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The Suspected Adulteress
5: 11-31

The suspected adulteress DIG: Why was this strange mitzvah required for a woman suspected of adultery? Why was the woman's head uncovered? Why was the "holy water" holy? Why was it mixed with dust from the Tabernacle floor? Why was the oath written on a scroll then erased in the bitter water? Why was it so important? What was the lesson?

REFLECT: Is it possible for a marriage to recover after adultery? How so? What effect do you think this ritual would have had on the rest of the community? What effect do you think it may have had on the woman in question, or her marriage if she was found innocent? Why do you think this ritual did not apply if a man was unfaithful to his wife? Or did it?

The priest would take the case out of the hands of a human court, and placed it in the hands of God.



The ritual of **bitter water** flows naturally after the mitzvah of sending the unclean out of the camp (**to see link click Ax – The Purification of the Camp**), and the mitzvah of **confessing** one's **sin** (see **Ay – Restitution and Repentance**). The scene pictured here was an irate **husband** who suspected that **his wife** had been **unfaithful**. Having no proof, **his** only recourse was to bring **her** to the Tabernacle where **she** underwent the ordeal of **bitter water**. **The priest** would make **her**

drink a potion consisting of **holy water** to which **dust** from **the floor of the Tabernacle** and **a scroll** containing **a curse** had been added. **The curse** spelled out the consequences. If **she** was guilty, **her womb shriveled up and wasted away,** and **she** would no longer be able to conceive. If, however, **the bitter water** had no effect on **her**, **she** was declared **righteous, her womb** would be fruitful and **she** was blessed to conceive and bear **children.**[89] This section is clearly connected with the previous one by the repetition of the word translated **unfaithful**. In previous teaching, we looked at a case where a person, who defrauded or robbed someone else, committed an **unfaithful** act against **God (5:6)**. Here we see a case where a **wife** was thought to be **unfaithful** to **her husband**. The same Hebrew word, *ma'al*, is used in both cases.

A The case (5:11-14): ADONAI said to Moshe, "Tell the people of Isra'el, 'If a man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him; that is, if another man goes to bed with her without her husband's knowledge, so that she becomes unclean (see the commentary on **Leviticus Bk – Ritually Clean and Unclean Animals**) **secretly, and there is no witness against her, and she was not caught in the act; then, if a spirit of zealousness comes over him, and he was zealous for his wife, and she has become unclean – or, for that matter, if the spirit of zealousness comes over him, and he is zealousness of his wife, and she has not become unclean.**

The Hebrew root *qinah* combines the two concepts of **jealousy** and **zeal**. So, **zeal**, or **zealousness**, meaning *a passionate devotion to,* would be a better term to use than **jealous**, which has negative, even petty connotations. Therefore, a husband's **zealousness** would burn for **his wife,** just as **ADONAI** is **zealous** for **His wife**. **YHVH** is making an important point here. By making provision for the proper expression of **a husband's zealousness**, **Ha'Shem** is teaching us that **zealousness** for the right reason is not wrong. Because **God** and **Isra'el** are viewed as married, **Isra'el** is viewed as **the wife of ADONAI (Deuteronomy 5:1-3, 6:10-15, 7:6-11; Isaiah 54:1-8, 62:4-5; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezeki'el 16:8; Hosea 2:14-23)**. For that very reason, **ADONAI** declares that **He** is **a zealous God (Exodus 20:5)! God** has a right to be **zealous** over what is rightfully **His**, and **the husband**, in this analogy, also had every right to be **zealous** over what was rightfully **his**.

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You,** that **You** are a just and fair **God**. **You** give respect to both **men** and **women** and **You** offer a fair way to protect both of **them**. It is so wise to put the final verdict into **Your** hands. Thank **You**, for protecting*

women *in many ways! Under the Torah,* ***You*** *lovingly made provision for* ***women*** *who were trapped in marriages with hard- hearted* ***husbands****.* ***You*** *gave protection for* ***women*** *who had been sold into slavery as slave brides but then were not wanted.* ***You*** *gave three mitzvot for providing for* ***a*** *slave* ***wife****. Since legal protection is provided for* ***a*** *slave* ***wife****, how much more would it apply to* ***a*** *free* ***wife*** *in* ***Isra'el****? Whoever purchased and married a slave* ***woman*** *had to provide her with* ***"food"*** *(the Hebrew word signifies high-quality food),* ***"clothing",*** *and* ***"marriage rights"*** *(probably a reference to regular marital relations so that she could have children). If* ***the husband*** *violated* ***his*** *responsibility to make such provisions,* ***he*** *was to let* ***his wife*** *"go out free". Which can mean no less than formal* ***divorce (Exodus 21:7-11).*** *The point being, that if this* ***woman****, sold as a slave-****wife****, is no longer to be a* ***wife****, she cannot be kept as a slave on the pretext that* ***she*** *is* ***the man's wife****. Instead,* ***she*** *is to be given* ***her*** *freedom.*

There are more ways you protect ***women****.* ***You*** *protected prisoners of war whom* ***men*** *no longer desired to be* ***their*** *wives. According to* ***Moses****, even* ***a woman*** *who was taken as* ***a wife*** *from the spoils of war was to be given legal protection. If* ***her husband*** *became dissatisfied with* ***her****,* ***he*** *had to treat* ***her*** *as he would* ***a wife*** *from* ***his*** *own people.* ***He*** *was not allowed to subject* ***her*** *to brutal treatment. Instead, the mitzvah required* ***him*** *to give* ***her a certificate of divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1)****.*

You *also so graciously protected* ***women*** *who were no longer loved. It is noteworthy that the mitzvah in* ***Deuteronomy 24:1-4*** *apparently did not require* ***the husband*** *to prove that* ***he*** *had valid grounds for* ***the divorce****. Neither did it subject either* ***the man*** *or* ***the woman*** *to community discipline. The only restriction was that* ***the man*** *who divorced* ***his wife*** *forfeited* ***his*** *right to remarry if* ***she*** *married someone else in the interim. We can probably safely conclude, however, that* ***the husband*** *is not making a public accusation of* ***adultery****. The mitzvah of* ***Moses*** *required* ***death for adulterers****, not a provision of* ***divorce (Deuteronomy 22:22)****.*

Thank ***You, Ruach,*** *for guiding* ***Paul*** *to address new protection for* ***women*** *when* ***he*** *answered new questions from* ***the Corinthian*** *believers* ***(First Corinthians 7:10-16). Father****,* ***You*** *designed marriage to be a loving covenant that lasts forever, but if hard, heartedness, causes the marriage not to last,* ***You****,* ***God****, are* ***righteous*** *and fair and make provision for the one who is abused. Praise* ***You*** *always for your purity and holiness that are wrapped in* ***Your*** *love and wisdom. In* ***Yeshua's*** *holy name and power of* ***His*** *resurrection. Amen*

The first interesting point about this passage is that it teaches compassionate sensitivity toward both **the husband's** and **the wife's** needs. The need of **the husband** in this case was to claim **his zealousness** regarding the possibility of **his wife's unfaithfulness** with another **man**. Should **the husband** passively ignore the sin? The Torah answers with a resounding, "NO!" It fights off a potentially dangerous situation caused by the unchecked **zealousness** of **the husband**, by outlining a judicial process to see if **his** fears were justified or not.

The Sages make it clear that the suspicion must be warranted. Though no witness to an illicit act was required (5:13), there must have been at least a witness to ascertain that the woman had the opportunity to commit adultery by being secluded with another man. A simple suspicion of adultery was not sufficient cause for the ritual. Furthermore, per the interpretation of the Sages, the words: he was zealous for his wife (5:14) are understood to mean that he had expressed his zealousness to her and explicitly warned her about being seduced with a certain man (Chofez Chaim 1:2). If after being warned, she had secluded herself with him, then there was certainly cause for suspicion. Accordingly the Oral Law (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ei – The Oral Law**)**, the Sages of the Second Temple ear would only allow a trial if these criteria had been met.**[90]

> **B Preparation of the ritual (5:15-18): The husband was to bring his wife to the priest, along with a grain offering for her.** It was unlike other **grain offerings** (see **Leviticus Aj – The Grain Offerings: Dedicated to God**) **because it was a grain offering for zealousness, a grain offering for remembering, for recalling guilt to mind (5:15).** The function of every offering was to bring a person near (*korban*) to **ADONAI**. This was usually a positive experience. The person bringing the sacrifice, even when it was **a purification offering** (see **Leviticus Al – The Purification Offering: Purified by Blood**) or **guilt offering** (see **Leviticus Am – The Guilt Offering: Evidence of Repentance**), did so to purposely draw near to **God**. In this case, **the grain offering for zealousness** was brought to bring **his wife** near to **God**. **He** brought it on **her** behalf for either vindication or condemnation. The offering was a reminder of the iniquity with which **she** had been charged. Because of the nature of the sacrifice, it was made of **two courts of barley flour** (the cheapest of flours), **on which he has not poured olive oil or put frankincense.**



The priest will bring her forward and place her before ADONAI, that is, at the gate of **the Tabernacle** (see the commentary on **Exodus Ez – The Gate of the Tabernacle: Christ, The Way to God**)**.** In the Second Temple era, **she** would have been brought to the Nicanor Gate in the Court of **the Women** as seen here. **He will put holy water** probably **taken from the bronze basin** (see **Exodus Fh – The Bronze Basin: Christ, our Cleanser**) **in a clay pot and then he will take some of the dust on the floor of the Tabernacle and put it in the water (5:16-17). The holy water** was not **holy** because **it** was blessed; **it** was **holy** because **it** was **Tabernacle water**. Though **the woman**, in **her** state of suspected **uncleanness**, was not allowed to tread the sacred ground of **the Tabernacle**, the sacredness of **the Tabernacle** was brought to **her**, so to speak.

Then, **the priest will place the woman before ADONAI, unbind the woman's hair.** This was probably understood as a symbolic act representing the vulnerability of **her** married status. As **sh**e stood before **God**, **she** no longer stood under **her husband's** authority, but before **God** alone. After that, **the priest put the grain offering for zealousness in her hands while he had in his hand the cup of bitter water and cursing (5:18).** This was equivalent to the laying on of **hands** that was performed with an animal offering. **The grain offering** is invested with **her** identity. **It** will be **waved before ADONAI** with **its memorial portion** going onto **the bronze altar (5:25).** Through the grain offering, **she** will be vicariously brought into the presence of **the LORD** where **He** will decide regarding **her innocence** or **guilt**. Only after the offering up of **the grain offering for zealousness** was **she** to **drink the bitter water**.[91]

Many have noticed similarities between the ritual of t**he wife drinking the**

bitter water and the story of **Isra'el's golden calf** apostasy (see **Exodus Gu – They Gave Me This Gold, I Threw It into a Fire and Out Came this Calf**). There, **Moshe** mixed **water** with **the dust** of **the golden calf**, which had been ground into powder. **The dust** presumably functioned as a trial by ordeal and brought punishment upon the Israelites who were **guilty** of worshiping the idolatrous **golden calf**, just as **the waters** of **bitterness** brought judgment upon **the unfaithful wife** here in **Numbers 5**. **Jeremiah** also used the imagery of **Isra'el** bringing judgment on itself by **drinking the** poisonous **water** of its idolatry **(Jeremiah 9:15** and **23:15)**.

As far as **the wife** was concerned, if **she** was **innocent**, **she** needed to have **her** name cleared of any suspicion. This ritual was provided for such justice. It actually protected **her** from the lynch-mob mentality of an angry community or **zealous husband**. **The priest** would take case out of the hands of a human court and placed it under divine judgment.[92]

Why is there no trial of **bitter water** for **men** when **a wife** suspected **her husband** of **adultery**? In the Dispensation of Torah (see the commentary on **Exodus Da – The Dispensation of the Torah**), **a man** had the right to issue a certificate of **divorce**, but **the wife** did not. Even if **she** suspected **him** of **adultery**, **she** could not **divorce him**, whereas **he** could **divorce her** on those same grounds. Therefore, the trial of **bitter water** was meant to prevent **divorce**. Most likely this ritual doesn't sit well with us, but we must remember that **YHVH** treated people differently in different Dispensations. It was all part of **His** progressive revelation. Lastly, we must remember this mitzvah was an attempt to save a marriage by exonerating **the wife** who was falsely accused.[93]

> **C The oath-spoken curse (5:19-24): The wife** was required to take **an oath** in **the name of ADONAI**. **The Oral Law allowed her to back out and refuse to take the oath. If she did, she was to be given a certificate of divorce without payment of any of her wedding contract's alimony terms. Even with her confession, she could not be stoned for adultery because, as had already been determined, there were no witnesses to testify against her in a court of law (Numbers 5:13; Deut 19:15).**
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> **The priest will make her swear by saying to her, "If no man has gone to bed with you, if you have not gone astray to make**

yourself unclean while under your husband's authority, then be free from this bitter water and cursing. But if you have in fact gone astray while under your husband's authority and become unclean, because some man other than your husband has gone to bed with you" then the priest is to make the woman swear with an oath that includes a curse; the priest will say to the woman, "may ADONAI make you an object of cursing and condemnation among your people by making your womb shrivel up and waste away and your abdomen swell! May this water that causes the curse go into your inner parts and make your abdomen swell and your genital area will distend (and **she** would no longer be able to conceive, a disgrace in the Jewish community)**!" – and the woman is to respond, "Amen! Amen!"** This confirmed the acceptance of **the curse (Deut 27:15-26; Numbers 5:13).** Then **the priest is to write these curses on a scroll, wash them off into the water of embitterment and make the woman drink the water of embitterment and cursing – the water of cursing will enter her and become bitter.** This mitzvah is the only explicit instance in Scripture of trial by ordeal. After the Temple was destroyed, the ritual was abolished.[94]

According to the rabbis, the priest would encourage her to confess by adding these words, "Wine can be responsible for much, or foolishness can be responsible for much, or childishness can be responsible for much. Many have been guilty before you and were swept away (when they refused to confess and then drank the bitter water). Do not cause the great Name to be blotted out in the water of bitterness." Then he told her of the affair of Reuben with Bilhah (Gen 35:22), and of Judah with Tamar (Gen 38:15ff). They confessed and inherited life in the next world.[95]

B Execution of the ritual (5:25-28): Then the priest is to remove the grain offering for zealousness from the woman's hand, wave the grain offering before ADONAI and bring it to the bronze altar. The priest is to take a handful of the grain offering as its memorial portion and make it go up in smoke on the altar; afterwards, he is to make the woman drink the water. When he has made her drink the water, then, if she is unclean and has been unfaithful to her husband, the bitter

water would have an immediate effect on **her**. **The water that causes the curse will enter her and become bitter, so that her abdomen swells and her womb shrivels up and wastes away;** thus, **she** would be barren **and become an object of cursing among her people. Though the Torah only specifies that her womb shriveled up and wasted away, the Sages assure us that the effect was fatal. She had barely begun to drink before her face turned yellow, her eyes bulged and her veins swell. They say, "Take her away!" Take her away!" so that the Temple court will not be made unclean [by her corpse] (m.Sotah 3.4). According to the traditional understanding, the man who committed adultery with her also died the same death. Since their sin was in secret, it could not be prosecuted by a court of law. Thus, their verdict was handed to them by Heaven, but only after the woman was given ample opportunity to confess and repent.**[96]

But if the woman is not unclean but clean and innocent, then **the water** had a different effect on **her**. Rather than having **her womb shrivel up and waste away**, **her womb** would be fruitful and **she** was blessed to conceive and bear **children.**

Now let's consider some of the issues involved in this ritual. There's no record in Scripture that any **husband** ever used it, or that any accused **wife** asked for it. Perhaps the very existence of this ritual provided a barrier to **adultery** and a warning that sin would be found out. There were clearly some built-in roadblocks that would make **a husband** hesitate to rush to **the priest** and ask for **his wife** to undergo this ritual. To begin with, it was a public event, performed at **the gate of the Tabernacle**, and the whole camp would know about it. Would **a husband** want to expose **his** marital problems openly, especially when he couldn't know the results of the ritual? Furthermore, what transpired there told something about **the husband** as well as **the wife**. If **the husband** loved **his wife** and was deeply hurt by **her** possible infidelity, why would **he** want to expose **her** publicly? But if **he** didn't love **her** and only wanted to hurt **her**, **he** might be embarrassed and proved wrong. A wise **man** would think twice (maybe three or four times) before having **his wife** judged in this way.[97]

A The mitzvah (5:29-20): This is the mitzvah of zealousness: when either a wife under her husband's authority goes astray and becomes unclean, or the spirit of zealousness comes over a husband and he becomes zealous

for his wife, then he is to place the woman before ADONAI, and the priest is to deal with her in accordance with all of this mitzvah.

Postscript (5:31): The husband will be clear of guilt, but, if guilty, **the wife will bear the consequences of her guilt.** However, if **she** is innocent, **her name** and standing will be cleared before the whole community. The purity and sanctity of the community was thereby assured, so that **the nation** would be prepared to move out from **Sinai** to **the Promised Land** and experience the fullest blessing of **ADONAI**.

The Torah and the Bitter Water: In a spiritual sense, we are all like **the woman** who stood accused. **The holy water** we drink is **the water** of the Torah. It is **water** from **the Tabernacle** in heaven, mixed with the words of the Scroll. Those words will either exonerate us or condemn us, depending on our innocence or **guilt**. Unfortunately, we are all **guilt**y. **All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away (Isaiah 64:6)**. The words of Torah can only condemn us. This was the ministry of the Dispensation of Torah. To the **guilty**, the words or the Scroll are poison, resulting in death. **In Messiah**, however, our old nature has already died. We know that the curse of the Torah has already been met. Having **confessed** our **sins** and have become a new creation in **Messiah**, we are able to strand the trial of **bitter water** with confidence. For us then, **the bitter water** is not **bitter water**, but **holy water**. It is not a ministry of death; but a ministry of life. Rather than working death within us, a life has been conceived within us . . . **Messiah's** life.[98]