

**Adultery: A Christian Ethical Analysis**  
**Dr. J. Alan Branch**

One of the most talked-about films of 1993 was *Indecent Proposal*. Starring Robert Redford, Demi Moore, and Woody Harrelson, the plot surrounded a young married couple who was offered a way out of bankruptcy by a handsome, middle-aged billionaire (Robert Redford). What was his indecent proposal? That the young wife (Demi Moore) spend one night alone with him—in return for a cool million. The film’s proposal was probably termed “indecent” not because it involved adultery, but because it involved money. But the true indecency of such a proposal is that it cheapens a beautiful gift of God -- sexual intimacy -- and undermines the institution meant to be its home: marriage.

In popular culture, adultery is celebrated as fun and enjoyable, as the following three country songs illustrate:

Mel Tillis – “Send Me Down to Tucson” (1979)

There's been no other woman since the mother of my children  
And in each and every way she's a lady  
Now there's one that I'll remember a sultry night we spent together  
And she satisfied the love inside of me

Go on and send me down to Tucson and I'll get the job done  
And call up the one whose love is free  
She may be easy and I love my lady [his wife]  
But the lady don't satisfy the love inside of me

Reba McEntire “Little Rock”

Well I'm married to the good life  
I said I'd be a good wife  
When I put on this ring  
I drive a new Mercedes  
I play tennis with the ladies  
I buy all the finer things  
But all that don't mean nothing  
When you can't get a good night's loving

Oh little rock [her wedding ring]  
Think I'm gonna have to slip you off

Take a chance tonight and untie the knot  
There's more to life than what I've got  
Oh little rock  
You know this heart of mine just can't be bought  
I'm gonna find someone who really cares a lot  
When I slip off this little rock

Toby Keith -- "What Happens in Mexico"

## I. Introduction

### A. Definition

Adultery defined: "The act of sexual intercourse between a person who is married and someone who is not one's marriage partner."<sup>1</sup> If you are married and you have sex with anyone else besides your spouse, it is adultery. If you are single, and you have sex with someone who is married to someone else, you as the single person have also committed the sin of adultery. Biblically, the larger category is *porneia* or sexual immorality, and adultery is a specific form of sexual immorality. Jesus clearly teaches that adultery begins with sexual fantasies (Matthew 5:27 – 30). H. A. Virkler attempts to differentiate between "adultery" and an "Affair." He says:

In an affair a married person begins to allow someone other than his or her spouse to meet emotional and eventually sexual needs that should be met by one's spouse. An affair is not synonymous with adultery (i.e., a sexual relationship with someone other than one's spouse), for people can commit adultery without developing an emotional relationship (e.g., a sexual encounter with a prostitute), and the early stages of many affairs do not include adultery.<sup>2</sup>

I think it is more accurate to say that all affairs are adulterous in nature. An affair is a subcategory of adultery indicating a more deep relationship with someone other than your spouse.

Frank Pittman says, "So when a man asks me whether something is or is not an infidelity, I suggest that he ask his wife. When a woman asks me if she has done

---

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>2</sup> H. A. Virkler, "Affairs," in *The Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology & Counseling*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 53.

something wrong in a certain situation, I reply that if she kept it a secret from her husband, she might think so.”<sup>3</sup>

As our nation becomes more promiscuous, the sin of adultery feeds on itself. Writing in 1989, Psychiatrist Frank Pittman said, “Quite obviously, people who grew up in families in which the adults had affairs are more likely to see this as normal behavior and do it for themselves.”<sup>4</sup>

## **B. Adultery in the Ancient World**

### 1. Adultery in the Ancient Near East

ANE law codes addressing adultery include the Laws of Ur-Nammu, the Laws of Eshnunna, the Code of Hammurabi, Hittite laws, and Assyrian laws.<sup>5</sup> The Laws of Ur-Nammu (circa 2112 – 2095 BC) address adultery at the following places:

(Lines 222 – 231) If the wife of a man, *by employing her charms*, followed after another man and he slept with her, they (i.e., the authorities) shall slay that woman, but the male (i.e., the other man) shall be set free.

(Lines 232 – 239) If a man proceeded by force, and deflowered the virgin (lit.: “un-deflowered”) slave-woman of another man, that man must pay five shekels of silver.

(Lines 240 – 244) If a man divorces his primary wife, he must pay (her) one mina of silver.

(Lines 245 – 249) If it is a (former) widow (whom) he divorces, he must pay (her) one-half mina of silver.<sup>6</sup>

The laws of Ur-Nammu also allowed a river ordeal to test one’s guilt or innocence of the charge of adultery (Lines 270 – 290).

---

<sup>3</sup> Frank Pittman, “What Price Camelot? Modern Day Myths of Infidelity,” *The Family Therapy Networker* 13.3 (May/June 1989): 22.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Pittman, “What Price Camelot?” *The Family Therapy Networker* 13.3 (May/June 1989): 24.

<sup>5</sup> No similar law codes have been found in Egypt. Egyptian wisdom literature discussed adultery.

<sup>6</sup> “The Laws of Ur-Nammu,” J.J. Finkelstein, trans., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. with supplement, James B. Pritchard, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 524.

The Laws of the Mesopotamian city of Eshnunna (circa 1885 BC) viewed marriage as a contract between a husband and the bride's parents. Once the contract was completed and the bride came into the husband's home, she was considered his wife. If the wife was then caught with another man, this law code says, "She shall die, she shall not get away alive."<sup>7</sup> The method of execution is not denoted.

Hammurabi's Code (HC), a Babylonian legal code circa 1792 – 1750 BC, contains 282 separate laws including several references to adultery.<sup>8</sup> Law 129 says, "If the wife of a [man] has been caught while lying with another man, they shall bind them and throw them into the water. If the husband of the woman wishes to spare his wife, then the king in turn may spare his subject."<sup>9</sup> Law 130 demands execution for a man who sexually assaults another man's fiancée. Law 132 says if a husband is suspicious but has not caught his wife committing adultery, then she must undergo an ordeal by water, saying the wife "shall throw herself into the river for the sake of her husband."<sup>10</sup> HC laws 133 – 134 address a husband's extended absence because he was captured in war. If the husband left sufficient funds to support his wife in his absence but she moves in with another man, the wife is to be executed by drowning. However, if the husband did not leave sufficient means to support his wife during his captivity, she was free to take another man.

Hittite and Assyrian laws also addressed adultery. Hittite Law (circa 1650 – 1500 BC) contrasts rape and adultery. A married woman is said to have been raped if the act occurred in the "mountains," but the wife is considered an adulteress if the act occurs "in her house," a place where the wife's consent was assumed.<sup>11</sup> Assyrian law (circa 1075 BC) also penalized adultery with death, but offered said a husband may choose merely to disfigure an adulterous wife by cutting off her nose, in which case the husband must also make her paramour a eunuch.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, "The Laws of Eshnunna," Albrecht Goetze, trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 135.

<sup>8</sup> R. K. Harrison, *Old Testament Times: A Social, Political, and Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 56, 147 – 148.

<sup>9</sup> James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, "The Code of Hammurabi," Theophile J. Meek, trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 152.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>11</sup> Matitiahu Tsevat, "The Husband Veils a Wife, Hittite Laws 197-8," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 27.4 (October 1975): 235; Law 197, "The Code of the Nesilim," *Ancient History Sourcebook*, Fordham University.

<sup>12</sup> Law I.15, "The Code of the Assura," *Ancient History Sourcebook*, Fordham University. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/1075assyriancode.asp>. (Accessed May 29, 2013).

ANE law was fairly uniform concerning adultery. Viewing marriage as a contractual arrangement, a husband was entitled to punish an unfaithful wife and could seek revenge against his wife's lover up to the limit allowed by law.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Greece

While Greek law prohibited either spouse from engaging in sexual relations with any other free-born person, it was perfectly acceptable for the husband to maintain concubines, to keep a mistress and to have sexual access to all the slaves beneath his roof.<sup>14</sup>

## 3. Rome

Roman Law defined adultery in terms of a wife engaging in intercourse with another man. Augustus exiled his own daughter, Julia, for acts of adultery. The entire story is quite convoluted and involves "soap opera" intrigue. It seems that in 12 BC, Augustus' wife Livia was able to convince to favor one of her sons from a previous marriage as the heir to the throne. As part of the agreement, Caesar Augustus forced Tiberius to divorce his own wife in order to marry Augustus's daughter – Julia. Eventually, Julia began indiscreet affairs, publicly engaging in sexual acts, some which involved a number of partners and various sexual activities in the *Forum Romanum* near the rostra and a famous statue of Marsyas.<sup>15</sup> In 2 BC, Julia's father forced her into exile on the island of Pandataria.

The Roman approach to adultery was actually quite conflicting in practice. According to Roman law, a husband who learned his wife was committing adultery was required by law to divorce her or he himself could be prosecuted on the charge of *lenocinium* – which might be loosely translated as "pimping."<sup>16</sup> But practically, adultery was common, as is seen in the shameful affair between Herod Antipas and Herodias.

---

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Westbrook, "Adultery in Ancient Near Eastern Law," *Revue Biblique* 97 (1990):576.

<sup>14</sup> Ken M. Campbell, ed. *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 117.

<sup>15</sup> Beth Severy, *Augustus and the Family at the Birth of the Roman Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 181.

<sup>16</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 588.

## II. Old Testament Law

There are several references to adultery in the Pentateuch. One should remember that these prohibitions occur in the Torah, which begins with the creation account of Genesis 1 & 2 in which heterosexual, monogamous marriage is established as God's standard. The prohibitions of adultery in OT law should be read through the lens of Genesis 1 & 2.

### A. Categorical Prohibitions of Adultery in the Torah / Decalogue

Exodus 20:14: Do not commit adultery. (לֹא תִנְאֻף)

Deuteronomy 5:17: Do not commit adultery. (לֹא תִנְאֻף )

The Hebrew word for adultery is תִּנְאֻף, or *naaph*.

Leviticus 18:20 (HCS): You are not to have sexual intercourse with your neighbor's wife, defiling yourself with her.

In Leviticus 18:20, the phrase translated "have sexual intercourse with" (HCS) is literally "*to give your emission of semen to*" in Hebrew.

Alfred Kinsey claimed the prohibition against adultery was not a moral one, but an aspect of the husband's concern for property rights. Commenting on ANE prohibitions of adultery, including the Bible, Kinsey asserted:

While various issues have been involved, such regulations have been particularly concerned with the property rights which the male has had in his wife, and there is no question that the extra-marital activities of the female became objects of concern in such early codes as the Babylonian, Hittite, Assyrian, Jewish (Bible, Talmud), and others, because of these property rights, rather than because moral issues were recognized."<sup>17</sup>

This quote again demonstrates either Kinsey's fundamental ignorance of the meaning of the Biblical text in its own context or his persistent ability to find ways to sidestep the plain meaning of the text in order to support his own sexually libertine ethic.

---

<sup>17</sup> Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Company, 1948), 583.

## **B. The Adulterer is “cut off”**

Leviticus 18:29 – 30 (NASB): For whoever does any of these abominations, those persons who do *so* shall be cut off from among their people. Thus you are to keep My charge, that you do not practice any of the abominable customs which have been practiced before you, so as not to defile yourselves with them; I am the LORD your God.

Along with the people guilty of various forms of sexual immorality included in Leviticus 18, adulterers are to be “cut off.” The phrase “cut off” apparently means they are excluded from the community of worship.

## **C. Death Penalty for Adultery**

Leviticus 20:10 (HCS): If a man commits adultery with a married woman—if he commits adultery with his neighbor’s wife—both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.

Deuteronomy 22:22 – 24 (HCS): <sup>22</sup>“If a man is discovered having sexual relations with another man’s wife, both the man who had sex with the woman and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel. <sup>23</sup>If there is a young woman who is a virgin engaged to a man, and another man encounters her in the city and has sex with her, <sup>24</sup>you must take the two of them out to the gate of that city and stone them to death—the young woman because she did not cry out in the city and the man because he has violated his neighbor’s fiancée. You must purge the evil from you.

In both passages, the perpetrators are caught *in flagrante delicto* (a Latin phrase meaning “while the crime is blazing”).

Leviticus 20:10 commands the death penalty for a married woman who commits adultery.

Leviticus 20:10 commands the death penalty for a man who commits adultery with a married woman.

Deuteronomy 22:22 – 24 commands that a married woman who commits adultery should be stoned to death.

Deuteronomy 22:22 – 24 commands that a man who commits adultery with another man’s wife must be stoned to death.

Deuteronomy 22:22 – 24 commands that a betrothed woman who has sex with another man has committed adultery and must be stoned to death.

Deuteronomy 22:22 – 24 commands that a man that has sex with a woman betrothed to another man must be stoned to death.

There is no record of anyone actually being put to death for adultery in the Old Testament. This may be because the OT law called for two witnesses in capital cases:

Deuteronomy 17:6 (HCS): The one condemned to die is to be executed on the testimony of two or three witnesses. No one is to be executed on the testimony of a single witness.

The commands for the death penalty in cases of adultery illustrates the degree of disapproval God has for adultery.

#### **D. “Death Penalty” vs. “Cut Off”**

Leviticus 18:29 says adulterers should be excluded from worship while Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22 – 24 call for the death penalty. How do we resolve this seeming contradiction?

Peggy Day says, “There is a serious scholarly debate over whether death was the mandatory punishment for adultery or whether the aggrieved husband had other options.” But she quickly adds “no one in the debate denies that the death penalty *could* be imposed.”<sup>18</sup>

#### 1. The Documentary Hypothesis

In an extensive discussion of adultery in the OT, Anthony Phillips assumes the interpretive grid of the Documentary Hypothesis. As such, he sees Deuteronomy as coming from sometime around 650BC or later. He claims the Deuteronomic reforms added execution for the adulteress. Furthermore, he sees Leviticus 18 & 20 as being arranged as comprehensive lists of sexual crimes for

---

<sup>18</sup> Peggy Day, “Adulterous Jerusalem’s Imagined Demise: Death of a Metaphor in Ezekiel XVI,” *Vetus Testamentum* 50.3 (July 2000): 303 – 304.



the post-exilic period (He believes Leviticus was written after the exile.) Phillips says, “Leviticus 20:10ff indicates that such [sexual relations] originally required the exaction of the death penalty. But in the changed situation of the post-exilic period this requirement is replaced by excommunication from the cult community [Leviticus 18:29].”<sup>19</sup> Moving beyond his speculative interpretation of the origins of the Torah, Phillips does make an interesting observation about the difference between laws against adultery in the OT as opposed to other ANE codes. Phillips argues the law concerning adultery in Israel was unique in the Ancient Near East because in Israel adultery was treated as a crime and not as a civil offence (as elsewhere). Phillips says, “The husband could neither pardon the criminal(s), take any private act of revenge, nor settle the damages, since adultery was a crime and not a civil offence for which damages would properly be paid.”<sup>20</sup>

The Documentary Hypothesis is hopelessly flawed, but Phillips does make an interesting observation.

## 2. Liberal Claim: A Remnant of Tribal Laws

Robert Gordis (1908 – 1992), one of the leading Conservative Rabbis in America, asserted that the death penalty for adultery was a remnant of the Hebrews’ nomadic past. Gordis said:

One of the most striking differences between Biblical and Mesopotamian law occurs with regard to the offense of adultery. While the Torah requires the death penalty for both partners in this case (Lev. 18:20, Lev. 20:10, Deut. 22:23), Mesopotamian law allows to the husband the option of sparing his wife’s life (Hammurabi Code par. 129; Assyrian Code, Part A I. Par. 14 – 16; Hittite Code par:198).<sup>21</sup>

Gordis went on to explain this difference by saying, “The Biblical law on adultery was closer to that of the early nomadic, semi-nomadic and rural societies from which Hebrew civilization emerged. Hence, it preserved the stricter and more uncompromising moral standards of this earlier stage. Babylonian, Assyrian and Hittite law reflected the more advanced standards of a society considerably more urbanized.”<sup>22</sup> Gordis then posits a more restrained approach to punishing adultery

---

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Phillips, “Another Look at Adultery,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 20 (July 1981): 18.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Gordis, “On Adultery in Biblical and Babylonian Law – A Note,” *Judaism* 33.2 (Spring 1984): 210.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

took shape at a later time during the writing of the Hebrew Wisdom literature and Hebrew prophets. He then suggests the Torah offers the upper limit of punishment. Gordis's theory assumes an evolutionary development of Hebrew religion and rejects the idea that God actually spoke from Mount Sinai. His theory is hopelessly flawed.

### **III. Adultery and Jealousy – Numbers 5**

Numbers 5 is a passage of Scripture that has been the source of much debate and criticism from feminists or from those critical of the Bible in general. Because it is often misunderstood, I will give it a more detailed treatment than the other passages in the Law. Numbers 5:11 – 31 is the most challenging passage regarding adultery in the Bible. Sometimes this is referred to as the “Sotah.” The term “Sotah” itself is not found in the Hebrew Bible but is a Mishnaic Hebrew term based on the phrase “if she has strayed” (verb: שָׁטָה) in Numbers 5:12.

#### **A. Components of the Sotah**

It is trial by ordeal and has several components.

1. Numbers 5:11 – 14: The ordeal is for cases when a husband suspects adultery, but cannot prove it. He has a “spirit of jealousy.” The word “spirit” here has the idea of attitude, mood, or feelings. He suspects something.
2. Numbers 5:15: The husband is supposed to take his wife to the priest. Notice, he is not allowed to attack or stone his wife just because he feels jealous. He must take her to the priest. They are also to bring a grain offering.
3. Numbers 5:16 – 18: The priest brings the accused wife “before the LORD.” The important point here is that she is being judged by God, not just the whims of her husband in a bad mood. The priest prepares a “bitter water” for her to drink. The priest took holy water and mixed dust from the tabernacle floor in it. The “holy water” was probably taken from the large bronze basin in the courtyard.
4. Numbers 5:19 – 23: The priest reads a curse. He writes the curses on a scroll, and then scrapes them off of the scroll in the bitter water. The scrapings should dissolve in the water.
5. Numbers 5:24 – 26: The woman drinks the water while the priest presents her grain offering.

6. Numbers 5:27: If she is guilty, her “belly will swell” and her “thigh will rot.” Some suggest these terms are figurative and mean she will be barren or have a miscarriage. The text does not indicate how long it should take for this effect to present itself.

7. Numbers 5:28: If she is innocent, she shall be able to conceive.

The *NET Bible* comments on Numbers 5 and says:

This ancient ritual seems to have functioned like a lie detector test, with all the stress and tension involved. It can be compared to water tests in the pagan world, with the exception that Israel it was stacked more toward an innocent verdict. It seems to have been a temporary provision, for this is the only place that it appears, and no provision is made for its use later. It may have served as a didactic force, warning more than actually legislating. No provision is made in it for a similar charge to be brought against the man, but in the case of the suspicion of the woman the man would be very hesitant to demand this test given the harshness on false witnessing in Israel. The passage remains a rather strange section of the Law.<sup>23</sup>

## **B. ANE Parallels**

Hammurabi’s Code (HC), a Babylonian legal code circa 1792 – 1750 BC, contains 282 separate laws including several references to adultery.<sup>24</sup> Law 129 says, “If the wife of a [man] has been caught while lying with another man, they shall bind them and throw them into the water. If the husband of the woman wishes to spare his wife, then the king in turn may spare his subject.”<sup>25</sup> Law 130 demands execution for a man who sexually assaults another man’s fiancée. Law 132 says if a husband is suspicious but has not caught his wife committing adultery, then she must undergo an ordeal by water, saying the wife “shall throw herself into the river for the sake of her husband.”<sup>26</sup> HC laws 133 – 134 address a husband’s extended absence because he was captured in war. If the husband left sufficient funds to support his wife in his absence but she moves in with another man, the wife is to be executed by drowning. However, if the husband did not

---

<sup>23</sup> *The NET Bible*. Electronic resource available at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org). (Accessed September 13, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> R. K. Harrison, *Old Testament Times: A Social, Political, and Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 65.

<sup>25</sup> James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, “The Code of Hammurabi,” Theophile J. Meek, trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 152.

<sup>26</sup> James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, 152.

leave sufficient means to support his wife during his captivity, she was free take another man.

Jacob Milgrom, believes that for this instance biblical law (Numbers 5) adopted a foreign pagan institution in order to save women from public lynching, which was the probable fate of a woman with a reputation as an adulteress.

### **C. Later Abuses**

Especially the Middle Ages – trial by ordeal became very violent and deadly. Some examples include:

Trial by Cold Water: The accused would drink a sip of holy water and then be thrown into a pool of cold water. If she floated to the top that meant the water rejected the defendant and he or she was guilty. If she sank in the water, then the water accepted her and she was considered not guilty. They may not have let her drown in this case.

Trial by Hot Water: Court officials would heat a laundry cauldron to the boiling point and a stone was thrown into the cauldron, sinking to the bottom. The plaintiff then had to pluck out the stone to prove his innocence. In serious cases, she must plunge in her arm up to the elbow.

As noted in the reference to the Code of Hammurabi, outside of the Bible, other sources mention ordeals something similar to the one in Numbers 5. Some claim a trial by red water among West Africans somewhat accords with the Mosaic institution.

### **D. Numbers 5 and Abortion?**

Some propose that Numbers 5:11 - 31 refers to God causing an abortion, such as *A Prochoice Bible Study*, published by *Episcopalians for Religious Freedom*.<sup>27</sup> They cite the *New English Bible's* peculiar translation, which makes it sound as if God brings a miscarriage on a woman if she is unfaithful to her husband. Other translations refer to a wasting of the thigh and swelling of her abdomen, but do not take it to mean pregnancy, which would presumably simply be called that directly if it were in mind.

---

<sup>27</sup> *A Prochoice Bible Study* (Seattle, Washington: Episcopalians for Religious Freedom, 1989).

This is clearly not what the passage is talking about. Pregnancy is nowhere mentioned, or even hinted at, in the text. The only thing that even sounds like pregnancy is the guilty wife's stomach becoming bloated, but even in that instance, it has nothing to do with pregnancy. Further, the passage does not say that drinking the concoction would cause an abortion/miscarriage. While drinking a poisonous mixture of ingredients could very well cause a miscarriage, the potion is not poisonous and could not possibly have an abortifacient effect. The text here is not speaking of miscarriage or abortion.

The *Prochoice Bible Study* that cites the *NEB's* unique translation suggests if God indeed causes miscarriage, it would therefore be an endorsement of people causing abortions. This is specious reasoning, since neither the wife, husband, nor priest made the decision to induce an abortion, nor would they have the right to do so. The passage does not seem to refer to a miscarriage at all; but even if it did, there is a certainly nothing to suggest any endorsement of human beings initiating an abortion.

## **E. Evaluation**

So, what are we to make of this ordeal in Numbers 5?

First, in contrast to other ANE codes, Numbers 5:11 – 31 protects an innocent wife from an irrationally jealous husband. The potential danger to the woman seems rather slim, especially in contrast to ANE codes which called for a suspected adulteress to be thrown into a river. The real judge in Numbers 5:11 – 31 is God Himself.

Second, the emphasis on this passage is to protect an innocent woman from an unfounded charge of “adultery” by a husband who is irrationally jealous. The purpose here is to prevent a childish, self-centered charge of marital unfaithfulness. This text (Numbers 5) was not to be used as a pretext by a capricious, petty, or malevolent husband to badger a good woman.

Third, the contents of bitter water were completely harmless. Therefore, the only way a woman could become sick from drinking them is by a miracle of God! The entire ceremony is weighted towards a judgment of “innocent”.

Fourth, because the use of ordeals in cultures outside the Bible and in the later middle ages were so terrible, many see this passage in the same horrible light. But

there is a significant difference: If a woman is innocent, there is no real danger in this ordeal. By comparison, other ordeals outside the Bible would often injure the accused even if they were innocent!

#### IV. Proverbs 5

Proverbs includes three extended discussions of the dangers associated with adultery and sexual immorality: Proverbs 5, 6:20 – 35, and 7. G.C. Heider claims these three lectures see adultery with another man's wife as the greatest danger.<sup>28</sup> Certainly these passages contain particular injunctions to be wary of adultery with another man's wife, but a close reading reveals they are a somewhat comprehensive warning against the various forms of sexual immorality.

The definitive passage of scripture concerning the dangers of adultery is Proverbs 5. I am not convinced by Bullock's argument that verses 1 – 14 address a single man and that verses 15 and following address a married man.<sup>29</sup> Adrian Rogers referred to Proverbs 5 as "The Playboy's Payday." I am following a modified outline of the passage provided by Dr. Paige Patterson.

##### A. A Seductive Temptation. 5:1-6

Proverbs 5:1 – 5:

- 1 My son, pay attention to my wisdom,  
listen well to my words of insight,
- 2 that you may maintain discretion  
and your lips may preserve knowledge.
- 3 For the lips of an adulteress drip honey,  
and her speech is smoother than oil;
- 4 but in the end she is bitter as gall,  
sharp as a double-edged sword.
- 5 Her feet go down to death;  
her steps lead straight to the grave.
- 6 She gives no thought to the way of life;  
her paths are crooked, but she knows it not.

---

<sup>28</sup> G.C. Heider, "Marriage and Sex," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, Tremper Longman and Peter Enns, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 452.

<sup>29</sup> C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1988), 200.

1. The Bible calls us to wisdom in regards to the temptation to commit adultery.

Proverbs 5:1 – 2 (NKJV): My son, pay attention to my wisdom; Lend your ear to my understanding, That you may preserve discretion, And your lips may keep knowledge.

Proverbs 5 begins with an introductory appeal to wisdom in general (5:1-2) and moves to a specific appeal for sexual discretion. The phrase “that your lips may preserve knowledge” means that one is morally disciplined and has so internalized the word of God that his or her lips permit nothing to escape from them which does not proceed from the knowledge of God.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the discourse on adultery begins with a positive description of a wise person who guards both the moral instruction they “take in” and the moral ideas they “put out.”

Proverbs 5 urges us to seek God for wisdom concerning sexual ethics and sexual restraint. But today, where are we getting our wisdom concerning sexual ethics? Sadly, many teenagers learn sexual ethics by what they see on the television or internet. How much TV do kids watch in the United States and what moral messages about sex are they receiving?

Television viewing increases in pre-teen years and declines after age 12. Adolescents aged 9-14 spend over 20 percent of waking hours watching television, compared to 9 percent on hobbies and 3.5 percent on homework.

The average American teen spends about 20 hours a week watching television, with the heaviest viewers coming from low-income households.

Two out of every three shows on TV include sexual content, an increase from about half of all shows during the 97/98 television season. The most widely viewed shows-those airing in primetime on the major networks-are even more likely to include sexual content. Sexual intercourse is depicted or strongly implied in one of every ten shows on TV.

Of those instances of sexual intercourse either depicted or strongly implied, only half occurred among couples who had an established relationship with one another. Ten Percent involved couples who had just met.

---

<sup>30</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, in *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprinted 1989), 119.

Only 10% of all television programs contain sexual scenes that include any reference to the possible risks or responsibilities associated with sex, including pregnancy or STDs.<sup>31</sup>

The positive description of Proverbs 5:1 – 2 is consistent with the admonition of Proverbs 4:23, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” Indeed, every Christian must guard his or her heart in the area of sexual morality. In this light, adultery is a unique temptation because no one is immune from this temptation. Two warnings about adultery from the rest of Scripture must be heeded here. First, The Seventh Commandment says, “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). Secondly, Jesus clearly teaches that adultery begins with sexual fantasies (Matthew 5:27 – 30). This warning from Jesus only amplifies the message of Proverbs 4:23 – Guard your heart!

## 2. Adultery begins with flattery. vv. 3 -5

Proverbs 5:3 – 4 (NIV): For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword.

Proverbs 5:3 – 4 (HCS): Though the lips of the forbidden woman drip honey and her words are smoother than oil, in the end she’s as bitter as wormwood and as sharp as a double-edged sword.

**Adulteress.** The word translated “adulteress” in the NIV is the Hebrew word זָרָה. The KJV gives a more literal translation of the word as a “*strange woman.*” Owens suggests the translation “loose woman.”<sup>32</sup> While the NIV is not incorrect in its translation, that she is a *strange woman (zarah)* carries the idea that she is an outsider and is someone other than a man’s wife. We get some idea of the negative meaning associated with *zarah* by examining Leviticus 10:1 where Nadab and Abihu were judged for offering “strange (*zarah*) fire” before Yahweh. The same word is also used in Proverbs 2:16 which says, “It [wisdom] will save you from the adulteress (*zarah*), from the wayward wife with her seductive words” (NIV).

By calling her “strange,” the Bible is not commenting on her ethnicity as though she were a non-Israelite, but instead she is “strange” in that she is an

---

<sup>31</sup> “Teen Health and the Media,” accessed May 7, 2018, <https://depts.washington.edu/thmedia/view.cgi?section=medialiteracy&page=fastfacts>.

<sup>32</sup> John Joseph Owens, *Analytical Key to The Old Testament*, vol. 3, *Ezra – Song of Solomon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 532.



outsider to the marriage who threatens the marriage's strength and very existence. Longman concludes that she is "strange" in regard to the legal and social customs. She is "acting outside of community norms. An adulteress or a prostitute would qualify for this description."<sup>33</sup> Kidner also emphasizes that her foreignness is not literal, but the point is that she has put herself outside the loyalties and structures of society and the laws of God, and owes her disruptiveness and much of her fascination to that intriguing fact.<sup>34</sup>

Adultery is an intrusion from the outside on a covenant relationship – a stranger comes into a place where she should not be allowed. So she is a "foreigner" or "stranger" in the sense that she is a *foreigner to Biblical ethics!*

The text contrasts "honey" with "wormwood."

**Drip Honey.** Notice the verbal seduction involved in adultery. Adulterous affairs usually do not start with physical contact, but with words that are like "honey" and "smoother than oil." Notice the strong contrast between the admonition of Proverbs 5:1-2 to maintain discretion concerning speech and the danger of listening to the enticing words of a person with adulterous intentions. Delitzsch comments, "The lips which distill the honey of enticement stand opposite to the lips which distill knowledge."<sup>35</sup> Duane Garrett comments, "The honey lips and the smooth mouth of the other woman refer more to her flattery than her sexual availability. The man is drawn to her because she inflates his ego with hollow praise in ways his own wife does not."<sup>36</sup> Adultery is unique because no one is immune to the temptation to listen to words of flattery connected with sexual sin.

**Bitter as wormwood:** The Hebrew term translated "wormwood" is לְעֵינָה. It refers to the *Artemisia judaica*, an aromatic plant with juice having a bitter taste that contrasts with the sweetness of honey. Some follow the LXX and translate it as "gall" (cf. NIV). The point is that there was sweetness in the beginning of adultery when the tryst had alluring glamour, but afterward it had an ugly taste and bad consequences.

---

<sup>33</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 159.

<sup>34</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 20.

<sup>35</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 119.

<sup>36</sup> Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, in *The New American Commentary*, vol. 14 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 91.

**Sharp as a double-edged sword.** The Hebrew phrase translated “double-edged” is literally “with mouths,” and is thus a pun on the way the adulteress woman described here devours people.<sup>37</sup>

**Death / Grave.** Proverbs 5:5 uses parallelism to stress the imminent danger associated with sexual sin: To flirt with this type of temptation is to flirt with death itself.<sup>38</sup> The terminology of “death” and “grave” communicates the horrible ways in which sexual sin distorts a person physically, morally and emotionally. Psychologist Gary Collins well summarizes the way in which sexual sin has a unique ability disfigure us morally when he says:

When it deviates from God’s perfect plans for human beings, sex is destructive. It destroys intimacy and communication, is self-centered, and often expresses a desire to manipulate, control, or hurt another person. The experience is pleasurable; it dulls one’s sense of loneliness, temporarily reduces anxiety, and gives a feeling of intimacy. All of this, however, is fleeting, dehumanizing, and ultimately unfulfilling.<sup>39</sup>

Adrian Rogers said, “Flattery is like perfume. It’s all right to sniff it, but you are not supposed to swallow it. . . . Flattery makes big fools of little men.”<sup>40</sup>

3. Adultery is unique in that it ultimately involves a seared conscience.

Proverbs 5:6 (NASB): She does not ponder the path of life; Her ways are unstable, she does not know *it*.

Notice that Proverbs 5:6b says the adulteress’s “ways are unstable.” The Hebrew verb used here is נוע (nua’) and it means “to quiver; to wave; to waver; to tremble; to shake,” or even “to totter.” In context, the verb is used here to describe a morally unstable person. Thus the KJV says “her ways are moveable,” and the ESV says “her ways wander.” NAB “her paths will ramble.” Perhaps the NLT gets at the moral message in Proverbs 5:6 and translates the Hebrew as, “She staggers down a crooked trail and doesn’t realize it.” The ways of the adulterous woman are unstable because she has no moral foundation.

---

<sup>37</sup> This insight is from David K. Stabnow, “Study Notes on Proverbs,” in *The Holman Christian Standard Study Bible* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2010), 1037.

<sup>38</sup> See Walter Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 155.

<sup>39</sup> Gary Collins, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*, rev. ed. (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1988), 249.

<sup>40</sup> Adrian Rogers, *God’s Way to Health, Wealth, and Wisdom* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 79.

By the time a person physically commits adultery, he or she has been indulging for quite some time in progressively more intense mental and emotional affairs. Adultery appeals to our desire to feel powerful.

Note: Affairs thrive on secrecy! The secrecy shared between the unfaithful spouse and his lover creates a bond between the two. Pittman says, “The conspiracy and adventure and tricks [to hide the affair] produce an alliance in the affair, while the lies and deceit increase the discomfort at home. All of us feel bound to those who share our secrets, and uncomfortable with those to whom we are lying. The power of any affair may be in its secrecy. The weakness of the marriage may be its avoidance of issues.”<sup>41</sup>

## **B. Severe Consequences. 5:7-14**

### Proverbs 5:8-14

7 Now then, my sons, listen to me;  
do not turn aside from what I say.  
8 Keep to a path far from her,  
do not go near the door of her house,  
9 lest you give your best strength to others  
and your years to one who is cruel,  
10 lest strangers feast on your wealth  
and your toil enrich another man's house.  
11 At the end of your life you will groan,  
when your flesh and body are spent.  
12 You will say, "How I hated discipline!  
How my heart spurned correction!  
13 I would not obey my teachers  
or listen to my instructors.  
14 I have come to the brink of utter ruin  
in the midst of the whole assembly."

“Spurned correction” implies that the adulterer intentionally rejects God’s moral standard found in the seventh commandment: “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” (Exodus 20:14). Derek Kidner summarizes Proverbs 5:7 – 14 and says, “The teacher speaks in 5:7 – 14 of the dignity that a man surrenders by loose living; of perhaps the bondage of blackmail; of his scattered and haphazard brood which

---

<sup>41</sup> Frank Pittman, “What Price Camelot,” 29.

should have been a close-knit family; of venereal disease; of vain regrets; of well-nigh irretrievable disgrace.”<sup>42</sup> If you commit adultery, you will suffer the following consequences:

1. You will suffer financial loss (Dissipating Finances)

Proverbs 5:10: Lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich another man's house.

You will lose everything for which you have worked. Adultery is very expensive, especially if you leave your spouse for someone else. You will wind up paying money to the person you left! Adultery will leave you flat-broke!

2. You will suffer loss of physical health (Disease)

Proverbs 5:11: At the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are spent.

The Hebrew verb translated “groan” by the NIV refers to a lion when it devours its prey, and to a sufferer in pain or remorse (e.g., Ezekiel 24:23).<sup>43</sup> The vivid language pictures someone in agony physically and emotionally.

People who choose to violate God’s guidelines and have sex outside of marriage will most likely contract an STD at some point during their promiscuous behavior. The language of Proverbs 5:11 may have this tragedy in mind. Approximately 65 million people in the United States currently are infected with an incurable STD. Approximately 15 million new STD infections take place each year.<sup>44</sup> In November, 2007, the Center for Disease Control published a report summarizing the national incidence of STDs for 2006. This report stated that for the second straight year, the incidences of Chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis all increased.<sup>45</sup> All STDs are more common in persons who have more than one sexual partner, and it is not uncommon for a person to be concurrently infected with more than one type of STD.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1985), 21.

<sup>43</sup> The NET Bible translator notes. Electronic resource available at [www.Bible.org/netbible](http://www.Bible.org/netbible). (Accessed February 11, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> W. Cates, et al. “Estimates of the Incidence and Prevalence of Sexually Transmitted Diseases in the United States,” *Sexually Transmitted Disease* 26 (1999): supplement S2 – S7.

<sup>45</sup> Victoria Stagg Elliott, “Number of Diagnosed STDs is growing,” *amednews.com*. [www.ama-assn.org](http://www.ama-assn.org), (Accessed February 7, 2008).

<sup>46</sup> Carol Mattson Porth, *Essentials of Pathophysiology: Concepts of Altered Health States* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins, 2004), 627.

### 3. Disappointment

Proverbs 5:12 says, “You will say, “How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction!” A person who is promiscuous and commits adultery will eventually say, “I wish I had listened to that pastor. I wish I had listened to my mother and father. I wish I had listened to the good advice people tried to share with me. Why did I think I was so smart?”

### 4. You will suffer loss of reputation (Disgrace)

Proverbs 5:14: I have come to the brink of utter ruin in the midst of the whole assembly.

The Living Bible paraphrases Proverbs 5:14, “For now I must face public disgrace.” Attempts to “cover up” sexual indiscretion always fail in the long run. The reference to the “whole assembly” in verse 14 implies public knowledge of sexual sin.

Two recent examples from politics come to mind: South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford and former Senator and Presidential candidate John Edwards. Our culture likes to talk about “free love,” but people who commit adultery are not free, they are slaves to lust. Adrian Rogers said, “You are free to choose, but you are not free to choose the consequences of your choices. You do not so much break God’s laws as you are broken on them.”<sup>47</sup>

### **C. Supreme Satisfaction. 5:15-19**

Proverbs 5:15-19:

- 15 Drink water from your own cistern,  
    running water from your own well.  
16 Should your springs overflow in the streets,  
    your streams of water in the public squares?  
17 Let them be yours alone,  
    never to be shared with strangers.  
18 May your fountain be blessed,  
    and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.

---

<sup>47</sup> Adrian Rogers, *God’s Way to Health, Wealth, and Wisdom* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 88.

19 A loving doe, a graceful deer—  
may her breasts satisfy you always,  
may you ever be captivated by her love.

There are several similarities between the language used in Proverbs 5:15 – 20 and imagery in the Song of Songs.

Notice the extensive use of water metaphors for the sexual relationship in marriage:

Vs. 15 – “cistern”  
Vs. 15 – “running water”  
Vs. 15 – “well”  
Vs. 16 – “springs”  
Vs. 16 – “streams”  
Vs. 18 – “fountain”

If we have grown up in an area with lots of water (such as the Southeastern United States), it may be difficult to understand how important water is in the Middle East. Steinmann rightly says, “In Palestine, where water is a scarce and valuable commodity, to have one’s own source of water was [is!] a great blessing. The metaphor of the wife as a private “cistern” and source of “running water” (5:15) depicts her as a great blessing to her husband.”<sup>48</sup>

1. Fidelity within marriage is God’s expectation.

Proverbs 5:15 – 17: Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers.

**“Cistern” and “Fountain”**: The instructor changes strategy from warning to positive instruction: Find pleasure in a fulfilling marriage. Longman suggests that verse 15 is a veiled reference to female sexuality while verse 16 is a veiled reference to male sexuality.<sup>49</sup> The wife is compared to a “cistern” because, like fresh water, she satisfies desire. Similarly, the husband is compared to a fountain: “May your fountain be blessed” (verse 18). The references to “cistern,” “springs,” and “fountain” is a series of implied comparisons with the sexual pleasure that must be fulfilled at home. That the “fountain” should be blessed (the passive

---

<sup>48</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Concordia Commentary: Proverbs* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 159.

<sup>49</sup> Longman, *Proverbs*, 161-162.

participle of בָּרַךְ, *barakh*) indicates that sexual delight is God-given; having it blessed would mean that it would be endowed with fruitfulness, that it would fulfill all that God intended it to do.

This special gift of sexual intimacy is not to be shared with strangers. The marriage covenant entails sexual loyalty to our spouse. Infidelity ruins the purposes for which God intended sexual intimacy.

The admonition to be loyal to one's spouse reinforces the consistent theme in the Bible that God's expectation for marriage is heterosexual monogamy. In didactic passages where marriage is addressed, monogamy is always assumed. Polygamy is a deviation from God's standard.

2. Fidelity Produces ultimate satisfaction.

**Proverbs 5:18 – 19 (NIV)**: May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer— may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.

**Proverbs 5:18 – 19 (HCS)**: Let your fountain be blessed, and take pleasure in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful fawn—let her breasts always satisfy you; be lost in her love forever.

**Blessed.** The idea in Proverbs 5:18 – 19 is that if one maintains and celebrates sexual fidelity in marriage, then the person will be blessed by God with a happy love life at home. Steinmann also notes that God gives this blessing, thus emphasizing that God favors humans with the gift of marriage. It is not merely a human invention, but a divinely ordained and hallowed estate.<sup>50</sup>

**Wife of your youth.** The phrase “wife of your youth” is a way of referring to a man's *first* wife. The idea is that a man should not seek another wife or a different woman.<sup>51</sup> Walter Kaiser comments on the OT standard for marriage assumed here in Proverbs 5 and says, “Conjugal fidelity and the monogamous relationship is taken so seriously as the only norm for marriage and sexual relationships that it has been immortalized in an allegory on marital fidelity.”<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Steinmann, *Concordia Commentary: Proverbs*, 159.

<sup>51</sup> David K. Stabnow, “Study Notes on Proverbs,” 1038.

<sup>52</sup> Walter Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 155.

**Doe / Deer.** The wife in a happy marriage is described as a “doe” and a “deer,” both terms meant to illustrate the exquisite gracefulness of a loving wife.<sup>53</sup> The word translated “deer” by the NIV is *הַלְּוּ* in Hebrew and actually means a female mountain goat (ibex). Apparently, many English translations use the word “deer” instead since in the English speaking world, a goat is not quite so romantic!

**Captivated (NIV) / Intoxicated (ESV).** The Hebrew word for “captivated” (NIV) in verse 19 *הִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה*, a Qal imperfect 2nd masculine singular of the verb *הִשְׁחָה* (*shagah*). It means “to swerve; to meander; to reel” as in drunkenness; it signifies a staggering gait expressing the ecstatic joy of a captivated lover. It may also mean “to be always intoxicated with her love.” The language of intoxication is also used in the Song of Songs when the woman says the man’s love is “better than wine” (Song of Songs 4:10). The ESV rightly translates Proverbs 5:19 as “be intoxicated always in her love.”

**Love.** Proverbs 5:19b uses a rare Hebrew word for “love.” The word is *hābîm* which refers to sensual love.<sup>54</sup>

Marital fidelity produces lifelong rewards. In contrast, infidelity can cause years of untold anguish. Marital fidelity is strengthened when you affirm your spouse, listen to your spouse, and seek to meet his or her needs. It’s also strengthened when you set healthy boundaries for your media consumption and for your relationships outside of the home. In marriage, trust = Belief + confidence. Trust comes from a belief you have that your spouse is reliable. Remember, “I am responsible for the attitude I have toward my spouse.”

#### **D. A Stern Warning 5:20 – 23**

Proverbs 5:20 – 23:

- 20 Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress?  
Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife?  
21 For a man's ways are in full view of the LORD,  
and he examines all his paths.  
22 The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him;  
the cords of his sin hold him fast.

---

<sup>53</sup> Allen P. Ross, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 930.

<sup>54</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Proverbs 1 – 15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 19.



23 He will die for lack of discipline,  
led astray by his own great folly.

**For a man's ways are in full view of the LORD.** While Proverbs 5 gives extensive warning about adultery and describes the joy of marital faithfulness and the disillusionment associated with adultery, the real motivation for ethical behavior is fear of the LORD. Proverbs 5:21 is very important as a summary in the discussion of adultery: the teacher's ultimate appeal is not to joy or even to the fear of disillusion – his ultimate appeal is to the fear of Yahweh!<sup>55</sup>

**Led astray by his own great folly.** The same Hebrew verb, *shagah*, used to describe the joy of sexual fulfillment in marriage in Proverbs 5:19 is used in a negative sense in Proverbs 5:23b to describe one “reeling” from the consequences of sin. Allen P. Ross says, “In other words, if the young man is not *captivated* by his wife but becomes *captivated* with a stranger in sinful acts, then his own iniquities will *captivate* him; and he will be led to ruin.”<sup>56</sup> A careful reading of the text shows that the description of sexual promiscuity here in 5:20 – 23 does not include the promise of the wonderful pleasure of shameless intimacy which a husband and wife share as described in Proverbs 5:18 – 19. The use of *shagah* in the positive exhortation of 5:15 – 19 and the concluding warnings of 5:20 – 23 connects the entire passage together. Garrett emphasizes this and says, “A man will stagger [*shagah*] in the pleasure his wife gives (v. 19). He can embrace the bosom of another woman and stagger (v. 20), but the terms of sensual pleasure are absent here [5:20 – 23]; with the adulteress it is the staggering of confusion and weakness. Finally, the man who indulges in adultery will stagger to his own destruction (v. 23).”<sup>57</sup>

## V. Proverbs 6:20 – 35

In Proverbs 6:20 – 35, a father teaches his son to avoid fornication.

### A. The Importance of Listening to Warnings About Adultery Proverbs 6:20 – 22

Proverbs 6:20 – 22 (NASB): My son, observe the commandment of your father and do not forsake the teaching of your mother; Bind them continually on your heart; Tie them around your neck. When you walk about, they will guide you;

---

<sup>55</sup> Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Allen P. Ross, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, *Proverbs*, 931.

<sup>57</sup> Garrett, *New American Commentary: Proverbs*, 94.

When you sleep, they will watch over you; And when you awake, they will talk to you.

### **B. The Protection of God’s Commands Proverbs 6:23 – 24**

Proverbs 6:23 – 24 (NASB): For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light; And reproofs for discipline are the way of life to keep you from the evil woman, from the smooth tongue of the adulteress.

### **C. The Unavoidable Dangers of Fornication and Promiscuity Proverbs 6:25 – 28**

Proverbs 6:25 – 28 (NASB): Do not desire her beauty in your heart, nor let her capture you with her eyelids. For on account of a harlot *one is reduced* to a loaf of bread, and an adulteress hunts for the precious life. Can a man take fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned? Or can a man walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?

### **D. The Consequences of Adultery and Promiscuity Proverbs 6:29 – 35**

Proverbs 6:29 – 35 (NASB): So is the one who goes in to his neighbor’s wife; Whoever touches her will not go unpunished. Men do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy himself when he is hungry; But when he is found, he must repay sevenfold; He must give all the substance of his house. The one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense; He who would destroy himself does it. Wounds and disgrace he will find, and his reproach will not be blotted out. For jealousy enrages a man, and he will not spare in the day of vengeance. He will not accept any ransom, nor will he be satisfied though you give many gifts.

People react emotionally to a broken trust; they respond with grief, anger, and pain. If someone’s spouse begins having an adulterous affair, the offended spouse feels disoriented and thinks, “When will this end?” or “I don’t think this will ever get better.” Consider these stages in a broken trust continuum.

Shock            Storm            Search                            Sequel

Last days    Months?    May have “aftershocks”

Eventually, periods of calm are larger than the storm. Most likely, you are going to have to talk through things over and over again to restore trust. The focus of

forgiveness is different than the focus of trust. You may have a sequel in which things are better than before, but not every story has a happy ending. But the potential is there for one. Forgiveness is given; trust is earned, and healing grows.

## VI. Proverbs 7

Wisdom will keep you from adultery and its final result – death. I’m still developing my notes here.

### A. Proverbs 7:1 – 5

Proverbs 7:1 – 5 (NASB):

My son, keep my words  
And treasure my commandments within you.  
<sup>2</sup> Keep my commandments and live,  
And my teaching as the apple of your eye.  
<sup>3</sup> Bind them on your fingers;  
Write them on the tablet of your heart.  
<sup>4</sup> Say to wisdom, “You are my sister,”  
And call understanding *your* intimate friend;  
<sup>5</sup> That they may keep you from an adulteress,  
From the foreigner who flatters with her words.

**Adulteress.** The Hebrew word translated as “adulteress” by the NASB is זָרָה (*zarah*), the same word we encountered in Proverbs 2:16 and Proverbs 5:3. The word here in Proverbs 7:5 is translated variously as “strange woman” (KJV), “immoral woman” (NLT), “forbidden woman” (ESV, HCS), “adulteress” (NASB), and “adulterous woman” (NIV).

### B. Proverbs 7: 6 – 9

### C. Proverbs 7: 10 – 13

### D. Proverbs 7:14 – 20

Proverbs 7:14 (NASB): I [the immoral woman] was due to offer peace offerings;  
Today I have paid my vows.

Proverbs 7:14 gives us important information about the identity of the “strange woman.” Leviticus 7:16 – 18 says peace offerings could be sacrificed to fulfill a vow. The immoral woman in this passage is obviously an Israelite / Jewish woman since she is attempting fidelity to Levitical laws. This makes clear that when Solomon warns about the *strange* woman, he is not necessarily describing a non-Israelite woman. In fact, she is depicted here in Proverbs 7:14 as participating in Israel’s sacrificial system. Rather, the indication is that the woman is not the son’s wife and so is foreign to the author’s son and his marriage if he is indeed married. Again, the point of the title “strange woman” in Proverbs is that she is a stranger to the son who is being instructed in divine wisdom. It does not mean that she is a “strange woman” in the sense that she is a non-Israelite or that something is wrong about her appearance or mannerisms.<sup>58</sup>

It is not uncommon for people engrossed in sexual immorality to engage in religious ritual, either to give their immoral choices an air of respectability or in an attempt to soothe their own conscience. In some cases sexually immoral people engage in public worship in an attempt to seduce people attending the worship service for legitimate purposes. Steinman says, “The mention of sacrifices is a ploy to ease the conscience of the young man. She is religious after all, and her purported motive is to fulfill her promises to God.”<sup>59</sup>

#### **E. Proverbs 7:21 – 23**

#### **F. Proverbs 7:24 – 27**

### **VII. The New Testament and Adultery**

#### **A. Adultery and Divorce**

##### **1. Lust leads to Adultery**

I cover this in more depth below, but Jesus talks about an “adultery of the heart” which leads to “adultery in the flesh.”

---

<sup>58</sup> This paragraph is summarized from Steinman, *Concordia Commentary: Proverbs*, 96 – 97.

<sup>59</sup> Steinman, *Proverbs*, 191.

Matthew 5:27 – 28 (NASB): [Jesus speaking] “You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’; <sup>28</sup> but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

## 2. “Green Grass Marriages” are adultery

Matthew 19:8 – 9 (HCS): He [Jesus] told them, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of the hardness of your hearts. But it was not like that from the beginning. And I tell you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

An old cliché says, “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.” Many people divorce one spouse in order to marry another person. I call these “green grass marriages” – another person looks attractive so I’ll dump the person I’m with. Jesus says these sorts of marriages are adultery.

## **B. The woman caught in Adultery**

### 1. The Pericope

John 7:53 – 8:11 (NASB): <sup>53</sup>Everyone went to his home.

<sup>8</sup> But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. <sup>2</sup> Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and *began* to teach them. <sup>3</sup> The scribes and the Pharisees \*brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center *of the court*, <sup>4</sup> they \*said to Him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. <sup>5</sup> Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?” <sup>6</sup> They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. <sup>7</sup> But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, “He who is without sin among you, let him *be the* first to throw a stone at her.” <sup>8</sup> Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. <sup>9</sup> When they heard it, they *began* to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center *of the court*. <sup>10</sup> Straightening up, Jesus said to her, “Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?” <sup>11</sup> She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more.”

## 2. Textual History

The much beloved story of the woman caught in adultery has a challenging textual history. This story is absent in the following manuscripts:

**Codex Sinaiticus** – Denoted by an Ⲁ. One of the four great uncial [written entirely in capital letters] codices.

**Codex Vaticanus** – Denoted by a “B.” One of the four great uncial codices.

It is absent from others, but these are two very important ones.

In the other two great uncial manuscripts, the text of John is damaged at John 8:

**Codex Alexandrinus** – Denoted by an “A.” One of the four great uncial codices.

**Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus** – Denoted by a “C”.

Metzger evaluates the damaged texts in John 8 in A and C and comments, “Codices A and C are defective in this part of John, but it is highly probable that neither contained the pericope, for careful measurement discloses that there would not have been space enough on the missing leaves to include the section [John 7:53 – 8:11] along with the rest of the text.”<sup>60</sup>

Some manuscripts place the story after John 7:36, 7:44, 21:25, or after Luke 21:38.

Metzger says, “At the same time the account has all the earmarks of historical veracity. It is obviously a piece of oral tradition which circulated in certain parts of the Western church and which subsequently incorporated into various manuscripts at various places.”<sup>61</sup>

## 3. Moral Application

Jesus forgives adultery without condoning it.

---

<sup>60</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1971, 1975), 220.

<sup>61</sup> Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 220 – 221.

## C. Adulterers will not inherit the Kingdom of God

1 Corinthians 6:9 - 10 (NASB): Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.

## VIII. Warnings About Lust

Augustine said, “And who is so wise that he has not battle at all to wage against his lusts?”<sup>62</sup>

### A. Lust Defined

The word translated “lust” in the NT is *epithumia*, which comes from from two Greek Words: *epi* (upon) + *thumos* (heat). There are a few passages where the word *epithumia* is used in a positive way to refer to an intense desire. For example, I Timothy 3:1 says, “This saying is trustworthy: “If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires (**epithumia**) a noble work.” In a sexual context, lust refers to various forms of unrestrained and inappropriate sensuous passion.

### B. The Dangers of Lust

1. A starting point for adultery.

Matthew 5:28: But I tell you, everyone who looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Lust is closely related to a lack of thankfulness. Stephen and Alex Kendrick comment, “Lust . . . is the result of being ungrateful for what you have and choosing to covet or burn with passion for something that is forbidden.”<sup>63</sup> When we cease to be grateful for the spouse God has given us, we are soon tempted to lust and adultery.

2. Lust detracts from the joy of fellowship with Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>62</sup> Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, The Loeb Classical Library, vol. 6, William Chase Greene, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 129, XIX.iv.

<sup>63</sup> Stephen Kendrick and Alex Kendrick, *The Love Dare* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2008), 28.

Romans 13:14: But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no plans to satisfy the fleshly desires.

### 3. A Source of interpersonal conflicts.

James 4: 1 – 2: 1 What is the source of the wars and the fights among you? Don't they come from the cravings that are at war within you? 2 You desire [lust] and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. You do not have because you do not ask.

### 4. Lust is a destructive spiritual influence to be avoided at all costs

I Peter 2:11: Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and temporary residents to abstain from fleshly desires [lusts] that war against you. (HCS)

“The more a man’s impure lust prevails, the more sweet and pleasant that sin will appear, and the more he will be inclined to think there is no evil in it.”

-- Jonathan Edwards

The Westminster Catechism offers this advice concerning lust:

Question: What are the proper remedies against lust, and all the incentives to it?

Answer: A serious reflection upon the all-seeing eye of an infinitely holy God (Gen. 39:9); walking in the Spirit, which will preserve us from fulfilling the lusts of the flesh (Galatians 5:16); keeping a strict watch over our hearts (Proverbs 4:23); studying to shun all occasions of this in be the external senses (Job 31:1); and fervent prayer to God to be kept from it, and all temptations to it (Psalm 119:37).<sup>64</sup>

## **IX. How to Avoid Adultery**

### **A. Warning Signs of Infidelity**

Here are some warning signs that may suggest we are placing ourselves in a situation more conducive to infidelity.

---

<sup>64</sup> *The Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism Explained by Way of Question and Answer: Part 2* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education and Sabbath School Work, 1902), 117.



1. “I quit having a daily devotion time consisting of Bible reading and prayer.” In many cases with which I and others are familiar, private devotions with God had ceased some time prior to the beginning of an adulterous relationship. In most cases, an intimate, adulterous affair was preceded by *lack of intimacy with God*. Thom Rainer reflects my thoughts and says, “Prayer and time in the Word are intimacy with God that precludes inappropriate intimacy with someone of the opposite gender.”<sup>65</sup>

2. A feeling of “going through the marriage motions.” This can be reflected an absence of conversations of any depth. Neglecting to talk openly with each other. One writer said, “If you only talk to your spouse about the bills and household chores, you may be sliding into trouble. Holding in your thoughts and feelings does not enhance transparency in your relationship. Practice the art of small talk that can open the door to deeper sharing.”<sup>66</sup>

3. Having deep, personal conversations about problems in your marriage with someone of the opposite sex.

4. Consistently choosing not to be with your spouse.

5. Closely related to warning sign 4, is the next warning sign: If there are significant gaps of time where your spouse doesn’t know where you are or what you are doing, you may be putting yourself in a situation where an affair is possible.

6. Inventing excuses to visit a specific person of the opposite sex, especially if that other person leads you to think, “She/he makes me feel good about myself.” Thom Rainer comments, “In marriage, neither party thinks the spouse is perfect; at least it is rare. The danger happens when one becomes a hero to someone of the opposite gender. The good feelings that come with accolades or even adulation can become sexual attractions and traps that end in an affair.”<sup>67</sup>

7. Intentionally increasing male/female contacts in normal environments. Eg: work, choir, recreation.

---

<sup>65</sup> Thom Rainer, “Seven Warning Signs of Affairs for Pastors,” June 30, 2015, accessed November 8, 2016, <http://www.lifeway.com/pastors/2015/06/30/seven-warning-signs-of-affairs-for-pastors/>.

<sup>66</sup> Beth J. Lueders, “Warning Signs of An Affair,” *Focus on the Family*, 2005, accessed June 27, 2018, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/divorce-and-infidelity/affairs-and-adultery/danger-signs-of-an-affair>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

8. Being preoccupied with thoughts about another person.
9. Exchanging of gifts with a “friend” of the opposite sex. There are appropriate and tasteful gifts for certain occasions, such as a gift card to a coffee shop on Administrative Assistant’s Day or a nice basket of fruit at Christmas. Perhaps on anniversary of employment of significant length, an employee may be given something quite tasteful such as dress watch of exquisite quality, and the gift is given in public to communicate the value of the person to the company. At a smaller level, employees always appreciate an employer who picks up doughnuts or good coffee on the way to work. The types of gifts in mind under this warning are things of a more intimate and personal nature given apart from a socially appropriate occasion consistent with a professional demeanor. For example, giving someone a piece of jewelry or an expensive garment sends a different message than a gift card to a steakhouse.
10. Making daily/weekly contact with someone by phone, text, email, or social media.
11. Putting yourself in situations where a “friend or co-worker” might become more.
12. Having to touch, embrace or glance at a person of the opposite sex.<sup>68</sup>

## **B. How to Avoid Adultery**

1. Run! Genesis 39 – Put physical distance between you and the temptation as quickly as possible.
2. Keep a healthy respect for our fallen nature or the “old man.” I am not afraid of women: I am afraid of me!
3. Maintain a strict awareness of the dynamics which can occur in counseling. Many pastors who have committed adultery will say, “It began in counseling.” As Thom Rainer says, “Sometimes the word “transference” is used to describe what can happen in counseling. The counselor or counselee becomes the object of attraction instead of one’s spouse. One or both of the parties see the other as something his or her spouse should be.”<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Most of these are not original with me. I’ve been collecting them from various sources over the years.

<sup>69</sup> Thom Rainer, “Seven Warning Signs of Affairs for Pastors,” June 30, 2015, accessed November 8, 2016, <http://www.lifeway.com/pastors/2015/06/30/seven-warning-signs-of-affairs-for-pastors/>.

4. Stay away from pornography. Pornography is a form of adultery in and of itself.

5. Once you are married, husbands do not have any more “girl friends” with whom they chat or hang out. Once you are married, wives do not have any more “guy friends” with whom they chat or hang out. Christian husbands and wives do not invite someone of the opposite sex out to eat lunch or invite them into the home. Grow up. Never dine alone with someone of the opposite sex.<sup>70</sup>

6. Stay away from salacious material in film, TV, computers, books or online. These dull the conscience and make sin seem attractive.

7. Invest in your spouse.

Gary Chapman calls this “keeping the love tank full.” He says, “At the heart of mankind’s existence is the desire to be intimate and to be loved by another. Marriage is designed to meet that need for intimacy and love. That is why the ancient biblical writings spoke of the husband and wife becoming ‘one flesh.’ That did not mean that individuals would lose their identity; it meant that they would enter into each other’s lives in a deep and intimate way.”<sup>71</sup>

8. Maintain strict decorum and professional courtesy in interaction with members of the opposite sex. Do not “flirt” in an even casual manner. Dr. Branch says, “If you don’t have any hooks in the water, you won’t get any bites!”

9. Always compliment character, and not appearance.

---

<sup>70</sup> Vice President Mike Pence has followed such a rule. Joanna L. Grossman, a Professor of Law at Hofstra University, has said Vice President Pence’s rule is discriminatory towards women, saying: “Nonetheless, the practice described by Pence in that 2002 interview is clearly illegal when practiced by a boss in an employment setting, and deeply damaging to women’s employment opportunities.” From Grossman’s perspective, a man who doesn’t eat lunch alone with a woman is denying her equal access to the employer since men can dine alone with the boss. Grossman goes on to say, “Employers are also not permitted to base employment decisions on gender-based stereotypes — including the stereotype that women are temptresses, or incapable of having purely professional relationships with male bosses or co-workers.” Joanna L. Grossman, “Vice President Pence’s “never dine alone with a woman” rule isn’t honorable. It’s probably illegal.” *Vox*, December 4, 2017, accessed June 27, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/3/31/15132730/pence-women-alone-rule-graham-discrimination>. Grossman seems to miss the point: Having such a rule is based on the stereotype of a woman as a temptress; the rule is based on a healthy respect for one’s own fallen nature. Such a rule puts a moral fence around yourself, not just the other person.

<sup>71</sup> Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1995), 22 -23.

10. Never ride alone in a car with a member of the opposite sex who is not your wife or immediate family member.

11. Never go into a house alone with a member of the opposite sex who is not your wife or immediate family member.<sup>72</sup>

12. Curiosity on Social Media can lead to adultery.

“Wow, I wonder what happened to that girl / guy I used to date in college? I wonder if they are on Satanbook? . . . excuse Dr. Branch’s commentary . . . I wonder if they are on Facebook?” Trolling around for an “old friend” can lead to a “new case” of adultery.

13. Be especially aware of the dangers at the workplace.

A large percentage of extra-marital affairs begin with friendships made at work. One article in *Psychology Today* commented on the tendency for affairs to begin at work and said:

By far the biggest predictor of affairs, experts agree, is sheer opportunity—how people vary in access and desirability to others. And the workplace is the great benefactor, providing large numbers of people with constant contact, common interests, an income to camouflage the costs of socializing outside the office, and an ironclad excuse.<sup>73</sup>

14. Men, listen to your wife!

15. Learn what the “tingles” are and how to handle them. Make up your mind *now* not to chase someone simply because their appearance or demeanor strikes a chord.

---

<sup>72</sup> Puritan Richard Baxter offered similar advice. In *The Reformed Pastor*, Baxter makes an urgent appeal for “personally catechizing” church members, by which he means virtually the same thing we mean by “soul winning and evangelism.” Baxter stressed the importance of talking to people one-on-one, but offered this word of caution: “Only, in order to avoid scandal, we must speak to the women only in the presence of some others; and, if we lose some advantage by this there is no remedy. It is better to do so, than, by giving occasion of reproach to the malicious, to destroy all the work.” Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, William Brown, ed. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974, reprinted 2012), 240.

<sup>73</sup> Hara Estroff Marano, *Psychology Today* 45.4 (July 1, 2012): 64.

The “tingles” are closely related to the “falling in love” experience. Though the “falling in love experience” is exciting, it is short-lived and largely self-centered. Love that truly contributes to our spouse’s emotional well-being is based on reason, will, and discipline.<sup>74</sup>

16. Never speak negatively about your spouse in public. Doing so leads others to think you may be open to adultery.

Keep this word of wisdom in mind as well: “If you are spending all your time explaining your actions, you are not winning.” So, if you are having to expend an inordinate amount of time explaining your friendship with someone of the opposite sex, you are not winning. Prudence dictates you change the nature of the friendship.

Preachers and Pastors, don’t overlook the element of spiritual warfare in the number of our brethren who have lost their authority to lead God’s church because of sexual sin. Richard Baxter (1615 – 1691) warns us:

[Satan] beareth the greatest malice to those that are engaged to do him the greatest mischief. As he hateth Christ more than any of us, because he is the General of the field, the captain of our salvation, and doth more than all the world besides against his kingdom; so doth he hate the leaders under him, more than the common soldiers: he knows what a rout he may make among them, if the leaders fall before their eyes.<sup>75</sup>

Remember this formula:

The wrong person +  
The wrong place +  
The wrong time =  
The wrong things happening!

*Last Updated October 23, 2018*

---

<sup>74</sup> <sup>74</sup> Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages*, 184.

<sup>75</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, William Brown, ed. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974, reprinted 2012), 74.