

Lesson 19: Numbers 1-10 Mosaic Law and Women

Introduction

The Overall Structure of Numbers

The book of Numbers: Israel is leaving Mount Sinai. The Bible Project provides an excellent video overview of Numbers, if you want to check that out at observetheword.com. Numbers is notoriously challenging to structure. Every commentary lines things up a little differently. The Bible project division is nice, viewing the book as a travel log, they see Israel camped at three locations and traveling in between, which makes a five-part division of the book. In the first chapter the people are still at Mt. Sinai, then they are on the move, then they camp at Paran, then they are on the move, and they end up in Moab, just across the Jordan river from Canaan.

The Wilderness of Sinai	Travel	The Wilderness of Paran	Travel	The Wilderness of Moab
Chapters 1-10a	Chapters 10b-12	Chapters 13-19	Chapters 20-21	Chapters 22-36

That's a helpful perspective. I prefer a simpler three-part division of the book. There is one literary element that clearly stands out in the book of Numbers. It is where the book gets its name. God tells Moses to take a census of all the men of fighting age, 20 years and older. And the report of that first census comes right away at the beginning of chapter 1. And then much later God commands Moses to take a second census which is recorded in chapter 26. A full report is given, just like the first census, with a list of all the fighting men over 20 from each tribe.

Numbers: Kingdom Rebellion		
Key Passage: 14:20-23		
1:1-10:10	10:11-25:18	26-36
Preparation to enter the land	Wandering in the desert	Preparation to enter the land
Census of the first generation	Death of the first generation	Census of the second generation

The first census counts up the fighting men of the first generation out of Egypt before they set out for the promise land. The second census counts up the fighting men of the second generation after they have arrived in the wilderness of Moab and before they enter the promise land. The text in between, from 10:11 to the end of chapter 25, tells the story of Israel wandering in the wilderness. So, there is a census at the beginning and a census at the end with 40 years of wandering in between. Along with a census, the beginning and ending sections also are mostly laws related to entering the land. There is no death of Israelites recorded in those two sections at the beginning and end. And that's even though there is a major battle after the second census. There must have been death. But no death is mentioned. All the recorded deaths in Numbers occur in that middle section, emphasizing the rebellion of the first generation and the consequence of that rebellion. That point is made after the second census in Numbers 26:63-65.

⁶³ These are those who were numbered by Moses and Eleazar the priest, who numbered the sons of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho. ⁶⁴ But among these there was not a man of those who were numbered by Moses and Aaron the priest, who numbered the sons of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai. ⁶⁵ For the LORD had said of them, "They shall surely die in the wilderness." And not a man was left of them, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun.

The Theological Point of the Census

When you look at the numbers from the first and second census side by side, the numbers remain fairly consistent with a little bit of change. Only Manasseh has a large gain growing from 32,200 to 52,700. And only Simeon has a great loss dropping from 59,300 to 22,200. I am not sure what to

make of the growth of Manasseh, though it does justify half of the tribe settling on the east side of the Jordan and the other half-tribe settling on the west side in Canaan. The loss of numbers in Simeon fits with the prophecy by Jacob in Genesis 49:7 that they would be dispersed and scattered through Israel. We mentioned that before because that prophecy was given to both Simeon and Levi. And Levi is going to be dispersed as the priests. So, they do not have their own inheritance but are dispersed throughout. The census shows that Simeon dropped by more than half. And then once in the promise land, Simeon is going to settle in the midst of Judah and is never referred to again.

Tribe	Reference	Figures	Reference	Figures
Reuben	1:20-21	46,500	26:5-11	43,730
Simeon	1:22-23	59,300	26:12-14	22,200
Gad	1:24-25	45,650	26:15-18	40,500
Judah	1:26-27	74,600	26:19-22	76,500
Issachar	1:28-29	54,400	26:23-25	64,300
Zebulun	1:30-31	57,400	26:26-27	60,500
Ephraim	1:32-33	40,500	26:35-37	32,500
Manasseh	1:34-35	32,200	26:28-34	52,700
Benjamin	1:36-37	35,400	26:38-41	45,600
Dan	1:38-39	62,700	36:42-43	64,400
Asher	1:40-41	41,500	36:44-47	53,400
Naphatali	1:42-43	53,400	26:48-50	45,400
Totals		603,550		601,730
Average		50,296		50,144
High		74,600		76,500
Low		32,200		22,200

The big theological point of the census, however, is in the bottom line. At Sinai, the number of fighting men is recorded at 603,550. After 40 years in the desert, and the dying off of the entire first generation, the number of fighting men has only dropped by only 1800 men, down to 601,730. Remember that the Pentateuch was not written for the first generation out of Egypt. They have all died. Moses wrote the Pentateuch for the second generation. He is giving them the answer to three essential questions: (1) Who is our God? (2) Who are we? (3) What's our mission?

The record of the census speaks this message to this generation of Israelites. "Here is the reality. God rescued your parents out of Egypt. He cut covenant with them at Sinai. He promised to give them the fertile land of Canaan, they got there, and they rebelled. They refused to go in. You are camped now on the wrong side of the Jordan river. What are you going to do? You do not have any more or any less fighting men than they had. Your situation is essentially the exact same as their situation. You have the same opportunity your parents had. But it is not on them any more. It is on you. It is your turn. This is the time for your generation. What are you going to do?"

The book of Numbers leaves that question open. We do not know what this second generation out of Egypt is going to do. And in a sense, it is a question that never ends. Every generation must face the same question. You must face the same question. We must face the question. "This is not written for your fathers. This is written for you. What will you do? Turn away? Or step up in faith?"

Over the next several lessons, we are going to consider the narrative of Numbers and look at some significant passages in that narrative. There is a lot of law in Numbers, more dos and don'ts than we have in either Exodus or Deuteronomy. But mostly we have met our objective for this series in regard to the law. We are not taking a verse by verse walk through the Pentateuch. This is an overview to help equip you in your own understanding and study. So, we will not spend much more time in the law code here in Numbers. The book is a reminder that the legal dos and don'ts of Torah come to us in the context of narrative. We normally think of Numbers as a book of narrative, the wandering of the Israelites. But it has got law all over the place. Mostly in the beginning and end, but even a little in the very middle. The law of Moses is not abstracted out of real-life narrative. The law is embedded in the context of story and God's interaction with his people.

I do want to address one legal issue while we are in Numbers. And I am going to go ahead and do that, since the relevant passage is here among the law code of the first major section of Numbers, which is 1:1-10:10. While discussing the cleanliness code in Leviticus, we recognized that various mosaic laws seem to devalue or even degrade women. We noticed that a woman is unclean longer for the birth of a girl than the birth of the boy. I promised to come back to that problem. So, that's the issue I want to address in this lesson. I have given you a brief overview here of the book of Numbers and the three-part structure. Now we are going to address the question of whether the laws of Moses devalue women. And we are going to start with a very odd text in Numbers 5, then I will address one other text from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus.

How should we view laws that seem to degrade women?

The Adultery Test (Numbers 5:1-31)

Numbers 5:1-31 is quite odd. I am going to read the whole thing because I want you to listen and allow yourself to respond to the text, emotionally, rationally, whatever. Don't try to spiritualize it. Just take it in as a law of society. This is Numbers 5:1-31.

¹¹ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹² "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'If any man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him, ¹³ and a man has intercourse with her and it is hidden from the eyes of her husband and she is undetected, although she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her and she has not been caught in the act, ¹⁴ if a spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife when she has defiled herself, or if a spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife when she has not defiled herself, ¹⁵ the man shall then bring his wife to the priest, and shall bring *as* an offering for her one-tenth of an ephah of barley meal; he shall not pour oil on it nor put frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of memorial, a reminder of iniquity. ¹⁶ 'Then the priest shall bring her near and have her stand before the LORD, ¹⁷ and the priest shall take holy water in an earthenware vessel; and he shall take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put *it* into the water. ¹⁸ 'The priest shall then have the woman stand before the LORD and let *the hair of* the woman's head go loose, and place the grain offering of memorial in her hands, which is the grain offering of jealousy, and in the hand of the priest is to be the water of bitterness that brings a curse. ¹⁹ 'The priest shall have her take an oath and shall say to the woman, "If no man has lain with you and if you have not gone astray into uncleanness, *being* under *the authority of* your husband, be immune to this water of bitterness that brings a curse; ²⁰ if you, however, have gone astray, *being* under *the authority of* your husband, and if you have defiled yourself and a man other than your husband has had intercourse with you" ²¹ (then the priest shall have the woman swear with the oath of the curse, and the priest shall say to the woman), "the LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people by the LORD'S making your thigh waste away and your abdomen swell; ²² and this water that brings a curse shall go into your stomach, and make your abdomen swell and your thigh waste away." And the woman shall say, "Amen. Amen." ²³ 'The priest shall then write these curses on a scroll, and he shall wash them off into the water of bitterness. ²⁴ 'Then he shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings a curse, so that the water which brings a curse will go

into her and *cause* bitterness. ²⁵ 'The priest shall take the grain offering of jealousy from the woman's hand, and he shall wave the grain offering before the LORD and bring it to the altar; ²⁶ and the priest shall take a handful of the grain offering as its memorial offering and offer *it* up in smoke on the altar, and afterward he shall make the woman drink the water. ²⁷ 'When he has made her drink the water, then it shall come about, if she has defiled herself and has been unfaithful to her husband, that the water which brings a curse will go into her and *cause* bitterness, and her abdomen will swell and her thigh will waste away, and the woman will become a curse among her people. ²⁸ 'But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, she will then be free and conceive children. 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 will be free from guilt, but that woman shall bear her guilt.'"

What's your response to this law? How does it make you feel? I generally get two responses from students. One, this is a really strange ritual, almost like magic. Two, it is really unfair to women. If the husband is jealous, why does the woman have to be put through all of that humiliation just to satisfy his suspicions? And what about the man? What is the woman is jealous? Why is there only a law making the woman go through a ceremony and not the man?

Old Testament law was written into a very different culture. One of the purposes of law was to mitigate the damage of sin in society while promoting basic order. And as we saw in a previous lesson, with the certificate of divorce, some of the laws are given not to express God's desired will for human relationships, but to minimize the effects of hard hearts. And it may be that some of the laws which seem to dishonor women were actually there to protect women. I think that is the case with this adultery test.

Let's think about what the situation in ancient Israel might have been like. What happens if a man becomes jealous of his wife, convinced she is unfaithful? In an ancient culture, the man is convinced his wife is committing adultery, what might be the result? Well, if it stands on the testimony of the one man alone, she might be executed. Or if she has a child, the jealous husband could deny that child's legitimacy, labelling the child a bastard. What law exists to protect the public reputation of a woman suspected by her husband.

The case here of a woman performing a ritual and then God being called to punish her has some similarity to the ancient idea of trial by ordeal. The Law of Hammurabi from 18th century Babylonian employs trial by ordeal. Here are a couple of excerpts from the Law of Hammurabi. The first sets up the idea. The second applies the idea to adultery.

If anyone bring an accusation against a man, and the accused go to the river and leap into the river, if he sink in the river his accuser shall take possession of his house. But if the river prove that the accused is not guilty, and he escape unhurt, then he who had brought the accusation shall be put to death, while he who leaped into the river shall take possession of the house that had belonged to his accuser (Hammurabi's code, paragraph 2)

It is really important to know that swimming was not a skill recognized and taught in the ancient world. Ancient Near Eastern people had a great fear of the water because they didn't know how to swim. In this law, the person who jumps in the river is expected to drown. If they do, the river god has judged them guilty. If they somehow live, then the river god has saved them, proving their innocence.

Here is the part that applies to adultery.

If the "finger is pointed" at a man's wife about another man, but she is not caught sleeping with the other man, she shall jump into the river for her husband. (Hammurabi's code, paragraph 132).

If the “finger is pointed” means a wife has been accused and that wife is expected to jump into the river. Does not sound so bad until we realize that Ancient Near Eastern wives could not swim. What is the expected result of the woman who jumps in the river for her husband? Well, she is going to drown. Imagine jumping in a river never having learned to swim. And that’s the Old Babylonian test for adultery.

Now, when we go back to the test in the Numbers 5, what does the woman have to do and what is the expected result? Some dirt from the tabernacle floor is mixed with holy water along with the ink used to write out the curse, and then the woman drinks it. What do we expect to happen? Absolutely nothing. This should have no affect at all. Drinking a little dirt and ink is not going to have any effect, much less make your abdomen swell and thigh waste away. The Babylonian code assumes guilt unless miraculously proven innocent. The Hebrew code assumes innocence unless miraculously proven guilty.

Now let’s consider again the reality of honor and shame. This would be a shameful ritual for the woman to have to go through. But in the end, she is, in all likelihood, going to be publicly justified. Her honor is restored by the ritual. The man, on the other hand, is going to be publicly shamed. He has voluntarily admitted that he thinks his wife has gone to another man. That is pretty shameful. But then, after the ritual, he is going to be shown in public to have been wrong and to have exposed his wife to a shame she did not deserve. And that is going to be even more shameful for him.

One student commented how unfair this law is. The man could bring her again and again before the priest anytime he feels jealous. First, if the priests are decent men at all, I do not think they would let a man continue to subject his wife to this ceremony again and again when she is again and again proven innocent. Second, the ceremony shames the man. So, I do not see this happening whether the priests allow it or not. You do not do this over and over. You don’t want that kind of public shame. Third, yes, it is unfair. Yes, it is certainly unfair that a decent woman has her character questioned and must then go through a public ritual. Law is often dealing with the unfair and the unjust, struggling to minimize the effect of sin in already broken human relationships. The law is not going to fix this broken relationship. It is only minimizing the effect on the woman.

I do not think that this law is teaching the high moral standard of what God desires for his people. God desires for husbands and wives that they join together as one flesh and walk together in love, respect, trust, and mutual forgiveness. But people are sinful, and relationships are often dysfunctional. So, some of the laws exist to mitigate the damage of that dysfunction, of that sin. A truly righteous person would act according to a much higher standard. Think of Joseph. Mary was pregnant. He was one of two people absolutely sure that he was not the father. He had never slept with Mary. Her infidelity was clear to any sane man. But he did not bring her up on public charges for breaking the betrothal. He did not accuse her before the priests. He did not ask for some kind of ritual to be performed. He was not yet married, so he simply sought a quiet end to the engagement. That is the behavior of a righteous man. He shows his character further when Gabriel tells him that Mary is still a virgin who is miraculously pregnant. He believes God and goes ahead with the marriage, even though the pregnancy is proof to everyone that Joseph must have slept with Mary before marriage. He takes the shame on himself. So, with this law in Numbers, we are not looking at it as the right course of action for a righteous man to follow. It is not that kind of law. It is a law mitigating sin in society. What is the point of the law?

The language of this law is stated from the man’s perspective and comes across as being against the woman. But I think, in reality, this law exists to protect that woman who is in a very difficult situation. If she is required to go through the ceremony, then she has public and legal proof that she did not commit adultery. Unless something strange happens and her abdomen swells and her thigh wastes away. If what we expect to happen happens then she has proof that she is not an adulterer. And there is no reason to believe that she is not going to be justified through the ritual. The outcome of the law is completely in her favor. The protection afforded by the law applies to her and also to the

status of a child born at the time of the accusation. Legally, she has been publicly justified and any child has been publicly proven to belong to the father. The child is legally legitimate.

Culture matters a lot when we look into these laws. Let's consider next the law. It is the one I have been using as an example that one of the functions of law is to provide a legal code that mitigates the effects of evil in society. This is the law quoted to Jesus by the Pharisees, regarding a certificate of divorce. It is in Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

The Certificate of Divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)

¹ "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts *it* in her hand and sends her out from his house, ² and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's *wife*, ³ and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts *it* in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, ⁴ *then* her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.

The focus of this law is not on the certificate of divorce. This is case law that assumes a certificate of divorce and it focuses on a particular question about divorce. If a woman is divorced from one man, and then remarries, if she is again divorced or her husband dies, can she remarry her first husband? The answer is, "No." This law answers a specific question, but in doing so raises a number of other questions that are not addressed in the Torah. It is another reminder of how little law we are given in the Pentateuch. Whereas modern society may have a whole book on divorce law or books on divorce law, the Torah only has a few verses. It is not enough to put into practice. Other decisions have to be made. The leaders of Israel would have to fill in the law in order to put it into practice.

For example, under what circumstances could a husband write a certificate of divorce? We are not told. This was the ongoing debate the Pharisees tried to draw Jesus into. A group of Pharisees argued that anything the husband defined as indecent was justification for a certificate of divorce. If he didn't like the way she cooked dinner that was indecent, and she could be given a certificate of divorce. Another group of Pharisees argued that there must be some proof of something legally defined as indecent. Jesus indicates that the law was not given to make divorce easy. So, I assume that the second group was right, that the intent of God was not that a man could easily dismiss his wife. She must truly have committed indecency according to the law of Moses. If she was found to have lied about being a virgin when she got married or if she failed the adultery test or some proof of indecency could be shown, then a certificate of divorce could be granted. It wasn't required. A righteous man might not write out a certificate of divorce. But if that kind of indecency was shown to be true then it could be granted. And that's the kind of argumentation that would have to happen in order for leaders of Israel to apply this law. They have to fill out the law, according to what is not actually written or explained in Torah. The text does not say what the requirements must be, so we leave that up to the elders and priests and judges to determine. They have to fill out what God has not provided.

This is a case law about whether a woman can remarry her previous husband in the event that she has already been given a certificate of divorce. The answer is clear, "No, she cannot." And the reason is not given. And I am not sure exactly what the reason is. There is an issue of that being some kind of defilement. There seems to be a moral issue. There may also be other issues. I am right now teaching a course for a church in Zagreb that has a great ministry to asylum seekers from the Middle East. It just dawned on me recently one night as I was teaching Old Testament, I was teaching the Old Testament to two Persians, an Assyrian, and an Egyptian. Talk about biblical. They affirmed to me that some Muslim cultures in the Middle East allow a man to divorce his wife, simply by repeating three times, "I divorce you. I divorce you. I divorce you." There is no going before a judge. No

certificate necessary. You do not need to involve the priest. I have been told that this law has been abused for the sake of sex and money. If a man divorces his wife and goes on a long trip, say, on a pilgrimage to a different country and has sex with a woman on the trip, then he is technically not committing adultery. Maybe it is sin, but it is not that bad sin, according to the custom. And when he returns home, he can remarry his wife. So, a man could also divorce his wife for purposes of taxes or inheritance or dowry, if there is some reason it is going to work out better if the wife is divorced. And then he can remarry her after the matter is settled in his favor. So, there is this potential of abuse of easily divorcing. And this law is preventing using easy divorce as a loophole to get out of other laws.

Purification Period After Birth (Leviticus 12:1-8)

Our third text is in Leviticus, so let's go back to the ceremonial law regarding a woman after birth. In Leviticus, we touched on the symbolism. The mother is not spiritually unclean when she gives birth. She is only symbolically unclean. And that was true anytime a man or woman came into contact with blood. And it fit with the sacredness of things associated with birth and with death. So, then there was a ritual, a simple ritual to go through to become clean again. And I also suggested that there was a benefit for the woman being declared ritually unclean after birth which resulted in an enforced period of convalescence at home. She had to be home a month. She was required to not go out and work and to not join in with communal worship. And that helps us when we think about this law in general that maybe there was a benefit in the woman being declared ceremonially unclean. It is not shameful to be declared unclean after birth. There is great honor in giving birth. It is a ceremonial issue. But why the difference between the birth of a son and the birth of a daughter? Here is that section in Leviticus 12:1-5.

¹ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Speak to the sons of Israel, saying: 'When a woman gives birth and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean for seven days, as in the days of her menstruation she shall be unclean. ³ 'On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. ⁴ Then she shall remain in the blood of her purification for thirty-three days; she shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor enter the sanctuary until the days of her purification are completed. ⁵ But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean for two weeks, as in her menstruation; and she shall remain in the blood of her purification for sixty-six days.' "

Again, I do not know the full reasoning. I am just wondering whether there is any cultural explanation. One thought has come to mind regarding female circumcision. The law requires circumcision of the boy and then adds extra days for the baby girl that covers the lack of circumcision for the girl. I mean, with a boy cleanliness came after one week and then circumcision and then 33 days. If cleanliness came after a week and 33 days for the girl then something is missing because the boy also has circumcision. But instead of circumcision for the girl, cleanliness comes by doubling the period. She has two weeks at the beginning and then 66 days. So, the extra days for the girl are in place of being circumcised.

While the argument can be made that male circumcision has positive health benefits and certainly does not have any significant negative effects, female circumcision is painful, medically dangerous, and leads to lasting negative effects. And again, my Middle Eastern friends in my class affirmed to me that there are Muslim cultures today that still practice female circumcision. We do not have examples all the way back to the days of Moses, but we do have examples going back to approaching the time of Moses. There are cultures, there were then, there are now, that practice this awful ritual of female circumcision. Israelites never practiced female circumcision. I believe this law is one of the reasons why. It is clear here that something else must be provided in place of circumcision for the baby girl. Circumcision is not an option. Instead the time period is doubled. I do not think this law is meant to devalue girls. I think it is intended to make the two cases basically equal. The male has circumcision plus a period of time. But the female has no circumcision but two periods of time.

These three passages provide test cases on how to interpret mosaic laws that seem to devalue women. There are other challenging passages. I will leave those for you to observe and to consider.

The Old Testament is rough and real. It confronts sin head on in real society. And much of it we readily relate to. We see ourselves, good and bad, in the characters of the Bible. We see our own culture in the laws required. It is amazing how much still applies to us 3000 years, more than 3000 years later. But then, much of it is strange and disturbing. It doesn't fit or apply to our culture. And we don't understand what the point is. The last thing we want to do is just whitewash the Bible, to cover over the rough spots and act as though it is not even there. On the other hand, for those of us who believe in Christ, we also accept his claim that he came to fulfill the law. Christ's followers declared the law of Moses to be holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12). They did not do away with it because it was unjust. God did away with it because something better had come in Christ, a new wine skin, a new covenant. But looking back

But looking back at the law's teaching in regard to woman, I keep two basic principles in mind. First, God established the equal worth and dignity of men and women in the very first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1:27, when he declared humankind to be created in his image, male and female he created them. Second, the Mosaic law is holy, righteous, and good. And some passages bring these two principles into tension. How can it be holy, righteous, and good? This doesn't look like there is equality or equal valuing. Those are challenging verses. So, I proceed on certain assumptions. I recommend these to you. When reading passages that seem to devalue women:

Assume that cultural realities you do not understand may be involved.

Assume the laws are for a society in which women were at considerably more risk than your modern society.

Consider whether the particular law exists as part of the civil law meant to mitigate sin in a hardened, sinful society.

Consider whether other principles exist in the Torah that call believers to a higher standard of behavior than that which is required by the civil code.

Do not whitewash the Bible. Let the rough parts stand whether you understand them or not.

Do not speak mockingly or skeptically about something you may not yet fully understand in the Word of God. It is still the Word of God.

We are going to trouble over some texts for years. We can't live with them, and we can't live without them. We may never get them. We may never become comfortable with them. We entrust them by faith to God.

Inheritance to daughters (Numbers 27:1-11)

In conclusion, I'd like to mention one more example. Along with laws that seem to devalue women, there are also texts that show the equality of women in the eyes of God. Looking back at the book of Numbers as a three-part work, the first part and last part are marked off by the two censuses of the two generations. These two parts mostly contain law code, regarding entry into the promise land. The passage on the adultery test came in chapter 5. That's in the first major section of Numbers. The laws in the last major section of Numbers are marked off by a question about inheritance for women. That question is addressed at the beginning of that law code in Numbers 27 and then again at the law code in Numbers 36.

This is the context. In the tribe of Manasseh, there was a man named Zelophehad. And Zelophehad was of that first generation out of Egypt. He died along with all the members of his generation. He had no sons, but he did have five daughters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. These daughters come to Moses with a concern. This is Numbers 27:4.

"Why should the name of our father be withdrawn from among his family because he had no son? Give us a possession among our father's brothers."

What do you think Moses said back to these women? "Why do you speak among the men, you greedy women. Get back in your tents."

No. Moses accepted the complaint as something to look into. The law so far given by God does not say anything about this question. So, Moses goes to God. Something similar had happened earlier and was recorded in the first major section of Numbers. Some Israelites who were unclean during the Passover could not celebrate it. They want to know if it is okay if they celebrated the Passover on a different day. And like the daughters of Zelophehad, they came to Moses with a complaint, asking for clarification. And Moses did not presume to answer himself, but said, "Wait, and I will listen to what the LORD will command (Numbers 9:8)." These two examples fit with what we have been saying about the Law. It does not answer every question. These two cases also indicate to the leaders of Israel how to go about answering the unanswered questions. They are to seek wisdom from God in prayer. Just as Moses went to God in the earlier case back in chapter 9, we see the same thing here in 27:5. It says, "Moses brought their case before the LORD." That is the case of the daughters of Zelophehad.

So, what do you think God said about these daughters who want to claim the inheritance of their father? This is Numbers 27:6-8.

⁶ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ⁷ "The daughters of Zelophehad are right in their statements. You shall surely give them a hereditary possession among their father's brothers, and you shall transfer the inheritance of their father to them. ⁸ Further, you shall speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'If a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter.'"

God hears their request and grants them inheritance. God values the daughters of his Israel. To accurately understand God's perspective of women in the Torah, we can't just look at the problematic verses. We need to look at those tough passages. We also need to look at other passages like this one that show God's positive valuing of women. God does not say, "Honor your father." But that would have been perfectly fine in the ancient world. That would have been all they expected. Nobody expects anything more. But that is not the command we get from God. "Honor your father and mother," that's the command of God. The mothers of Israel are to be honored. The book of numbers is issuing a challenge to the current generation. And it is not just a challenge to the men. It is a challenge to the entire generation, to the mothers and fathers, to the sons and the daughters. Are you going to step up in faith? Genesis 1 and 2 present Adam and Eve as a partners. They are both commissioned together, to multiply together, to rule together, and to display the image of God together.

Reflection Questions

1. Choose one of the examples used in this lesson of texts from the Torah that could seem to communicate a prejudice against women. Observe the text closely. What do you see?

- a. The Adultery Text (Numbers 5:1-31)
- b. The Certificate of Divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)
- c. Purification Period after Birth (Leviticus 12:1-8)
- d. Inheritance for Daughters (Numbers 27:1-11)

2. The objective of this lesson is not to argue that Ancient Near Eastern society and Jewish society were not prejudice against women. From the writings we have, the various societies of the Ancient Near East were certainly prejudice against women. The objective here is to evaluate how that prejudice comes out in the biblical text and how it is addressed by God. In observing the above examples, what do you see that suggests the cultures of the time were oppressive or prejudice against women?

3. What other texts come to mind that you could include in the above lists of examples?

4. Observe Leviticus 27:1-13. What stands out to you? How could this text be taken as devaluing women? What might be a possible reason for lower amounts placed on a female that would not include a lesser value of a woman as a person?
5. Observe Genesis 1:27-28. How do you understand these laws in light of that declaration of equality for male and female?
6. Observe Matthew 19:3-10. How does Jesus' comments about the law being given to minimize the hardness of heart help you to understand these various passages? Do you agree that some laws in Torah are not given to promote God's highest standard of holiness but rather as a low civil standard to mitigate the effects caused by the sin of people? If you do not agree with this view, what is your view? How do you understand the hardness of heart comment by Jesus?
7. At the bottom of page 7, there is a recommended list of things to consider when reading passages that seem to devalue women. Does that list seem helpful? What would you remove from the list or change or add?