

○ MALE JEALOUSY AND THE SUSPECTED SOTAH TOWARD A COUNTER-READING OF NUMBERS 5:11-31

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Until recently, discussions of the Sotah ritual (Numbers 5) stood at an impasse between the view that it provides wives protection from jealous husbands and the view that it mainly subordinates women. This article examines the place of writing and curses in the biblical text, highlighting its almost compulsive concern to bring certainty to uncertainty. Dynamics of body and text, writing and erasure, uncertainty and linguistic power inform the Sotah text in ways that resist univocal readings. With the full weight of priestly and legal authority brought to bear on the problem of male jealousy, there can be no doubt that the ritual enforces patriarchal controls on women's agency. It thus instantiates the development of what Deleuze and Guattari call the 'despotic sign', whereby '[t]he mouth no longer speaks, it drinks the letter'. Yet as the law on oaths later in Numbers (ch. 30) attests, women could also exercise powerful speech, making their agency a reality in biblical times. Building on theoretical models from Irigaray and Butler, I sketch two strategies of counter-reading the Sotah text: reversal, in which the tables of suspicion are turned on the accusing husband, and parody, in which the entire ritual, like the exchange of sandals in Ruth 4, seems strange from a particular point of view.

Writing – the first deterritorialized flow, drinkable on this account: it flows from the despotic signifier. For what is the signifier in the first instance? What is it in relation to the nonsignifying territorial signs, when it jumps outside their chains and imposes – superimposes – a plane of subordination on their plane of immanent connotation? The signifier is the sign that has become a sign of the sign, the despotic sign having replaced the territorial sign, having crossed the threshold of deterritorialization; *the signifier is merely the deterritorialized sign itself*... Desire no longer dares to desire, having become a desire of desire, a desire of the despot's desire. The mouth no longer speaks, it drinks the letter. They eye no longer sees, it reads. The body no longer allows itself to be engraved like the earth, but prostrates itself before the engravings of the despot, the region beyond the earth, the new full body (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 206).¹

Numbers 5:11-31, which describes the ritual of the wife accused of turning astray, or Sotah, poses significant problems for interpretation. The text specifies every detail of a unique ceremony that includes a grain offering, an oath and a curse, and a drink containing dirt and residue from the written curses. Jealous and suspicious husbands shall bring their wives to the priest with a 'grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance' (5:15). Standing the woman before Yahweh and disheveling her hair, the priest compels her to drink a potion of water, dust from the tabernacle floor, and the ink of curses that have been immersed in this 'water of bitterness' that 'brings the curse' (vv. 18, 19, 23, 24, 27). If the woman

is guilty, her womb will drop, she will be unable to conceive children and face ostracism; if she is innocent, then she will be able to conceive.

The ritual of Sotah brings together several categories and issues of interest beyond the historical study of this text: sexuality and gender, writing and erasure, territory and identity, memory and tradition, and ritual sacrifice. The epigraph above, from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, which identifies writing as a drinkable flow, the 'despotic sign' that has replaced the 'territorial sign', suggests a kind of conceptual commentary on Numbers 5. Here writing itself is a kind of flow, and the letter is something one must drink. Writing is associated with 'deterritorialization', desire, and the body, which 'prostrates itself before the engravings of the despot'. By citing Deleuze and Guattari in this way, I regard the Sotah as a text that pertains not only to women in a particular ritual but also to the place of such a ritual in the context of cultural systems and traditions. My interest is not simply to understand how this ritual text reinforces the control of women by men, but to consider how this text mobilises dynamics of powerful speech and writing in a tradition that includes the control of women. In Numbers, a narrative about the formation of identity for a people preparing to claim a land, the control of women by men relates directly to the concerns of group identity and territory. The present reading of Numbers 5 thus considers the treatment of women as part of a larger cultural, religious, and political system. My argument is that attending to the dynamics of powerful speech and writing enables a subversive reading of the text, one that shows the limits of attempts to control women. Like curses in general, the curse of the Sotah can have unintended consequences, or backfire, so to speak.

Four possible modes of interpretation suggest themselves to feminist readers of the Sotah: ignore the text, reject it outright, neutralise it, or subvert it. By far the easiest paths are to ignore or reject the text. But these approaches offer nothing to those who cannot overlook the influence or authority of the Bible, and what is more, they miss an opportunity to engage actively with biblical text and tradition. The choice between neutralising and subverting the text is more difficult. To neutralise the text, that is, to limit direct and overt harm to women, would seem to address feminist concerns. This is how I would describe the approach of Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Jacob Milgrom and others who point out that the Sotah ritual, by placing punishment for infidelity in divine or priestly hands, was an effective way to protect women from the violence of jealous men (Frymer-Kensky 1999 and Milgrom 1999). One can also seek to neutralise the text by a kind of theological abrogation, declaring it a thing of the past, as Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai does in the Mishnah.

But one doesn't have to master post-structuralist theory to see that neutralising a biblical text such as this is not easy. Neutral or not, it remains part of the canons of the Torah and Bible, leaving it permanently available to reading and interpretation. To neutralise is to qualify or bracket the meaning of a text, as if to say, 'This is the exception – all parts other than this one require serious attention', but in the canon of Jewish and Christian scripture, such bracketing can only be provisional. While ignoring, rejecting, and neutralising the text may be problematic, my suggestion to subvert the text raises other concerns: On what basis can such a reading be proposed? What are the ground rules for such a project? I have no complete answers to these questions, but by attempting a subversive reading of the text in biblical context, I hope to make such a project seem at least as plausible and viable as ignoring, rejecting, or neutralising the text.

To subvert the text of the Sotah means to engage it not only as ritual but also as *text*, as a normative part of written tradition. As Bonna Devora Haberman shows in her study of the rab-

binic uses of Sotah, the influence of the text goes far beyond the time when the ritual was declared null and void (Haberman 2000). The extensive discussions of Sotah in the Talmud indicate a level of interest beyond what is accorded to most passages of this length. A subversion of the text, then, would start by acknowledging the patriarchal character of the text *and* its legacy, a legacy that includes, among other things, men's traditional control of biblical exegesis. For Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, subversion calls for a reconstructive project built on a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1986, xxii). Subverting the text means more than addressing specific inequities in the text; instead, it emerges from a more general account of the relationship between biblical writing and the body.

Because of the Bible's canonical prestige, it can resist critical readings made in the name of modern, extra-biblical principles of reason and justice; such readings can be disregarded as theologically or historically invalid. Subversion of the text can thus be more effective if it can somehow be done in *biblical terms*, that is, by finding resources in the Bible to counteract the potentially corrosive potential of the text. To subvert the text is thus to engage it in a hermeneutical process that confronts familiar readings with counter-readings, using the terms of the text itself. What I propose to do is to offer a sketch of how a biblically-based subversive reading of the Sotah might proceed. I begin with a brief discussion of the categories of writing, speech, and the body, move on to consider the immediate context of the book of Numbers, other biblical texts, and the Talmud, and then sketch a subversive reading of the Sotah by means of reversal and parody.

WRITING, SPEECH AND THE BODY

The text of Sotah is almost compulsive in its use of writing, memory, and repetition. The ritual, we are reminded, makes a 'grain offering of remembrance' to bring 'iniquity to remembrance' (5:15, 18). But how? How can such a ritual transform suspicion and missing evidence into anything substantial? From a feminist perspective, this impulse to write, remember, sacrifice, and instruct, to bring private uncertainty to public 'remembrance' and resolution, suggests a kind of anxiety in the face of male jealousy. The emphatic place of memory, writing, and 'torah' in the Sotah text seem designed to compensate for the lack of evidence and justification for the ritual.

A more obvious fact about the ordeal is that there is no explicit opportunity for the accused woman to move or speak, except to respond 'Amen' to the priest's oath. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari (1983), 'The mouth no longer speaks, it drinks the letter'. Stood up before Yahweh by the priest, with hair disheveled and an offering placed in her hand, the woman does not move by herself – she is treated like a living mannequin by the men. With her body and will subordinated to ritual symbolism, she drinks a potion of curses that will compel her body to speak, just as it has or has not 'spoken' through adulterous transgression. When it speaks, her body will deliver a message her husband, the priest, and presumably the entire community, want to hear. In that sense, the woman's body becomes not just a mannequin but a kind of ventriloquist's dummy projecting the divine response to her husband's suspicion. Like Ezekiel, who becomes a prophet when he eats a scroll containing 'words of lamentation and mourning and woe', the woman of the Sotah acquires a mantic power (see Ezek. 2:10, and 2:8-3:3). Her body's 'speech', which declares innocence or guilt, unites verdict and punishment in a single action. (If she is innocent, there is no explicit judgment against her husband, though one could speculate that her innocence

indicts his jealous spirit.) But in keeping with his status (and gender role), Ezekiel's writing is a sweet scroll, not bitter water, and his speech, though agonising in its own way, bears the stamp of divine approval outward to announce judgment against Israel and the nations, rather than inward, bearing priestly sanction against the woman's body. In both these priestly texts, divine power is conveyed to Israel through writing (the curse of the Sotah and the scroll of the prophet).

The semiotic economy of the merged verdict and judgment, text and context, differs from the typical prophetic speech and action which usually only *represent* the condition of exile, punishment, or redemption. Take the scene in Ezekiel 12:1-16 where the prophet packs up and performs a symbolic action of going into exile. Since he is already *in* exile, the situation maintains the distinction between symbol and reality. No such distinction is possible in the ritual of the Sotah, in which symbolism is embodied in the drinking of the ritual water that brings direct consequences for the accused woman.

The violent, economic merger of body and text occurs in the context of sacrifice and powerful speech. But how do the sacrifice and powerful speech operate? What social and religious functions do they perform, and at what cost? These questions captivate the historical imagination, but unfortunately there are no historical data that answer them directly. Instead we must operate on a more speculative level, drawing from the text in its context to read against the grain of sexist violence. Ancient practices of sacrifice and cursing undoubtedly contributed to the formation of our text, but it is by no means clear what those practices are or, more to the point, how the text makes use of them. The temptation to identify biblical texts as straightforward records of ancient practices is understandable and widespread, but the many-layered and artfully-structured biblical text warrants no such transparency. The book of Numbers took shape over centuries, probably no earlier than the fifth century BCE, but it is set hundreds of years earlier. Exactly how and when the text took shape has been a central concern of modern biblical studies, but the mere fact of its shape, its discernibly artful formation, suggests that Numbers, and the Sotah ritual, is neither a hodge-podge of textual fragments nor a simple description of ancient practices. In Michael Fishbane's form-critical analysis, the text reflects two 'distinct cases', one in which infidelity is suspected on the basis of evidence (vv. 12-13), and another motivated only by the husband's suspicion (v. 14) (Fishbane 1999: 493; Milgrom 1999).

Biblical bodies become biblical texts in the mark of Cain, the 'prophetic agony' of Jeremiah, the writing of the 'new covenant' on human hearts, also in Jeremiah, and in the transformation of the body of the Levite's concubine into twelve violent texts in Judges 19. What these cases share in common, of course, is violence and damage to the body. Like the machine in Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony', which inscribes the body with the signs of its crimes, the Sotah ritual reduces the woman's body to a sign, a text of divination that must be read to determine her guilt or innocence (Destro 1989: 129-132). In our text, the threat of disorder – a flow of independent desire (in Deleuze and Guattari's terms) – is matched by the power of priestly order – the flow of a potion containing a written curse. According to Alice Bach, 'The Sotah both reflects and supports the patriarchal social system that cannot accept the woman without seeking to offset the threat that she represents, a threat of dissolution, anarchy, and antisocial disorder' (Bach 1999: 518). In the measure for measure justice of the Sotah, the amorphous danger of feminine desire is matched by the 'water that brings the curse'.

How and why does writing become 'drinkable'? For Deleuze and Guattari (1983), writing, as the catchword for cultural hierarchies of gender, law, and power, transforms desire, agency,

and sense experience: ‘The mouth no longer speaks, it drinks the letter’. The image of drinking writing, even if it does not directly allude to the drinking of curse potions, indicates that writing is the ‘first deterritorialized flow’: emerging from the ‘despotic signifier’, it can be transported across space. Because it flows, it can be drunk. Consider the drinking of the golden calf and water mixture (Exod 32:20). Here, just after Moses has broken the written tablets of the law, he forces the people of Israel to drink the illicit alternative law they have produced. Measure for measure justice demands that the people eat what they are, that their punishment should not fit the crime but require that they *drink* it. Like the quails they will eat till they come out their nostrils, such punishment simply goes one step beyond the crime. The golden calf penalty does not represent a trial as the Sotah does, nor does it include writing directly, but both episodes impose justice by a drink closely related to the crime. These drinks of discipline thus make the body not just subject to law but an instrument of its administration.

The ‘new full body’ has become deterritorialized, torn from earth and desire by the combination of writing and potion. The need to deterritorialise women’s bodies reflects not just the patriarchal imperative of biblical culture, but, as Fishbane’s (and Weems’s) analysis of prophetic discourse shows, the fundamental metonymic relationship between man/woman and God/Israel demands that the discipline of the Sotah be applied to Israel as a whole. For those who violate the covenant, the discipline of the written law on the body becomes universalised. The curse enters the body and becomes part of it. In a series of potent curses, a psalmist elaborates a vision of retributive justice in which the curse is worn and soaked into the body: ‘He loved to curse; let curses come on him! He clothed himself with cursing as his coat, may it soak into his body like water, like oil into his bones! May it be like a garment which he wraps round him, like a belt with which he daily girds himself!’ (Ps. 109: 17-19; RSV).

Though the epigraph from Deleuze and Guattari helps move a discussion of Numbers 5 into the register of cultural systems, their simple shift from territory to deterritorialisation does not describe the reality of biblical tradition. It was exile and diaspora, not the culture of writing, that deterritorialised the people of Israel; the impulse behind many of their writings, was *re*-territorialisation, however figuratively expressed. Numbers 5 was presumably written when there was an Israelite territory about a time when there wasn’t. Land and Torah intertwine endlessly in biblical tradition, combining the need to territorialise writing with an identical need to write territory. From the post-exilic standpoint, it also becomes necessary to identify territory *as* writing, a process whereby territory becomes idealised and sublimated. Similarly, the trial of the Sotah follows a dual need to deterritorialise women’s bodies and to insist on their bodies as a master metaphor for territory (e.g., Jerusalem in Lam. 1, e.g.) itself.²

‘WIFE GOES ASTRAY’ AND/OR ‘SPIRIT OF JEALOUSY’?

The ritual of Sotah is triggered when a man’s wife ‘turns astray’ (*tisteh*) and/or when a ‘spirit of jealousy’ (*ruack qin’ah*) comes upon the husband (vv. 11-14). The complex prologue to the ritual imagines a number of scenarios, one of which is jealousy without actual transgression (vv. 11-14). The elaborate ritual includes several stages, verbal formulas, and consequences. Speech and writing are prominent in the ritual, which itself is conveyed to Moses by divine speech. The elements include language of swearing and cursing: ‘Let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse (*bishvu’at ha’alah*) and say to the woman – “the LORD make you an execration

and an oath (*le'alah welishebu'ah*) among your people, when the LORD makes your uterus drop, your womb discharge” (v. 21). Combining a grain offering, a verbal formula, and a water ordeal, the ritual’s repetitions make it seem overdetermined. Against actions that remain hidden, the ritual brings forth memory, witness, writing, instruction (*torah*), a curse-causing potion, and public statements. The grain offering operates in the register of memory: it includes a memorial portion that will be burned, ‘bringing iniquity to remembrance’. The verbal formula, to which the woman replies ‘Amen, Amen’, indicates immunity to the water that brings the curse in the case of innocence and the double consequences of a fallen (probably prolapsed [Frymer-Kensky 1999: 467–469]) uterus and public humiliation (to be an ‘execration and an oath’) in case she is guilty.

The topic of male jealousy runs through uses of the Hebrew term *qn'*. In its verbal and noun forms, *qn'* can refer to human or divine jealousy or passion. The term appears in a variety of places with a variety of meanings, but one of the most interesting is the description of Yahweh as '*el qn'*' in the covenant formulas of Exod 20:5, Deut 5:9 and elsewhere. Does the God of the Decalogue act like a jealous husband? If so, we must add this observation to discussions of gender and patriarchy in ancient Israel (Weems 1995; Zenger 1996; Eilberg-Schwartz 1994; Pardes 2000). While these questions go beyond the scope of this study, it should be noted that jealousy appears to be an exclusively male passion in the Hebrew Bible (with the possible exception of Song of Songs 8:6, which has an ambiguous reference), and one that can be associated with the sort of violence that must be controlled. What is the relationship between human jealousy and divine jealousy, between Num 5 and the Decalogue? No equivalence can be assumed, and one could suggest that there are good kinds of jealousy and bad kinds of jealousy, but it is clear that *qn'* is considered to be an appropriate divine attribute. What is more, the Sotah text and the covenant formula both involve binding speech and writing as a way to regulate and limit the power of jealousy which, as Prov. 6:34 makes clear, can easily erupt into violence. Nor is this problem restricted to ancient societies; male jealousy and control of women remain basic to patriarchal societies; in one recent study in the United States, ‘22.1 percent of surveyed women, compared with 7.4 percent of surveyed men, reported they were physically assaulted by a current or former spouse, cohabiting partner, boyfriend or girlfriend, or date in their lifetime’, most often at the hands of a jealous male husband or acquaintance (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000).

James Frazer compares the Sotah ritual to similar African and Indian traditions in which ‘superstition comes to the aid of morality, and supplies the material vehicle of justice’ (Frazer 1919: 412–413). Frazer also cites the practice of adding the ink from Qur’an passages to medical or love potions that appears in Africa, along with similar practices from China, Japan, and Tibet. By these comparisons, Frazer assures the reader that ‘we can fully understand, even if we cannot entirely believe, the powerful accession of force which the bitter water of the Hebrews was supposed to receive from the curses pronounced over it and washed into it by the officiating priest’ (Frazer 1919: 414).

Closer to ancient Israel, river ordeals are attested in ancient Mesopotamian, Hittite, Assyrian, and Canaanite texts (McCarter 1973; Cardascia 1967; Laroche 1973; Günbatti 2001). Comparisons have also been made with Babylonian legal texts and oath ordeals (Fishbane 1999). On the whole, however, biblical scholars have been more preoccupied with the apparent disunity of the text, concluding from its disparate elements and repetitions that it represents the combination of several distinct traditions (Frymer-Kensky 1999: 472, n. 3–4). In other words, modern schol-

arship on the Sotah text followed two distinct approaches: one that equated the text with similar ‘superstitious’ customs, and another that regarded the text as a composite and fragmentary record of the ancient past. More recently, with studies by Michael Fishbane, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, and Jacob Milgrom, hypotheses on redactional practice have led to a compelling case for the unity of the text. No longer persuaded by the facile comparisons of Frazer, and convinced by the apparently unified structure of the text, scholars have returned to the question of the meaning of Numbers 5.

Scholars remain understandably puzzled by this unique episode, which raises several questions that have not been answered. What is the link between the sacrifice offering, the oath, and the ritual of the water? What happens to the woman’s social and marital status if she is found guilty? Another question concerns the social purpose of the ordeal and its implications for the understanding of women in ancient Israel. Fishbane, Milgrom, and Frymer-Kensky emphasise that the ordeal wisely places the decision in God’s hands, thus protecting women against capricious human action. For Milgrom especially, the Sotah represents a kind of enlightened legal innovation: ‘[T]he community and, especially, the overwrought husband may not give way to their passions to lynch her’ (Milgrom 1999: 480). Milgrom, unlike Frymer-Kensky, does consider the ritual to be an ordeal, but he argues that the text combines ancient magic with later justice: arguing that v. 21 is added later to ensure divine control over the process, he proposes:

It may therefore be conjectured that originally the present formula (minus 21) was an ancient Near Eastern incantation for an ordeal employing magical water which did not invoke the name of any deity. It may have been incorporated into the Israelite cult at local high places or shrines and converted into an oath by having the suspected adulteress respond ‘amen’ (22b)... Since the formula was already accepted and in widespread use he would have incurred too much resistance had he attempted to alter its wording (Milgrom 1999: 478).

Milgrom thus argues for a kind of evolution from magical incantation to later law, suggesting the earlier formula was too entrenched to be eliminated easily. Fishbane, who locates close affinities between the Sotah text and cuneiform laws of Hammurabi, also adduces evidence of the influence of the tradition on later texts about God and Israel, especially Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel (Fishbane 1999: 493–498). Milgrom and Fishbane demonstrate the astonishing tenacity of the Sotah tradition from pre-biblical to post-biblical culture, thus raising the important question ‘Why?’

For Alice Bach, a glass that many scholars see as half-full – the protection of women from lynch mobs – is really half-empty. The ideology of the text is decisively patriarchal; and the very actions of the narrative subordinate and humiliate the woman. Even if we regard the priest as a protector, we must ask what male protection of this kind implies for the status of women. And as Haberman shows, rabbinic interest in the ordeal, including a long tractate of the Babylonian Talmud, keeps the ritual of the Sotah alive in written form long after the practice was abandoned early in the Common Era (Haberman 2000).

Scholarship thus stands at something of an impasse on the question of the meaning and moral significance of the water ordeal. The stakes in this debate, I suggest, are high for a number of reasons. Because the text appears in the Bible, it demands explanation – there is no way to

hide a biblical text. To dismiss it as peripheral or antiquated relative to other biblical texts is to invite the problem of providing an account of which biblical texts have a claim on readers and which do not. This hermeneutical slippery slope presents hazards to theological and non-theological biblical scholars alike, since it assumes a standard for dividing central, normative biblical texts from peripheral ones. Moreover, since the rabbis dedicated a lengthy tractate to the text and Christians practiced several kinds of water ordeals well into the early modern period, there is no justification to claims that the text lacks influence (Bartlett 1986).

Can the Sotah ritual be neutralised because of its affinities with magic? According to Sheldon Blank, a clause has been added to the oath ‘according to which, not the self-fulfilling words of the curse, but God will effect the disintegration of her guilty body. This reformulation draws the ordeal into the area of religious practice but does not conceal its original primitive spell-like character’ (Blank 1950–51: 88). It is very appealing to imagine the water ordeal as a kind of obsolete magic used to protect or punish women. But despite its unusual level of detail and reliance on supernatural phenomena, the ritual exhibits strong connections to mainstream biblical texts and traditions. Rather than try to neutralise the text, I suggest a strategy of trying to *engage* it in a creative hermeneutical process first by examining the text in context and then by reversing the text’s apparent priorities and parodying them (by analogy to Num 22-24 and Ruth 4), against the grain of patriarchal assumptions.

THE TEXT IN BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Our text is an instruction (*Torah*, vv. 29-30), a how-to for the ritual of Sotah. Instructing or threatening to curse, furthermore, can yield the same outcome as cursing. No mention of a curse can be completely free from its danger, and no performance of a curse can avoid also mentioning, or as Derrida would say, iterating, the curse (Miller 2001: 77–91).³ In the Bible, as in contemporary speech, it is far more common to *mention* a curse than to *perform* one. Yet it is precisely by blurring the distinction between mention and performance that the Sotah ritual achieves its enduring and menacing power.

Biblical cursing works not so much by magic but by social and psychological pressure. To the extent that curses derive from superhuman power, they threaten and defy human agency. But to the extent that curses can be *harnessed* or *threatened*, not to mention *performed*, by humans, they present a formidable source of power. As Paul A. Keim shows in *When Sanctions Fail*, the social purpose and function of biblical curses can be demonstrated by the flexibility with which they are imposed and retracted. The mention of ‘curse and oath’ in the Sotah text, seems designed to deter women from adultery and to coerce a confession from them. Everything about the ritual, from the priestly context to the ritual props of the scroll, dirt, and offering, is designed to intimidate and humiliate the woman. The threat of such a ritual, not to mention undergoing it, could certainly terrify anyone, especially a woman accused of such a serious offense. Because the Sotah works as a form of social control, it is paradoxically the *mention* of the curse, more than its *performance*, that accounts for its efficacy.⁴

The Sotah ritual appears in a series of miscellaneous priestly instructions after one of the census texts (of the Levites) for which the book of Numbers is named. The chapter begins with commandments for placing lepers and other ritually unclean individuals outside the camp (vv. 1-4). The next legal prescription, immediately preceding the Sotah, concerns restitution and

atonement for sins of 'breaking faith with the Lord' (*lim'ol ma'al byhwh*). The same verb appears in the introduction to the Sotah text: 'If any man's wife goes astray and acts unfaithfully against him' (*uma'alah vo ma'al*). But whereas the case of retribution leaves no doubt about actual guilt, the Sotah ritual exists to decide cases in which guilt is uncertain. The restitution text also calls for making an atonement sacrifice in cases where restitution cannot be otherwise made. Like the Sotah text, then, the first two texts of Num. 5 deal with ritual matters that affect the social welfare of Israel.

The passage immediately following the Sotah text in Num. 6 concerns the vow of the Nazirites. Like the woman suspected of adultery, there are clear priestly guidelines for conduct in this case. Like the Sotah ordeal, the status of the Nazirite is a matter of individual choice. Also like the woman of the Sotah ritual, the Nazirite comes to the tent of meeting to offer a sacrifice. Drinking is mentioned in both texts: the woman's drinking of the potion (5:24), and the Nazirite's renunciation of it (6:3). The hair of both supplicants is mentioned: the woman's hair is unbound (5:18), and the Nazirite's hair grows long until the end of the period of the vow, when it is cut and burned 'under the sacrifice of the peace offering' (6:18).

Our text, then, belongs to a set of prescriptions on priestly ritual. These texts share a number of verbal patterns (such as the term for breaking faith, *m'l*, sacrificial offerings, hair, and drinking). On a more general level, all four of these legal texts have to do with the separation of an individual from the community: lepers, those who must pay restitution, women suspected of adultery, and nazirites. The rituals are prescribed to regulate the separation and reintegration of these marginalised individuals.

Numbers 30, which concerns responsibility for oaths sworn (terms include 'by women'), provides an interesting counterpart to Num 5. Both involve women's actions, powerful or binding speech, and the consequences of these actions for the men responsible for the women and for the community as a whole. Num 30 is the second of two or three (see Num 36 on inheritance) long legal passages concerning women in Numbers, and it shares specific words and phrases with Num 5, such as the idiomatic 'he shall bear her guilt' (*wenasa' 'et 'awonah*, Num 30:16, cf. 5:31). This expression, which appears also in Ex 28:38 and Lev 16:22, involves a transfer or substitution of guilt from one party to another. In Num 5, the guilt is not transferred but assigned to the woman if she is found guilty. In both Num 5 and Num 30, though, the religious and legal question seems to be how to assign guilt or responsibility to women in light of their subordinate (social) status with respect to men.

More to the point, these texts ask, 'Given her subordinate status, can a woman *really* transgress or swear an oath? Can she bear responsibility or guilt for her actions or oaths?' The contrast is instructive: the woman who turns astray in Num 5 *does* bear her own guilt, while the daughter or wife who swears an oath in Num 30 transfers that responsibility to her father or husband (though a widow does bear guilt for her own oaths). Num 5 involves possible adulterous action by the woman and applies powerful speech (a curse) to address it, whereas Num 30 involves powerful speech (oaths) taken by women and the remedies needed to control it. In both cases the problem is a woman's discretionary action, but powerful speech is the solution in one case and the problem in the other.

To borrow the half-empty and half-full metaphor of Alice Bach, Num 30 represents a recognition that women are capable of powerful, binding speech (half full), but it also implies the strict control of these actions by the fathers or husbands of these women (half empty). From a contem-

porary feminist standpoint, we can see both these episodes as expressions of male anxiety toward the free agency of women, an anxiety that applies to words and deeds alike. Such an anxiety can be inferred from the lengthy and redundant nature of the Sotah ritual and from the detail of Num 30, which specifies multiple conditions and scenarios for the responsibility attaching to women's oaths. It cannot be known exactly what historical and legal conditions led to these formulations, but the male fear of women's unrestricted or transgressive behavior is evident in both texts. Part persons and part property, women can act independently (as sexual and speaking agents) to disrupt the male order, the flow of the patriarchal signifier, so to speak.

TALMUDIC READING OF THE TEXT: TRACTATE SOTAH

How did the early rabbis understand the meaning and efficacy of the text? The Babylonian Talmud (c. 500 CE), which contains an extensive tractate called Sotah that includes the earlier text of the Mishnah (c. 200 CE), offers some clues. There the rabbis report that the practice of the Sotah ritual was abandoned (assuming it was ever practiced). Why? According to the Babylonian Talmud, 'When adulterers became many, the ordeal of bitter water was cancelled' (Sotah 9:8, Neusner 1984: 270). If the Sotah was truly believed to have divine efficacy, if its supernatural power was guaranteed, then it would make no sense to abandon the practice. If anything, it should have intensified. But if the Sotah functioned as a form of social and psychological control, then its power would recede in the face of widespread corruption. The issue here is not so much the unequal treatment of men and women under the biblical law as the lamentable condition of public morality in general. Because the Sotah is a form of social control, it will not work when standards sink.

Was it discontinued? The destruction of the Temple and subsequent diaspora would have made a priestly ritual like this difficult to maintain. Yet Haberman shows that ongoing rabbinic preoccupation with the ritual shows that it lives on in memory and midrashic tradition. There is also an apparent reference to the practice also in the Protevangelium of James, a non-canonical infancy gospel in the Christian tradition from the second or third century C.E. When Jewish authorities discover that Mary is pregnant before she has married Joseph, the high priest tells Joseph and Mary: 'I will give you [both] to drink the water of the conviction of the Lord, and it will make manifest your sins before your eyes'. The priest then sends them both into the wilderness, and when they return unharmed, the priest says, 'If the Lord God has not made manifest your sins, neither do I condemn you'.⁵ Even though the details of this ordeal depart greatly from Numbers 5, the narrative identifies a temple priest presiding over a case in which adultery is suspected without the standard evidence needed to convict. For a text that likely originates outside Palestine long after the destruction of the temple, the Protevangelium appears to attest the lasting influence of the Sotah ritual far from priestly and rabbinic circles.⁶ Despite the widespread circulation of the Protevangelium of James and the Mishnah, which were roughly contemporary, it remains unclear what the ritual meant to Jews and early Christians or even whether it was practiced in the first place.

The reading of the Sotah text in Tractate Sotah is too lengthy to review here, but three themes deserve some discussion: writing and Torah, male guilt, and the related theme of declining morality. While these themes certainly reflect the historical and cultural perspective of rabbinic Judaism, they also draw directly and cogently from biblical tradition. As they often do, the rabbis

proliferate layers of meaning and texts in their commentary on the Sotah ritual. Nothing about their engagement suggests a lack of seriousness toward the text, yet we read that the ritual itself has been discontinued. Why, then, do the rabbis continue to write and dispute about the Sotah? Because it appears in the Torah, it demands careful legal commentary, especially if it has been discontinued. The discontinuation of the entire set of sacrificial traditions after the destruction of the Temple demand rabbinical explanation, leading to new forms of ‘sacrifice’ based on Torah study and ethical action (Fishbane 1998: 123–135). The Sotah, a text that is emphatically about texts, was no exception. Rabbinic preoccupation with this text testifies to the centrality of Sotah to the tradition, even after its official discontinuation.

But the rabbis venture two interesting and related explanations for the discontinuation of the Sotah: moral decline and male guilt:

When murderers became many, the rite of breaking the heifer’s neck was cancelled... When adulterers became many, the ordeal of bitter water was cancelled. And Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai cancelled it, since it is said, ‘I will not punish your daughters when they commit whoredom, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery, for they themselves [i.e., the men] go apart with whores’ (Hos 4:14). (Sotah 9:8, Neusner 1984: 270)

The rabbis adduce many texts to support their claim that times are bad, including Judg. 17:6, Deut. 15:9, and Isa. 3:16 (Sotah 9:10, Neusner 1984: 273–274). Like the situations described in these biblical texts, the time of the Sotah’s suspension is marked by moral corruption so severe that divine intervention (judgment and exoneration) is withheld. A large part of what has gone wrong, of course, is that men in particular are sinful. In this sense, one could argue that by resorting to the position that moral corruption is rampant, the rhetorical equivalent of ‘a pox on all your houses’, the rabbis have ruled against a practice that discriminates against women on the grounds that everyone is corrupt.

In the laments about the deterioration of values, one can perhaps detect an egalitarian tendency that implies men are culpable for faithlessness, as in Yohanan ben Zakkai’s citation of Hos. 4 above. What’s good for the goose, he suggests, should be good for the gander. But there are also hints that the rabbis are uncomfortable with the whole process: one rules against a woman repeating the ritual (Sotah 2:6, Neusner 1984: 125). Another rabbi even discounts the efficacy of the ritual if the man is also guilty: ‘If the husband is not free from iniquity, the water will not put his wife to the test’ (Sotah 9:10, Neusner 1984: 276). A contemporary rabbinic reading glosses the repeated word ‘man’ of v. 11 to mean ‘too much a man’.⁷ It is thus possible that discontinuation of the ritual reflects the rabbis’ distaste for its clear double-standard, but such a reading of the tractate is only speculation, since it depends on cultural and historical details no longer available. In this sense, the Sotah and its discontinuation remain a mystery, so that no conclusive judgment can be made on its meaning or the meaning of its abandonment.

Let me make an analogy between Sotah and debates on the Indian rite of *sati*, in which widows kill themselves at the funerals of their husbands. Citing Ashis Nandy’s notion of ‘critical traditionalism’, which combines respect with skepticism toward modernism as well as nativism, Dipesh Chakrabarty engages the question of how to evaluate a violent ritual. While Nandy does not defend *sati*, he distinguishes between opposition to the practice and respect for its values, suggest-

ing that contemporary critics can choose how to evaluate such a tradition. Chakrabarty modifies Nandy's position by doubting the full accessibility of tradition to contemporary eyes: 'But the past also comes to me in ways that I cannot see or figure out – or can see or figure out only retrospectively. It comes to me as taste, as embodied memories, as cultural training of the senses, and reflexes, often as things that I do not even know that I carry' (Chakrabarty 2002: 46). By this account, says Chakrabarty, 'I am to some extent a tool in the hands of pasts and traditions' (47). The implications of this discussion of *sati* for the study of biblical sacrifice are twofold: first, modern attitudes toward sacrifice can blur distinctions between symbolic and material realities, conflating the two or mistaking one for the other. Second, ancient rites and traditions may be essentially obscure to contemporary understanding, and they may even be capable of surviving unnoticed. Traditions, it seems, are too rich to sort out by scholarly analysis, especially when they implicate those of us who study them.

How are we implicated? A short answer would be that insofar as we can *recognise* the motivations and the actions described in Numbers 5, insofar as we take as *natural* this subordination of wives to husbands and religious authority, and, finally, insofar as we might overlook beliefs and practices about the power of words (biblical and non-biblical), we are implicated in the tradition of Sotah. One implication of this line of thinking is that biblical scholarship cannot ignore the history of interpretation (Aichele 2001). Many strategies become possible at this point, but in recognition of this implication, I suggest strategies of counterreading Num. 5:11-31 that cast the moral position of the suspecting husband in a questionable light.

COUNTER-READING THE CURSE: REVERSAL AND PARODY

With the suggestion that Sotah, in the context of Numbers, bespeaks male anxiety and ambivalence toward the status and power of women, we have already begun a counter-reading of the text. I now carry this subversive reading or counter-reading further by means of reversal and parody. There is a basic and often-overlooked symmetry in the Sotah text: hidden actions and dispositions require a ritual ordeal with hidden mechanisms and power. Causes that cannot be proven lead to a mysterious trial with no evidence. Unverifiable accusations require unverifiable investigation. Terms for concealment characterise the woman's act of infidelity (v. 13). The spirit of jealousy that comes upon the husband is intangible. Likewise, the bitter water contains curses that have been blotted (or rinsed) from a book. This water then acts away from view, inside the woman's body. A murky solution to a murky problem?

One of the most fundamental feminist strategies for working with a text is to read it so closely that it begins to unravel and reverse itself; this type of reading has affinities with deconstruction. In the case of the Sotah ritual, a close reading would observe the repetitions in the text, such as the two commands for the priest to bring the woman before Yahweh (vv. 16, 18) and the two orders for the woman to drink the water (vv. 24, 26), asking why this is the case. One reason for such repetitions can be a kind of anxiety or 'repetition compulsion' (Exum 1993). In a text about a ritual triggered by a famously compulsive emotion, jealousy, such repetition may be only one sign of male anxiety. A close reading of the husband's 'spirit of jealousy' reveals male anxiety behind the detailed 'rage for order' in the ritual. The punishment for the woman found guilty in the ritual is less severe than the death penalty prescribed for adulterers in Lev. 20:10, but the woman's childlessness appears to represent the severe curse of *krt* (Wold 1979: 23).

A related feminist approach is to apply a degree of parody or satire to the text, even simply by quoting it. Just as a comedian or child can ridicule an authority figure merely by repeating his or her words, so can feminist critics (in a more sophisticated way) satirise patriarchal speech by repeating it. According to Luce Irigaray,

One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it... It means to resubmit herself... to 'ideas', in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible', by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means 'to unveil' the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere*: another case of the persistence of 'matter', but also of 'sexual pleasure'. (Irigaray, 1985: 76)

According to Judith Butler, strategies of parody can be used to counterbalance the 'regulatory fictions' of sex and gender. Such tactics are possible because categories of sex and gender are themselves 'multiple contested sites of meaning' (Butler 1990: 32). While the Sotah ritual itself may not appear parodic, one can provide a parodic interpretation through careful analysis of text and context. Given its unique position in Numbers and the Bible, not to mention in a rabbinic or contemporary context in which the practice has been abandoned, the Sotah can be seen as exceptional. As I will suggest with a ritual tradition cited in the book of Ruth, the distancing from a ritual as a thing of the past automatically can make it curious or quaint, and possibly silly. Such a shift is by no means automatic, and in the case of the Sotah ritual, I only claim that such a reading is possible from a post-biblical standpoint, not that it is somehow encoded into the text.

Let me return to the symmetry of the text: hidden actions and dispositions lead to a trial with hidden mechanisms. Did she or didn't she? Unverifiable (and unfalsifiable) accusations lead to an unverifiable (and unfalsifiable) investigation. Instead of scrutinising the woman, whose guilt is uncertain without a supernatural ordeal, one could equally scrutinise the man, whose *suspicion* has uncertain foundations and a supernatural quality (Bach 1999). The 'spirit of jealousy' that can inaugurate the Sotah ritual is an unstable factor in the marriage and community. Like the 'evil spirit' that descends upon Saul in 1 Sam 16:13-16, and like biblical curses themselves, the 'spirit of jealousy' has the power to act capriciously on the husband and wife. It is so powerful that a ritual combining a memorial sacrifice, an oath, and an ordeal must rise to control it. But as many biblical narratives suggest, the human attempt to control or harness such unstable forces can often fail; the story of Balaam later in Numbers (discussed below) is a perfect example. The rabbinic preoccupation with the ritual after its discontinuation may reflect ambivalence whether to grant the 'spirit of jealousy' a hearing, particularly after the loss of the Temple's sanctifying and legitimating power.

The ritual and text of Sotah place great emphasis on memory and writing; the sacrifice will bring 'iniquity to remembrance' (5:15). But how? How can such a ritual render suspicion and missing evidence into anything substantial? The torah and memory of the Sotah are insubstantial, counterbalanced by the spirit of jealousy and the erased curses. The emphatic place of memory,

writing, and ‘torah’ in the Sotah text seem designed to compensate for the lack of evidence and justification for the ritual. Almost compulsive in its use of writing, memory, and repetition, the text of Sotah betrays its own fragile claims to justice. Counterreading the text exposes this impulse to write, remember, sacrifice, and instruct as an effort not simply to bring iniquity to remembrance, but also to bring private uncertainty to public ‘remembrance’ and resolution.

PARODY: BALAAM AND RUTH

Parody offers a critical resource to feminist counterreadings of the Sotah. Parody is not a so much a divergence from the text as a continuation of its tradition. The two texts I wish to invoke in my parodic reading of the Sotah ritual are Num. 22-24, the story of Balaam’s blessing and cursing, and Ruth 4:7-12. The first text demonstrates how blessings and curses can defy human intentions, especially non-Israelite human intentions. The story provokes laughter at the expense of the foreign prophet, Balaam, who is ordered by the Moabite king to curse the Israelites. Already depicted as a buffoon whose donkey can see the angel of Yahweh before he can, Balaam blesses under the command to curse, even when he tries from two additional locations (23:11-30).

The Sotah text offers less access to humour than the Balaam narrative. One can imagine, however, the scenario in which the woman is vindicated and her uterus does not drop. The husband in this case must now face the entire community as one who gave in to the ‘spirit of jealousy’, whose suspicion was groundless. If, on the other hand, the husband’s suspicion is affirmed, his reward is a wife (presuming he wishes to remain married) who cannot bear children. Little hermeneutical imagination is needed, then, to imagine how this ritual could ‘backfire’. The logic of reversal so central to the Balaam story, in which curses become blessings, presents readers of the Sotah text with the possibility that the curse may somehow become a blessing – perhaps by the humiliation of the husband and priest, who may seem ludicrous in their efforts, or by the vindication of the woman. Also, from a retrospective standpoint, when the ritual had been abandoned or at least placed at some historical distance, the high level of detail could presumably look rather silly, especially if the reader were inclined to doubt the efficacious power of such a ritual. The sheer uniqueness of the text itself exposes it to the risk of marginal status, if not outright disregard.

A more apt and subtle parallel to the parodic tendencies of the Sotah ritual appears in Ruth 4, the scene of the exchange between Boaz and the nameless kinsman. Unlike Num 22-24, which offers broad humour at the expense of a foreign prophet and king, the humor here is at the expense of Israelites; it is a very gentle humor, but real nonetheless, distanced from the standpoint of the narrator and, in the context of the story, it shows the men to be somewhat inactive, self-important, and just silly.

In *Lethal Love*, Mieke Bal applies the weak Boaz of a Victor Hugo poem, ‘Boaz endormi’, to the book of Ruth: not the Boaz of strength, as his name suggests, but a fearful man (3:11) ‘incapable of changing his sad situation as a childless widower’ (Bal 1987: 71). His name is ironic, just as the scene at the gate only ratifies what has already been set in motion by Ruth at the threshing-floor. Built into a larger analysis of the narrative structure of Ruth, Bal’s analysis establishes a basic parodic or ironic structure for Ruth. The narration provides some justification for such a reading:

Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one took off a sandal and gave it to

the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when the next-of-kin said to Boaz, 'Acquire it for yourself', he took off his sandal. Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, 'Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance'.
(Ruth 4:7-10a)

The crux of the scene at the gate is the explanation of the sandal exchange in v. 7: 'Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel'.

The verse breaks the narrative frame, glossing the practice of 'redeeming and exchanging' for an audience unfamiliar with it; the verse begins and ends with an explanatory phrase, setting it off. This phenomenon, often called 'repetitive resumption' (*Wiederaufnahme*), suggests the text was inserted for some reason, in this case, perhaps as a gloss to the social ritual being performed. The verse also exhibits phonetic and semantic parallelism, and it contains four terms for ratifying and codifying. The custom, bracketed by the narrator as alien, becomes quaint, even humorous, to the reader who imagines this exchange of sandals. More interestingly, the ceremony differs strikingly from the version in Deuteronomy 25:7-10, in which the woman plays a prominent role. There, instead of exchanging sandals, the widow removes the recalcitrant brother's sandal, spits in his face, and says, "So shall it be done to the man who will not build up his brother's house". And his name will be called in Israel "the house of him whose sandal was removed" (25:9-10).

Ruth exaggerates the patriarchal nature of the levirate marriage law, making it seem silly and obsolete. Since Ruth is a story about women arguably told from a woman's perspective (particularly the women of Bethlehem (in 1:19 and 4:14-17)), I suggest the book and this scene represent a form of women's writing (*écriture féminine*), which subverts patriarchal discourse by means of parody and perhaps, as Irigaray says in *This Sex Which is not One*, 'mimicry' and 'playful repetition' (Irigaray 1985: 76).

The book of Ruth is framed by the women of Bethlehem (1:19 and 4:14-17); when these women greet Naomi, they hear of the bitterness that summarises the obstacle Ruth and the story must overcome. Like a Greek chorus, they return at the end of the book, after the scene of the men at the gate, to comment on her good fortune, and even more significantly, to name the child (v. 17). As several scholars have noted, the book makes the women's perspective and action more central than the men's. The real effort and ingenuity belong to Ruth, not Boaz; the legal exchange at the gate only ratifies the plan already set in motion by Ruth and Naomi in the preceding scene. By naming and celebrating the son 'born to Naomi' (not Boaz), the women underline their centrality (and men's marginality) in the book.

According to Edward Campbell (1975), Ruth may have been written by a woman. Rather than speculate on the sex of the book's author, I suggest a view of the book as a form of women's writing (*écriture féminine*), which works against patriarchal discourse by several strategies, including Irigaray's 'mimicry' and 'playful repetition' (Irigaray 1985: 76). What does the ritual establish? That the one with the right to redeem, who remains nameless, is willing to give up his

right to Ruth and Naomi: 'I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it'. Like Onan, the recalcitrant kinsman in the story of Tamar (Gen. 38), this nameless kinsman suffers no sanction for his derogation of duty toward Ruth and Naomi. His statement commits himself to no action; it only ratifies his refusal to act, along with an agreement to give up his right to act.

With all the pomp of a public trial, before ten witnesses and presumably many others, the ritual of exchange in the story accomplishes only that Boaz may continue helping Ruth and Naomi without any interference from the kinsman who has shown no inclination to do so anyway. It is a case of men behaving self-importantly. In a story in which the real actions are performed by Ruth and Naomi, even the traditionally-male religious task of blessing comes from the women of Bethlehem (v. 14). Commentators have noted the silliness of the passage in context: followed as it is by a chorus of women who frame the book at beginning and end, the scene at the gate takes on the quality of an empty bureaucratic gesture that matters much less than the real work accomplished by Ruth, Naomi, and the women of Bethlehem.⁸ Perhaps emerging from a tradition of women storytellers, Ruth subverts the traditional authority of men by placing their ritual in the historic past and between the more compelling scenes of the main characters.

The evidence of distancing or parody in Numbers 5 is less clear than it appears to be in Ruth. Yet the text is a clear 'outlyer' in Numbers, specifying terms to a unique ritual that takes place in a setting distant from the world of the text's redaction. In the context of a book in which curses can quickly and comically backfire and in which the whole question of women's ability to perform speech acts is under debate, the position of the Sotah in Numbers is unquestionably marginal. And even though Numbers 5 offers no hermeneutical clue of women's agency comparable to the women of Bethlehem in Ruth, the option of reading Numbers 5 as strange and parodic seems at least plausible, even for an ancient audience.

CONCLUSION

With its women-generated blessing, Ruth is in some ways the opposite of the Sotah text and its male-generated curses. The subversion of male authority so close to the surface in Ruth only emerges in Num 5 from a close reading of the text in its canonical and post-biblical context. While it is much less likely that Numbers 5 comes from a women's storytelling perspective, it nonetheless can be understood to have an ironic and parodic position in the canon of the Bible. How? By its uniqueness among ritual texts, its quasi-magical methods, and mostly by a solemnity and specificity that match the compulsive attitude of a jealous person. The ritual's repetition and detail are symptomatic of *ruack qin'ah*, the Saul-like jealousy with which the text begins. Together, these details make a counterreading plausible and consistent with biblical tradition.

My analysis of the Sotah proceeds from the central observation that biblical curses in general, and this text in particular, are complex literary compositions rather than mere records of ancient belief and practice. Evidence for the influence of pre-biblical texts and traditions on biblical texts, as well as elaborate procedures of editing, reveals a biblical text that is more cooked than raw. The power of biblical curses derives as much or more from when they are *mentioned* as when they are *performed*. In its biblical context, the Sotah text shows itself to be one of several ritual and legal texts concerned with the separation and reintegration of exceptional individuals in the community. Like the Nazirite and the leper, the woman suspected of adultery must undergo a

rigorous ritual procedure in order to address her exceptional situation and protect the community; but unlike them, the status of the suspected woman itself is ambiguous. The cumbersome apparatus of writing and ritual assigned to her case seems to overcompensate for the ambiguous status of women and the flimsy nature of the case. Even though it undoubtedly protects the safety of the women in question, the ritual nevertheless stakes the credibility of the priest, the husband, and the ritual system on shaky moral and legal ground.

The literary *mention* of curses, in addition to their performance, reinforces Keim's anthropological emphasis on their social function. The woman's visit to the priestly sanctuary, along with solemn oaths, memorial sacrifices, and divinatory potions, wield many kinds of power over the woman's disheveled head, creating a powerful deterrence to adultery and a powerful inducement to a prolapsed uterus in case of guilt. The husband, too, must weigh the consequences of being right in his suspicions, in which case his hopes for children by his wife are ended, or being wrong, in which case he will be publicly recognised as one who gave in to a false 'spirit of jealousy'.

As Haberman shows, the rabbis preserve the repressive structure of the Sotah ritual in a textual form that serves the tradition after the destruction of the Second Temple. But the rabbis of the Talmud demonstrate a willingness to question the morality of the Sotah – not simply by doubting the morality of their age overall, but also by pointing out the hypocrisy of men's behavior. What is more, their preoccupations with morality and textuality illumine these same tendencies in the biblical text.

But the scholarly impasse on the Sotah cannot be addressed simply by reading the text in its biblical and rabbinic context. I have suggested counterreadings which, if plausible, bear on the text's ability to accommodate more than one perspective and voice. The two strategies of counter-reading proposed here, reversal and parody, begin with a close reading of the passage in its immediate context, and they proceed through consideration of biblical, rabbinic, and contemporary contexts and understandings of how categories of writing, speech, and the body are interrelated. These readings aspire only to be plausible, and they offer no conclusive remedy to the potentially corrosive tendencies of the text.

While they differ on key points, the readings of Bach and Haberman share a central conviction with Fishbane, Milgrom, and others: the Sotah tradition perseveres through pre-biblical, biblical, and post-biblical history, despite the radical differences between these moments. The text of Sotah, like much of biblical tradition, holds past and present, writing and speech, in dynamic tension. The curse and ritual were already ancient when the text was written, but they did not disappear even after the ritual was officially discontinued. Ideas of powerful speech and ritual may have been displaced onto writing, biblical text, and eventually a biblical tradition that persists today. The persistent need to turn back to the Sotah long after its time reflects its deep connection to unresolved conflicts within the categories of writing, women, territory, and law.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ I wish to thank the following people for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this article: Jane Aiken, David Burr, Joe Eska, Susan Farquhar, Ann-Marie Knoblauch, and an anonymous reviewer for this journal.
- ² According to Jan Assmann, the Exodus represents an 'Errinerungsfigur' in ancient Israel, and the book of Deuteronomy is a paradigm of cultural 'Mnemotechnik'. See Assmann 1992: 200, 212.
- ³ See J. Hillis Miller (2001: 77–91). Derrida argues that the notion of signature depends on a mixture of originality and duplication; likewise, Miller shows, Austin's notion of speech act fails to distinguish sharply between use and mention in speech acts.
- ⁴ To dismiss the Sotah simply as a form of obsolete superstition ignores its social function and continuities with later, post-Enlightenment practices. When Alice Bach asserts that 'ancient readers probably believed that if a woman drank the ritual water she would not survive', she unnecessarily blurs the distinction between a criticism of patriarchy and a criticism of ancient belief (Bach 1999, 514). Against this tendency, Bach's overall analysis concentrates on the social system that produces and benefits from the Sotah.
- ⁵ *The Protevangelium of James* 16:1-2, in Cameron (1982: 116–117). I wish to thank Elizabeth Struthers Malbon for showing me this text.
- ⁶ According to Tim Horner, the understanding and account of the ritual more closely approximate the Mishnaic version than Numbers and thus testify to the strong connection between this text and Jewish tradition (Horner 2004: 328–329).
- ⁷ This reading was reported to me by Rabbi Manes Kogan, who knew of no written reference for it.
- ⁸ Noting the 'heavy patriarchal cast' of the scene in contrast to the rest of the book, Phyllis Trible observes the 'small ironies' that it produces: 'If Orpah is a model to be emulated, the unnamed kinsman is a model to be avoided. If Boaz is now the patriarch in charge, it is two women who have summoned him to duty' (Trible 1978: 192–193).

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