusation using a helpless woman in order to try to discredit a rival.....Jesus of Nazareth. Justice wasn't the issue, getting rid of Yeshua was the issue.

We need to understand just how rampant adultery was in Jesus' day, and that ONLY women needed to fear the accusation. The charge of adultery had become a joke; everybody was

doing it. The usual consequence for a woman accused of adultery was divorce, not her death. NO proof of adultery was necessary for a man to divorce his wife, just the suspicion. But by Yeshua's day only a husband could be the aggrieved person. Men were simply no longer brought up on charges of adultery even though Leviticus clearly states that both men AND women caught in adultery were to be executed. The concept of a woman being accused of adultery, and being divorced instead of being executed for this adultery, was Tradition, not Torah. Men had decided that execution was much too harsh of response to this all-too-common crime. This is but one small example of what Judaism had become.

So since there is no HINT that this woman had confessed to her supposed crime, the Law says she should have been taken to the priests who would have performed the Numbers 5 water ordeal upon her. If I'm correct that the story of John 8 is more about the law of Numbers 5 than anything else, a good question surrounding the story of Jesus and the woman accused of adultery would be, was the water ordeal still being practiced in the NT era, 1300 years after it was first enacted? And yes, it was. We find proof of it in the Mishnah, in Sotah 9, where we find that Rabbi Yochanon Ben Zakkai eventually outlawed the water ordeal sometime just before the Romans destroyed the in 70 A.D. Since Jesus died around 40 years earlier then we know that the water ordeal was still in use in His day. And Rabbi Ben Zakkai outlawed it because it had become misused and abused by husbands who simply wanted to be rid of their wives; so, they would accuse the wives of adultery, the wives would go through the water ordeal, and no matter what the outcome they would still divorce them because it could be years before it was known if a woman might become barren (which was the supernatural indication of guilt) and the husband didn't want to wait.

Now, another interesting little thing: I have heard some of the most amazing..... And I might add, inventive....suggestions on just what it was that Jesus was writing in the dust with His finger, as it says in verse 6 of John 8. Even though nothing more is ever said about Jesus writing in the dust in the NT, it has for some reason captured the imaginations of Christian teachers and Pastors. So, let's address that if we can.

In Numbers 5 we find that the focal point of the water-ordeal ritual is a special drink; and we find that there are 3 ingredients to the water concoction the woman is supposed to swallow: holy water, dust, and the ink from the letters of a vow the priest has written as to her punishment if she did what she was accused of.

What, exactly, is holy water? It is just a synonym for "living water". Holy water only indicates that it is water that had been drawn from a running spring or river, and designated for use in the Temple. From a practical standpoint, holy water was but the water that filled the Copper Laver at the Temple; the same water priests used to dip from to wash their feet and hands during Temple rituals. Holy water and Living water are two terms for the same thing.

So added to this flask of living water was dust gathered from the Temple floor. Why did it need to be dust from the Temple floor? Because the dust HAD to be holy. The Temple was God's dwelling place. Anywhere God dwells contracts His holiness. Remember in Exodus as Moses approached the Burning Bush what it was that God instructed Moses to do, and why? Moses was ordered to remove his sandals from his feet because he was about to stand on holy

ground.....literally, stand on holy dust. Why was **this** dust holy but dust just a little further away it wasn't? Because God was present there at the bush.

So the dirt beneath God's feet, so to speak (the dirt that formed the floor of His dwelling place, the Tabernacle, later the Temple) was automatically made holy and therefore **it** was that holy dust which was required to be put into the drink.

As for the ink of the letters that was the last part to go into the concoction: it was required that God's name.....yud-heh-vah-heh.....be written on a sheepskin scroll as part of the oath the woman swore to. We don't read that directly in the Torah that the letters of God's name was written, but it doesn't matter because it's a given. A Biblical oath by definition ALWAYS includes God's name; without God's name there was no oath. Just as when we write a letter to someone today, we write our name on that letter. When we say to someone, I wrote so and so a letter, we don't have to say "and I signed my name", because without our name on it it's not a completed letter. Same thing with an oath; a biblical oath is NOT merely the making of a statement; a biblical oath is the invoking of God's name as a validation and witness of your statement. It is calling upon God to be the guarantor of your promise. Therefore when the ink of that written oath was immediately washed off into the holy water, God's name flowed in as an ingredient. Please hear me: this is not allegory that I'm giving to you; this is accurate historical fact well attested to in many ancient Jewish writings. Certainly this ritual water mix is symbolic as there is no magical quality about the water, ink, or dust. But what I'm telling you is not conjecture; it is what was recorded in those times about the procedures and the meaning of each step.

So the drink that a woman accused of adultery swallowed consisted of living water (the kind of water required for ALL holy ritual), dust made holy by God's presence (dust from the Temple floor), and the letters of God's holy name.

Here's the thing: what in the world does dust (and Yeshua writing in the dust with His finger) have to do with this story of He and the accused woman? **Everything if** we know the Torah; because in Numbers 5 when a woman was brought before the priest AND God to be judged as to whether she actually committed adultery or not, dust and writing were important parts of the ritual.

We see every element of the law of Numbers 5 in the John 8 story of Jesus and the women accused of adultery. We have Living Water (Yeshua), a priest and God present (again Yeshua), holy dust (Jesus was currently in the Temple and we're told there was dust on the floor), and writing (Jesus was inexplicably and mysteriously writing in the dust with his finger). The woman was indeed brought before God....the requirement of Numbers 5..... when she was brought before Yeshua....though those bringing her didn't know it. Jesus was writing in holy dust, because as God, He made the very ground He sat upon, holy. What was He writing? I can't be sure, but I suspect it may have been Yud-Heh-vav-heh, the letters that form God's name.....that would have been the most consistent with the pattern set down in Numbers 5.

Yeshua was simply displaying the REAL and original Torah....the Torah as given to Moses on Mt. Sinai....the Torah we are studying together. And as Jesus so eloquently stated in the

Sermon on the Mount, He was on earth to but act out the meaning of the Torah. Yeshua, who IS living water, who is also priest and God, writing on holy dust with a woman accused of adultery standing before Him.

This story is in many ways an irony. In John 8 these corrupt men had brought this woman before God for judgment, and they didn't even recognize what they were doing. Before them was every ingredient of the God-ordained ritual of the water ordeal upon a woman accused of adultery....priest, God, holy water, holy dust, and holy writings all performed at the required location: the Temple.

Do you see this? Those Pharisees and Rabbis who had dragged that poor woman before Yeshua couldn't see what was actually occurring here because they were blind to their own Messiah and equally blind to the laws and commands of the Torah that they had largely replaced with their traditions.

Listen to the last 3 verses of Numbers 5.....but as you listen, picture, if you would, this woman standing before Yeshua, in the story of John 8.

NAS Numbers 5:29 *'This is the law of jealousy: when a wife, being under the authority of her husband, goes astray and defiles herself, 30 or when a spirit of jealousy comes over a man and he is jealous of his wife, he shall then make the woman stand before the LORD, and the priest shall apply all this law to her. 31 'Moreover, the man shall be free from guilt, but that woman shall bear her guilt.'*

Indeed, the Torah was followed: she was stood before the Lord, and the priest.....our High Priest in this case.....applied ALL the law to her. Jesus, seeing no witnesses against her, no one to condemn her, which is the requirement of the law of PROVEN adultery in Leviticus, then moved to the law of SUSPECTED adultery of Numbers 5, the test of the water ordeal, and each and every element of itwater, dust, and writing.....was used. Of course as He was God on earth there was less need that she drink a holy water mixture and wait for the results as the sign of God's judgment in the matter.

When Jesus tells the men who had brought the woman to Him: "....he who is without sin be the first to cast a stone.....", remember it was the witnesses who threw the first stones of execution; this was Law, not tradition. Listen to **NAS Deuteronomy 17:5 *then you shall bring out that man or that woman who has done this evil deed, to your gates, that is, the man or the woman, and you shall stone them to death. 6 "On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. 7 "The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.***

My dear friends, almost everything that happened with Jesus in the New Testament is completely explainable by means of the Torah. We don't need to resort to allegory and fanciful stories with dubious conclusions to defend the Bible. We just need to study the Word....the WHOLE word....and make the connections.

Now since Numbers chapter 5 and John chapter 8 is largely about the subject of adultery, there is one final aspect to this that I'd like to bring out: it is that the law of adultery assumes that one partner in the relationship is faithful, while the other is not. Let me quote Joseph Milgrom who says that the Rabbis read the laws concerning adultery in precisely this way: "IF the man is clear of sin, THEN the woman (the woman convicted of adultery) shall suffer her guilt". And that view is based largely on Hosea 4. The idea being that if the man was being unfaithful to his wife then the wife's unfaithfulness merits no punishment.

Listen to **Hosea 4:14.....** ***"Therefore your daughters behave like whores, and your daughters-in-law commit adultery. I won't punish your daughters when they act like whores or your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery; BECAUSE THE MEN are themselves going off with whores and sacrificing with prostitutes. Yes, people without understanding will come to ruin."***

Marriage is the institution that God designed as a way to explain and demonstrate the relationship between Himself and mankind. The definition of what adultery amounts to and what the effects and consequences are for adultery, are placed in the Torah to protect the God-ordained institution of marriage. But these same effects and consequences (caused by adultery) upon a human marriage between a man and a woman also paint a picture of what happens when we commit adultery against God. The Biblical term we see used in Numbers 5 (and elsewhere in the Bible) is "breaking faith". Adultery in a human marriage is the breaking of faith between the husband and wife. Over and over again we are told in the Bible that we break faith with God when we worship other gods, when we choose the way of the world over the way of the Lord, when we decide to dedicate ourselves to religious doctrines and nice sounding traditions instead of to the actual Word of God as laid down in Scripture, and when we violate His laws and commands.

Over and over we are told in the Word that God is faithful. He NEVER breaks faith with us. He never changes; He always is just and loving. IF God ever were to be unfaithful towards us it would basically invalidate the entire biblical concept of adultery and breaking faith; without the faithfulness of one of the partners, adultery has no meaning. If God is unfaithful to us, then it is not POSSIBLE for us to be unfaithful to Him. Let me repeat that: if God ever becomes unfaithful to us then the entire premise of our relationship with Him goes down the drain. Fortunately we NEVER have to worry about that, for God is not a man that He might change or be tempted.

Therefore from the Rabbis point of view....and I think they are dead-on in their thinking.....adultery in a marriage only has any meaning at all if while one party remains faithful, the other becomes unfaithful. If BOTH are unfaithful then adultery becomes an oxymoron.

This is why, not long before the Temple was destroyed, that Rabbi Yochanon ben Zakkai abolished the water-ordeal of the suspected adulteress of Numbers 5; because men had long ago excused themselves from having to be faithful to their wives. The Jewish men saw adultery as a one-way street. Only women could be unfaithful, men had no obligations to remain pure in their marriage. In effect there was no adultery because there was no real faithfulness anyway.

Thus this is reflected in the New Testament statement of Yeshua who said in NAS **Matthew 5:31** *"And it was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce'; 32 but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

Here Yeshua makes clear.....despite what you may think the remainder of this instruction concerning divorce is indicating..... that UNFAITHFULNESS basically destroys the whole marriage dynamic. When Christ was addressing the crowds and talking about adultery, it wasn't because it was rarity in Jewish society.....it had become the norm; just as it has become so again...or still.....in our time.

We'll begin Numbers chapter 6 next time.