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Reading the *Sotah* Text (Numbers 5:11-31): Holiness and a Hermeneutic Fit for Suspicion

Richard S. Briggs
University of Durham

Abstract

The *sotah* text of Num. 5:11-31 is a striking and ethically problematic passage concerned with a husband's jealousy and suspicion of his wife for adultery either real or imagined. It is argued that despite frequent labelling to the contrary, it is actually a passage about jealousy rather than adultery *per se*, and that historical-critical attempts to locate the described ritual in its ancient Near Eastern context are inconclusive with regard to substantial matters of interpretation. Various strategies for handling the ethical dimensions of the text are explored, including gender-specific and symbolic angles of approach. These are considered to be of limited value. The ethical issues presented by the text are then discussed with regard to its present canonical location in the book of Numbers. It is argued that owing to a unique combination of factors, an expected reading of the *sotah* text in its canonical context is one which is suspicious of the suspicion described in the passage. Some hermeneutical dimensions of this analysis are evaluated with a view to the wider question concerning theologically problematic passages in scripture.

Keywords

sotah, adultery, ordeal, suspicion, trust, hermeneutics

> It is a curious fact about the Bible, not sufficiently noted, that this book, which is the source of so much of our morality and theology, should also be the repository of so many stories which seem almost deliberately designed to question both morality and theology… It is not that these stories seem indifferent to morality or theology but rather that they seem to be carefully designed to confuse the moralist and the theologian, to say to him: take us seriously if you dare and see what happens!
>
> Josipovici 1999:49

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> Eifersucht ist eine Leidenschaft, die mit Eifer sucht, was Leiden schafft.
> attr. Schleiermacher, cited in Bell 1994:1

> Bill: [*After inflicting a terrible ordeal on 'The Bride' who had left him, massacring her wedding party, suspicious that she had cheated on him, but not knowing that the child she bore was his*] I mourned you for three months. And in the third month of mourning you, I tracked you down…So, I find you. And what do I find? Not only are you not dead, you're getting married to some * jerk and you're pregnant. I… overreacted.
> The Bride: You overreacted? Is that your explanation?
> Tarantino 2004

Numbers 5:11-31—A Reading

Every writer on this passage is required at some point to summarise or synthesise the narrative to get it in focus for subsequent analysis. But one of our concerns will be to investigate the appropriate hermeneutic for such a passage as this, and can it be that every text requires analysis and dissection as praeparatio *for the grand ethical* propositio*? Surely not, especially with Numbers 5. Therefore, with no apologies to Kierkegaard, who thought that 'in the world of ideas our age is putting on a veritable clearance sale', and who suspected that many a reader longed for nothing more than to ride side by side with Abraham up Mount Moriah (Kierkegaard 1985:41,44), and, by extension, watch from the edge of the tabernacle floor, here is our text.*

It was early morning. The man and the woman sit together for breakfast. Freshly baked bread, vegetables, a skin full of yoghurt. They eat in silence, eager not to waste the cool of the day in idle chatter. There is work to be done, and today there is special business to attend to. He gathers up some barley meal, and leads her soon to the priest. 'This is my grain gift', he says. 'And this is my wife'.

Silent she stumbles forward, struggling to take in the unfamiliar setting. The tabernacle tent until now seen only from afar. The priest—refusing to catch her eye. He dips a small clay jug into the holy water, then stoops to the floor and pinches together a small handful of dust, sprinkling it into the jug. He reaches for her hair, and she flinches. Her husband pushes her forward again, sullen. In a moment, her hair tumbles down over her back, as the priest pulls her silent hands up before her, and places the grain gift into them.

The priest speaks: to her, for her, at her. 'If…' If no man lay with her, if she is not defiled, be clear. 'But if…' Then she is to swear the curse. She will be a curse for her people. Her thigh will fall. Her belly will flood. The water will eat away her insides. All this she is to swear. And finally, when he has stopped with the longest of pauses, she speaks: 'Amen. Amen.' The words barely reach to her husband.

The priest writes the curse on to the scroll, then dips it into the water, and they all watch, transfixed, as the letter of the law bleeds into the liquid. He removes the grain gift, scoops out a handful, and burns it on the altar. She is still watching the flash of smoke when he raises her cupped hands to her mouth, gripping the jug together, and requires her to drink. She drinks. They wait.

They return home, until the silence has completely filled the day.

She had been an adulteress. She had been pregnant. But the sickness which follows is not morning sickness, and the emptiness inside her is complete.

When the husband is jealous, perhaps it is his honour at stake. Perhaps the crowd will never accept him while she attracts disgrace. This is the law of jealousy. Happy are those who never need to be jealous.

* * *

It was early morning. They breakfasted in silence. Freshly baked bread, vegetables, a skin full of yoghurt. They arrive at the priest. 'This is my grain gift'. 'And this is my wife'. He mixes. He unties. He curses. 'Amen. Amen.' He burns. She drinks. They wait.

They return home, until the silence has completely filled the day.

She had not lain with another man. She was no adulteress. Nothing happened.

The next day they eat breakfast again in the cool of the morning. There is plenty of work awaiting them in the fields. But now there is a new reason not to pass the time in conversation. Not now. Not, perhaps, ever.

When the husband is jealous, perhaps it is his honour at stake. Perhaps the crowd will never accept him while she attracts disgrace. If she is innocent what does she have to fear? Happy are those who do not need to prove their innocence by drinking the bitter water.

* * *

It was early the next morning. They sit together at breakfast. What has he done? What was he thinking? He is free from blame, but she has to know why. He pauses. Yes, she was innocent. But he was jealous, and the jealousy was unbearable. Perhaps he…overreacted.

Overreacted? Is that his explanation?

The Text and its Subject Matter

Numbers 5:11-31—the *sotah* text.[1] Two different scenarios are combined into a not quite seamless whole:

A (vv.11-12a) Introduction	
B1 (12b-14a) A man's wife has been unfaithful	B2 (14b) A man is jealous of his wife although she has not been unfaithful
C (15) The man brings her to the priest, along with an offering for her	
D (16-18) The priest introduces the ordeal	
E1 (20-22) The curse on the woman if she has been unfaithful	E2 (19) The annulling of the curse if she has not been unfaithful
F (23-26) The priest makes her drink and presents the offering to God	
G1 (27) If she has been unfaithful, the curse will take effect	G2 (28) If she has not been unfaithful, she is cleared
H1 (29) This is the law of jealousy, for when the woman has strayed	H2 (30) … or for when the husband is jealous
I (31) The man shall be clear of iniquity, but the woman will bear her iniquity	

[1] The *sotah* is the woman, the 'wayward wife' as the rabbis called her (Gruschcow 2006: 1), but by extension, and especially because the relevant Mishnah tractate is entitled *sotah*, it becomes also the text, and sometimes the act of 'turning' which occasions it, from שׂטה—turning aside; going astray, cf. Num.5:12, 19, 20, 29 (*NIDOTTE* 3: 1230).

Source critics tried various ways of reconstructing the two different documents alleged to lie behind this final text, a project which has demonstrated that any criteria of demarcation mapped into the text can duly be reflected back out as putative separate sources. Is there an oath tradition and an ordeal tradition, for example? Nevertheless, the paradigmatic attempt to discern sources was that of Stade who allotted vv.11-13aa, 13b, 15-17, 18ab-b, 19-20, 22a, 23-24, 25bb-26a and 31 to a text about a guilty wife and the rest to the case of jealousy (separated texts conveniently set out in Stade 1895:176-77). Details aside, the obvious suggestion that there is here a conflation of a procedure for punishing the guilty adulterer and a separate procedure for trying the wife suspected of adultery has a certain plausibility, and marks out most variations of the source-critical enterprise on this passage through the twentieth century. [2]

In keeping with trends in biblical scholarship generally, the tide turned in the 1970s and these days most commentators will admit that it is not so very difficult to read the finished version as a coherent whole, if one only has the wit and imagination to allow for a little dramatic license in the telling of the tale.[3] Thus the climactic moment of the woman's drinking the water occurs at the end of v.26 and is anticipated, at the beginning of v.24, as the act he shall make her perform. Likewise the repetition of the effects of the potion in the anticipatory oath (v.22) and in the case of the results of any unfaithfulness (v.27) need not suggest an authorial unawareness that something has been said twice. Literary cohesion and narrative artistry is the order of the day: 'the text is cemented together by the sevenfold repetition of the verb *tame*', "pollute"', writes Jacob Milgrom, and 'the unity of the text is projected into clear relief by its structure' (1990:351). One might almost borrow

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[2] A convenient chart of the minutiae of early source-critical divisions is provided by a very unimpressed Morgenstern 1925:128. Updates in, e.g., Budd 1984:62-64; Ashley 1993:120-22; Davies 1995:49-50, with full-scale charting of source strata analysis in Jeon 2007.

[3] The shift was marked in the important articles of Fishbane 1974 and Brichto 1975, who avers that scholars 'have plied scalpel and suture to dissect and excise and then reconstitute a text presumably conflated and glossed by anonymous redactors who, for reasons known only to themselves, saw fit to garble what Deity had once made clear to Moses' (1975:55).

the comment which Robert Alter makes regarding Numbers 16 and apply it here: 'The biblical account actually seems devised to confuse the two stories and the two modes of [judgment]…[and] would prefer us to see [them] as one, or at least as somehow blurred together', (Alter 1981:133-34).

In fact, there remain major interpretative issues which hinge on the considerations of minor redaction: Milgrom himself exempts both vv.21 and 31 from the original, and cites them as key to understanding the meaning (1990:351), and then Ellens (2004:63-73) argues at length for the integrity of v.21 against Milgrom, but locates even more weight in the addition of v.31, where the original concerns of the suspicious husband are, she suggests, broadened out to include the concerns of the community, with the divine penalty on the woman being the remedy to the community's (rather than the husband's) suspicion (Ellens 2004: 73).

If, however, we do want to assert that the text is a unified whole, then more substantive questions come into focus. In the first place, the startling nature of the text is now to be attributed to some intentional communicative act on the part of the author, and not the long-gestated confusion of ancient rituals no longer seen clearly. Secondly, if this is not 'a text about an adulterer' merged with 'a text about a suspected adulterer', then what is this one single text about? What is the subject matter of the *sotah* text? Commentators typically offer one of two main ways of characterising their discussion of this passage, either in terms of 'ordeal' or 'suspected adultery'. The analyses of ten major commentaries are entitled as follows:

'The Ordeal of Jealousy' (Gray 1903:43-56)
'The Divine Judgment in Cases of Suspected Adultery' (Noth 1968:47-52)
'The Ordeal of Jealousy' (Wenham 1981:79-85)
'Priests and the Ordeal' (Budd 1984:60-67)
'The Case of the Suspected Adulteress' (Milgrom 1990:37-43)
'The Jealous Husband' (Ashley 1993:117-35)
'The Ordeal of the Errant Wife' (Levine 1993:200-12, though he also talks of 'Suspicions of Marital Infidelity', 192-99)
'The Ordeal of Jealousy' (Davies 1995:48-57)
'The Case of Suspected Adultery' (Olson 1996:35-39)
'Legal Instruction about the Trial of Jealousy' (Knierim and Coats 2005:76-84)

Doubtless the rabbinic tradition which developed out of this passage and which became the subject matter of the Mishnah tractate *Sotah* has influenced this labeling: if the Jewish tradition wants to talk about the subject raised in terms of straying or being 'wayward', then the focus is indeed on the woman and her (possible) sin, or arguably the procedure for seeing whether she is a *sotah*.

There are, however, several indications that what this text is about is not primarily adultery or unfaithfulness, nor the mechanics or unusual nature of the trial by ordeal. No, what the text is about is jealousy. (Interestingly, while several commentaries do entitle their discussions 'the ordeal of jealousy' they do not really discuss the significance or nature of the jealousy, and even more interestingly, in light of what I shall argue below, Ashley's section on 'The Jealous Husband' spends all its time focusing on the woman and her experience, and is not about jealousy at all.)

The concluding summary names this law a תורת הקנאת, a 'law of jealousy' (v.29). Furthermore, when the two different cases in view are introduced at the beginning of the passage, they are both specifically described in terms of the רוח־קנאה (the 'spirit of jealousy') coming upon the man, whether his wife has gone astray (vv.12b-14a) or not (v.14b). It is the second case, of course, which has specifically caused the interpretative trouble down through the ages. One may not like the idea that a woman guilty of adultery should drink a magic potion and suffer a terrible fate, but this worry is framed by the larger knowledge that the penalty for a wife caught in adultery in Israel was death (Deut. 22:22). It is arguable that the moral and hermeneutical problems raised by this are sufficient unto the day. But the complexity introduced by Numbers 5 is precisely the case where the woman is in fact innocent: here she is forced to submit to an ordeal with terrible consequences solely because she has a suspicious husband. It is the spirit of jealousy which is at work in this scenario, and the text offers a device for dealing with it. Thus what we have here is a procedure for dealing with the man's problem, and since his problem is caused by his wife, she is dragged into it (quite literally, one imagines). That the woman suffers trial by ordeal is incidental to the point of the passage, which is concerned with the rushing wind of the רוח־קנאה. The only study to notice this, as far as I am aware, is that of Deborah Ellens, who states unflinchingly that

the 'text describes the ritual prescription for a "malady" called רוח־קנאה, a "spirit of jealousy" or a "jealous rage" which overtakes a man who suspects his wife of infidelity' (2004:55) and goes on to suggest other structural markers in the passage which show that 'the law concerns the husband…[and] the antidote to jealous rage' (2004:74-75). Haberman is willing to go as far as saying that '*jealousy* is a dominant interest of the text' but the thrust of her argument is different since she pairs it, in due course, with a concern about the woman's possible impurity (2000:18-21).[4]

The uniqueness of the passage in the OT remains even if this shift in interpretative focus is permitted. Nowhere else do we read of a 'spirit of jealousy'. The nearest comparable concern, in Prov. 6:34-35, sees the husband who has committed adultery with another man's wife suffering at the hands of the wronged man himself, whose fury is aroused by his jealousy, and who attacks the adulterer physically on 'the day of revenge'. The adulterer, notes the author, 'lacks sense' (v.32), or, as McKane has it, is 'mentally deficient' (1970:330). The woman involved in adultery is not prominent in the Proverbs passage, save that she is the אשׁת רע, the evil woman of v.24, a distant figure to the man under instruction, hereby warned not to 'play with fire' (vv.27-28), and reminded, with a dubious sense of practical logic, that you can get a prostitute for only half a loaf of bread, so why risk your life on adultery (v.26)? In Numbers 5, of course, the jealous husband does not know who to vent his fury on, or even whether there is such a man at all. The risk is that the jealousy will be let loose on the wife.

Jealousy, then, will suffice as a shorthand label for what this text is about. Fishbane enters the caveat that '"jealous" meant something different to the translators of King James than to us', and he prefers to speak of an 'attentive and zealous concern for (personal) prerogatives or possessions'. He paraphrases תורת הקנאת as 'the jurisprudence regarding (personal) zeal (or attention to honor)'. Nevertheless, when explicating the matter, Fishbane still cites the second case, where there is no evidence at all, as 'suspicion, pure and simple', and describes the רוח־קנאה as 'a fit of suspicious (zealous) indignation' (Fishbane

[4] Somewhat oddly, Dozeman claims that the text focuses attention *away* from jealousy and towards God and the woman, rather than the husband (Dozeman 1998:67-68).

1974:35-36). One could be detained by further clarifications of the range of meanings appropriate to the קנא root, but on the whole these are not relevant to the straightforward use of the word in Numbers 5 (see Bell 1994:5-24; Grushcow 2006:33-35). In the meantime, 'jealousy' will do for the nexus of zeal and suspicion with which we are concerned.

The text and its subject matter are now in focus. The interpretation may begin in earnest, but first we must take the necessary detour through the hermeneutical wilderness of historical criticism. The collocation of wilderness and criticism will be seen in due course to be significant in the book of Numbers.

The Historical Background

The purpose of this section is largely negative. The historical background, or better—the world behind the text—is not the significant key to this passage, I shall argue.

Firstly, we do not know when the text was written. Source and tradition critics suppose that the text that we have is a product of P, which seems not unreasonable, though not entirely illuminating either. There is no evidence of any such practice(s) as are described in this passage occurring in biblical times in Israel. Various suggestions are put forward, which will be explored in more detail at appropriate points below: the text was never designed to be implemented; the text is symbolic of Israel in its prophetically denounced adulterous standing before a jealous God (the God Yhwh whose name is indeed 'jealous' (קנא), Exod. 34:14); or the text was an abstract ideal of the status of adultery, though presumably 'ideal' in the sense of 'unrealised' rather than something to which one might aspire.

Is the text a borrowing of other ancient Near-Eastern practices? Many scholars, following Fishbane, cite two stipulations from the Code of Hammurabi:

> 131 If her husband accuses his own wife (of adultery), although she has not been seized lying with another male, she shall swear (to her innocence by) an oath by the god, and return to her house.

> 132 If a man's wife should have a finger pointed against her in accusation involving another male, although she has not been seized lying with another male, she shall submit to the divine River Ordeal for her husband. (*CoS* 2:344)

Fishbane thinks these two scenarios relate to the two cases under consideration in Numbers 5 in that both texts concern separately a private suspicion and a public accusation (1974:36-38), though this seems to force the evidence slightly. Furthermore, the 'River Ordeal' is not the ordeal of the bitter water. McCarter has demonstrated that 'Israel shared with Mesopotamia a concept of judgment by river ordeal' but that this does not occur in OT legal texts (McCarter 1973:412), and Frymer-Kensky concludes that 'comparison with the river ordeal in Mesopotamia, and with the potion ordeals of Africa has led to a distortion of our view of this trial [Num. 5]' (1981:120). She concludes that Numbers 5 is best understood as a subcategory of 'poison ordeals' (Frymer 1976:639-40, though see below). Perhaps then it is an Israelite contextualisation of the ANE practice? Thus de Vaux plods his way across the holy land and notes with an attitude bordering on disappointment: 'If [the River Ordeal] is not found in Palestine, this may simply be because, apart from the Jordan, the country has no river in which anyone could possibly be drowned' (de Vaux 1961:158).

Much has been made of a fragmentary letter from Mari where a prophet sees a vision of an oath-taking ceremony in the divine council, where Ea commands the gods and the goddesses to drink door-jamb dirt from the gate of Mari dissolved in water before binding themselves under oath to do no harm to the brickwork of Mari (text in Nissinen 2003:42-43). Genre and sequence notwithstanding, this is a much closer parallel than the River Ordeal, but the parallels do indeed not withstand the differences of genre or sequence of actions, and apart from testifying to the fact that other cultures knew of oaths which involved drinking liquid containing dissolved symbolic substance, it is unclear what interpretative benefit has been derived here. Furthermore, the Numbers 5 text is Yahwistic throughout: not only in the introductory verse 11, but a further six times in the description of the practice Yhwh is named, and doubtless seven mentions of the divine name in all is not coincidental.[5]

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[5] For more on Elam and Nuzi 'drinking trials' see Frymer-Kensky 1981.

The specific feature of the potion which characterises the logic of Numbers 5 is in any case not so much the dust from the tabernacle floor (v.17), but the fact that the priest writes the projected curses into a document (ספר, v.23) and then blots or erases the writing into the potion. As Schniedewind notes, writing is the key ingredient: 'The writing in the water gives the water a magical property…The ritual testifies to the power and magic of *written* words' (Schniedewind 2004:28-29). This seems a more plausible view than the theory which sees the potion as poison, a view defended by McKane in the light of various parallel phrases in the book of Jeremiah (McKane 1980:478-87). For McKane, המים המאררים (vv.24, 27) means 'the water which bears a curse as poison' (1980:478). Other suggestions have included 'the waters of contention' (cf. Driver in typically creative mode, 1956:74) and 'the water of judgment' (Sasson 1972). Fox opts to capture the alliteration of v.24 with 'the Water of Bitterness Bringing the Bane' (Fox 1995:680). The point is clear: whatever it is you don't want to drink it, unless Sasson has persuaded you that it presumes upon innocence in order to deliver its blessing, and its purpose is to clear the innocent woman. She appears to have a lot of lexicography to think about as she takes this particular cup.

The other matter of great interpretative dispute is the precise nature of the result on the guilty woman: that her 'belly will swell and her thigh fall' (vv. 24, 27). It is certainly possible that the results might include the abortion of any foetus, though the debate about whether the text presumes upon pregnancy in the case of guilt is inconclusive. It is more probable that we can say that the text envisages the failure of the female reproductive system in the case of guilt (Frymer-Kensky 1985:18-21; cf. Levine 1993:201-2). It will suffice for our concerns to describe the ordeal inflicted on the woman as terrible, painful, humiliating, and very possibly life-threatening either to her or to any foetus.

A more theologically substantive matter of terminology is raised by Milgrom's argument concerning the use of מעל to describe the woman's act of 'turning' or 'going astray' (v.12). Rather than describe her act as 'adultery', she is said to have perpetrated מעל against her husband, or 'broken faith' with him. Milgrom remarks that 'this is the only time that the term *ma'al* is used outside the sacred sphere of sancta

and oath violations' (Milgrom 1990:37), and concludes that the woman's straying here is fashioned in a literary sense after the act of idolatry. This is clearly a line of interpretation congenial to those who want to use the passage symbolically, but for now suffice it to note that Milgrom himself still thinks that the issue at hand is adultery, as indeed it was understood in the subsequent Jewish tradition.

By the time of the Mishnah we read, 'When adulterers increased in number, [the ritual of] the bitter water stopped' (*m.Sot.* 9:9). Whatever the likelihood that this is the true reason, or for whatever socio-political reasons such a view might be promulgated, the one assumption which such a statement makes is that the ordeal was designed at least at some point to be practiced in Israel. This is equally true of other traditions of cessation of the ritual, such as those in the Tosefta, which in the process do offer comparative perspectives for making moral or theological judgments about the reasoning behind its cessation.[6] It is perhaps relevant to note here also that the publication of Jewish magical texts of late antiquity has shown that 'Later Jewish traditions did not only pretend to have continued the ritual, despite the Mishnah's insistence on its abrogation, they also transmit a much more elaborate curse formula including all the crucial names which alone guarantee the efficacy of the ritual' (Schäfer 1996:542, with translation of relevant texts 553-55).

So much for the world behind the text. But what has been explained? If by dint of historical and sociological analysis we are able to show that the key issue in the ancient Israel of this text is the 'endangerment of the household's honor' (so Matthews 1998:102-8), what have we succeeded in demonstrating with regard to the nature and function of this text in scripture? The warning of Ricoeur is pertinent:

> The sense of a text is not behind the text but in front of it. It is not something hidden, but something disclosed. What has to be understood is not the initial situation of the discourse, but what points towards a possible world, thanks to the non-ostensive reference of the text…To understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference: from what it says to what it talks about. (1976:87-88)

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[6] The sources for such an analysis are set out and discussed in Grushcow 2006:233-63.

To understand the *sotah* text, therefore, we must take an altogether more hazardous journey into its subject matter, now present to the reader, in the world in front of the text. In short, we turn from the historical suspension of the ritual to the text itself which looks rather like a teleological suspension of the common-sensical. And yet this is not to abandon our historical-critical work. Rather it is to refuse to see such work as an end in itself, and to channel it on into the more pressing ethical and canonical contexts of the passage.

The Ethical Issue

Immersed in debates about honour and shame, guilt and innocence, and the difficulties of translating המים המאררים, the reader is familiarised past the shock of the passage. But the first reader response should not be forgotten: this text is morally abrasive. In the words of Brichto: 'Few are the texts in Scripture which can rival Numbers 5:11-31 for the discomfort occasioned to translators and exegetes.' (1975:55). We could at this point be detained on the question of whether the right designation for it is 'morally offensive', or 'startling', or 'problematic'—these are all terms which betoken different degrees of readerly self-involvement. The problem with 'offensive', perhaps, is that it prematurely forecloses or at least severely circumscribes further exploration, a connotation made explicit when Dozeman writes 'The requirement that a wife invoke God to destroy her uterus because of a husband's jealousy is so offensive that we are inclined to stop the process of interpretation.' (Dozeman 1998:68). All the options have difficulties. 'Abrasive' is a word designed to hold us up, notify us that the grain of this text rubs us the wrong way, and make us stop long enough to work out what to do about it. How shall we respond?

In a well-known manifesto for what we might call the 'ethical turn' in biblical studies, David Clines claimed that 'We have a responsibility, I believe, to evaluate the Bible's claims and assumptions, and if we abdicate that responsibility, whether as scholars or as readers-in-general of the Bible, we are in my opinion guilty of an ethical fault' (1995:20). Eryl Davies, in a survey article entitled 'The Morally Dubious Passages of the Hebrew Bible', agrees with him: we need an 'ethical criticism' to

take its place alongside a historical or literary criticism, and he suggests that 'the task of evaluation has all but been evacuated from the realm of biblical criticism' (2005:220). Numbers 5 is an obvious test case. And yet, in Davies's own commentary on Numbers, all we find is a patient articulation of possible sources behind the text and a careful exegesis of every detail (1995:48-57). It is a textbook case of prescinding from evaluation.[7]

Others, ironically, demonstrate that an evacuation has not taken place. 'Modern practice of the ordeal would obviously be indefensible' offers Philip Budd (1984:67), while Dennis Olson observes that 'other texts of Scripture provide sounder principles and paradigms for the relationship of males and females than those implied in Num. 5:11-31' (1996:39). One could multiply examples. One problem with such comments, entirely reasonable as they are, is that they are operating with the passage as being a treatment of handling cases of adultery. Even then, somewhat remarkably, not all the ethical comment is one way. Gordon Wenham concludes his commentary on the passage with this memorable parting shot: 'Numbers 5, Paul and Revelation make the same point: unfaithfulness in marriage is incompatible with membership of the people of God' (1981:85). As an attempt to find enduring theological value in this ancient text, this seems at best optimistic.[8]

Faced with a text that appears to condone male suspicion without retribution, some have concluded that full-scale engagement only serves to dignify matters. Martin Noth may not always be best characterised as a commentator with a lightness of touch, but his final word bears pondering: 'There is no indication of any punishment for the man who, in the case of the woman's being innocent, has entertained, out of "jealousy", an unjustified suspicion (v.14b); perhaps he simply went free' (1968:52).

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7) Davies *does* offer a wide range of critique in 2003:55-81, though not, in fact, on this passage.

8) A less serious example of the same optimism is Dozeman's bright opening: 'The priestly writers encourage us to reflect theologically on the role of the church in health care' (1998:66) though to be fair this is aimed as much at 5:1-10 as the *sotah* passage.

All in all, almost every interpreter falls somewhere on the spectrum between the two extreme possibilities with regard to ethical evaluation.[9] Very few take the route of Wenham and assert a full-blooded moral continuity between Numbers 5 and the present day, whether as Christians, Jews or indeed anybody. Equally, surprisingly few voice outright rejection. Perhaps this is simply because, in Haberman's words, 'The sotah source is premised upon a network of assumptions required to render it intelligible' (2000:15), such that by the time one has made sense of the text its potential plausibility as a way of dealing with defilement and/or jealousy has already been strengthened. More simply, those who find the text ethically unpalatable may well not cross its threshold. Fretheim is perhaps a surprising candidate for one who comes close when he describes the text as 'repulsive instructions': degrading, one-sided, and patriarchal (2001:110, 116), but even he is *en route* to a destination beyond the wilderness—a sharpened understanding of sin, failure and holiness.

Everyone will admit that the text is gender imbalanced. Three main strategies persist for 'redeeming' it within limits. The first, championed by Jacob Milgrom, takes seriously the jealous rage of the scenario, and furthermore considers that the defilement brought upon the community by the possible adultery is such that a kind of 'mob rule or its legal equivalent, a kangaroo court' (1981:74) might prevail and endanger the defenceless woman. In short:

> The biblical law of the suspected adulteress provides a unique example of how the priestly legislators made use of a pagan ordeal in order to protect a suspected but unproved adulteress from the vengeance of an irate husband or community by mandating that God will decide her case. (1981:75; 1990:354)

On this account, the ordeal turns out to be good for the woman. If she is innocent she will be fine. Bach provides stringent critique: this looks a little too close to an interpretation determined to show that the woman has nothing to worry about if innocent, indeed that she will be 'protected' by the ritual (Bach 1993:47, citing Brichto 1975). Not all such

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[9] The text appropriately forms a 'case history' of interpretation in Bach's 'reader' on *Women in the Hebrew Bible* (Bach 1999).

interpretations are offered by men—Bach's feminist sympathies are too well attuned to make such a simplifying generalisation—but they do all operate 'within the borders of the biblical ritual', and 'none of them', she notes, wryly, 'is struck by the fact that the woman is condemned to undergo the ordeal on the basis of her husband's suspicion, not on proof' (1993:49-50). Her 'new literary critical' metacommentary hits close to the mark. She might also have noted, on a more mundane level, that all these interpretations are constructing scenarios to exonerate the ritual which have no actual basis in the text. Rampaging mobs may break the door down asking for sex with visitors, according to the text of Genesis 19, but if they lynched suspected adulteresses in Israel, we have no record of it.

If the text will not yield interpretative sanctuary, then the interpreter must withdraw to the level of hermeneutical frameworks to find ethical solace. This is exactly what Bach does in her article, which avowedly strains to read this 'glass half empty' text as a 'glass half full' one. 'The crucial element of the Sotah text', she says, '…is that it reflects the potency of male imaginings', and the best one can appear to hope for, in the light of this, is that the increasing application of feminist theory to this text will dissolve 'the presumption that the male point of view is universal or normative' (Bach 1993:52, 51). This is a powerful point, and subsequent analyses seem, in my opinion, to be largely indebted to it. Thus Haberman's view is comparable: this text challenges gender definitions and their authority, creating, in the very act of supporting them, the space to offer critique and alternative insight (2000:13, 36-37). Ellens, likewise, offers a perceptive account of how a social position of complete dominance (man over woman) bears within it the seeds of its own instability, since if the man's honour is dependent on the obedience of his subordinate wife, then it becomes 'contingent on the security of the forced arrangement' (2004:80). Male suspicion, which Ellens sees as the key value enshrined in the text, drives Israel to adopt a ritual which lays bare the impossibilities of its gender arrangements. (2004:82). There is something valuable about this general line of argument, but also, I think, something unstated in it, something which prevaricates on the question of whether this text could be intended to have some such destabilising function. On the one hand, it seems thin to argue that a text which looks for all the world like a blunt assertion

of male control might in the end offer hope to those who realise that it is self-undermining. There is plenty of evidence (some of it cited by Haberman) to suggest that a large number of people find it correspondingly much easier to take the ethical values of the text at face value.[10] On the other hand, if the text does have such an undermining function, then might there be some way in which it could signal that? Some role it could be playing in the canon of literature which has preserved it in the first place? We shall return to these questions when we consider below the significance of the canonical status of this text.

A third approach, and perhaps a quick way with the problems raised by the passage, is to subsume it under the metaphorical trope of Israel the unfaithful wife. The prophets frequently use the language of adultery to describe what has gone wrong between Yhwh and his people. 'Infidelity and divine anger', writes Fishbane, is being 'retrojected in the period of the desert wanderings', paradigmatically indeed in Numbers 25 where Israel is described as yoking itself to the Ba'al of Peor (Num. 25:3; Fishbane 1974:40). There is a fine line here between inner-biblical exegesis and an over-spiritualising of the text. One might suspect that we have arrived at the latter when Mary Douglas writes that 'If the woman is Israel, the terror goes out of the curse, for we know that for his betrothed he is compassionate and forgiving' (1993:169). Clearly there are spiritual resonances between the *sotah* text and the depiction of Israel's struggle with Yhwh, resonances picked up in Hosea 1-3, Jeremiah 2-3, and in Ezekiel (see Fishbane 1974:40-45), and a tradition going back to Pseudo-Philo links the Numbers 5 text with Exod. 32:20, 'He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it'.[11] It is, however, a mistake to see this dimension of the text as exhausting the meaning of Numbers 5, which, as we have argued earlier, includes, even if it is not limited to, an intent to legislate actual practice involving men and women.

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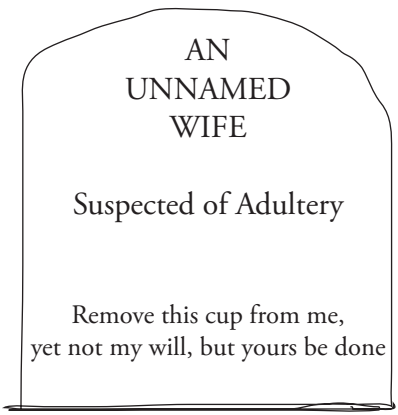
[10] Boer 2006, for example, sees a similar point to Ellens, but not its self-undermining nature.

[11] Cf. *LAB* 12:7, which adds 'And if anyone had it in his will and mind that the calf be made, his tongue was cut off; but if he had been forced by fear to consent, his face shone'. See Fisk 2001:176-90.

There is a fourth alternative, the option left when all hermeneutical rescue strategies have been exhausted, and that is to honour the text as, in Phylis Trible's memorable phrase, a text of terror. In a kind of midrash on Genesis 32 Trible defines her project thus: 'To tell and hear tales of terror is to wrestle demons in the night, without a compassionate God to save us…We struggle mightily, only to be wounded…If the blessing comes—and we dare not claim assurance—it does not come on our terms' (Trible 1984:4-5). Is all we can do to read *in memoriam*, and pause silent before the grave?



Even a grave, or a textual memorial, is not the final possibility. Trible's project opts for the breakdown of any possibility of a hermeneutic of retrieval overcoming the requisite suspicion. Indeed, she cautions against too easy a path from terror to resolution: the resurrection does not make everything all right (1984:2). But this is an extremely significant framing statement, underlying the purpose of the book: the resurrection does not provide any kind of 'happy ending', but these 'sad stories' are read with the knowledge that the tradition will continue, and will even live again to find life beyond these graves. Trible's project is a Christian one, though this is rarely insisted upon in the book, but the hermeneutical principle which it encapsulates is that there is a continuity of tradition between these texts of terror and today's reading community.

The final hermeneutical possibility, of course, is that these texts should not even be remembered: that our sense of outrage or judgment should consign them to oblivion. For any events or texts that must be

remembered, we create *ad hoc* canons to preserve the memory. We only remember the suspected adulteress of Numbers 5 because she has come down to us in the tradition, or more accurately traditions. But the particular tradition which preserves this text,[12] and in the context of which it creates such ethical trouble, is the scriptural canon. Numbers 5 is preserved in Torah, in the Hebrew Bible, and in the Christian Old Testament. What does this say to us, hermeneutically, about how we should interpret it?

The Canonical Context

Where better to start an analysis of the *sotah* text in its canonical context than with the words of Childs?

> The canonical process at work in the shape of Numbers incorporated much diverse material within the framework of an overarching theological construct… [The] canonical tolerance of diversity thus allowed the material to function freely on several levels. … The question as to how much independent life from an earlier stage was allowed to survive, e.g. the law of jealousy in ch. 5, can only be determined by a close exegesis within the canonical context. (Childs 1979:200)

This last question, about the text's 'independent life', is indeed *the* question, and although Childs raises it he does not answer it. The question concerns what happens to the communicative function of this text at the point where we read it as part of the canonical book of Numbers. Our analysis and discussion of the text to this point has largely treated it as a free-standing passage in the context of other ancient ordeal texts and in light of what understanding we have about social and gender constructions regarding honour and shame, purity and defilement, in ancient Israel. All of this is essential to an appropriate reading of the text, but it lacks the extra stage: the question of how the text's author or redactor might have used the text to communicate a message which is theologically dependent on its canonical location.

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[12] I.e. rather than the rabbinic tradition which is exercised over questions of later practice.

For this, we need to grasp something of the overall structure and purpose of the book of Numbers (cf. Sparks 2005). Those who think there is no such thing are too numerous to mention.[13] Apart from various attempts to map the book temporally or geographically, three major proposals should be noted briefly.

- Dennis Olson's influential analysis derives from his doctoral dissertation completed under Childs, no less (Olson 1985). He identifies the book of Numbers as a consciously defined unit of the Pentateuch, with the two census lists of chs 1 and 26 being the primary structural indicators. The resulting structure of the book concerns generational transition between those who failed to enter the promised land and those who will, hence the title: *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New* (see further Olson 1996).
- Won Lee's proposal is based on the approach of 'conceptual analysis' developed by his own teacher Rolf Knierim (see, briefly, Knierim 1995), where the 'infratextual conceptual system, whose presence is implicit, is responsible for the organization of the extant text in its linguistic-semantic aspects' (Lee 2003:47). The result of his conceptual clarification of what he calls 'Israel's migratory campaign' is that it is the conquest of Canaan which serves as the decisive criterion for clarifying Num. 10:11-36:13, and 'More precisely, Israel's failure to conquer the promised land from the south reported in chapters 13-14 is the fundamental conceptual basis' (2003:279). This approach represents a derivative of form-criticism which has in turn influenced the practice of form-criticism. Thus Lee's analysis is imported in large measure into the FOTL volume on *Numbers* (Knierim and Coats 2005:135).
- Mary Douglas offers a reading of Numbers informed by the concerns of anthropology, and in the process discerns a pattern of alternating law and narrative in a 12 or 13-step 'ring' structure, an idea she develops in the light of the calendrical indications of Numbers 28-29, and in view of the Jewish lunar calendar of 12 or 13 months: 'His book would be arranged in a circle, like the circle of the seasons, the

13) But they are all carefully mentioned, nonetheless, in Lee 2003:1-6.

circle of the years, and like the other great poems which are known as ring compositions' (Douglas 1993:116).

What can one conclude from these three proposals? Literary criticism shades into reader-response analysis. Despite Lee's massive and programmatic assurances to the contrary, it is hard to believe that any method assuredly guarantees conceptual clarity. And one need not accept Douglas's hypothesis about the period and intention of composition to see that she offers one literary reading of a text all too easily discarded as having no literary merit or coherent structure.[14] What is interesting, for our purposes, is to see where these different analyses leave the *sotah* text. Since it falls outside Lee's remit, we are left with essentially two attempts to discern a canonical purpose for the text within Numbers. This needs to be set against the all-pervasive trend to label chs. 5-6 as a collection of 'various' things: 'various divine ordinances' (Noth 1968: vii; Davies 1995:lxx) or 'various legal enactments' (Ashley 1993:15).

Olson's two-generational perspective, as worked out in his subsequent commentary, leaves Numbers 5 in 'the old generation of rebellion' played off against the story of Zelophehad's daughters in ch. 27 in 'the new generation of hope'. Both are characterised as 'legal discourse involving women' (1996:5), and when Moses turns for divine guidance in 27:5, Olson suggests that 'As in the case of the jealous husband and the woman accused of adultery, the determination is seen as beyond human competence; the decision is left in the hands of God' (1996:164). The difference, of course, lies in the locations within two different overarching narratives, one of failure and one of success. Indeed, Zelophehad's daughters reappear in ch. 36, forming a kind of sanctifying *inclusio* around the second half of Olson's structure for the book. One might suggest, therefore, that Numbers 5 is particularly left behind in the narrative drive toward the promised land.

Douglas's ring structure pairs the laws of chapters 5 and 6 with the laws about the partition of the land and the cities of refuge toward the end of the book, and the *sotah* text in particular with the creation of

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[14] In the 2001 reprint of the book she addresses critiques in an extended introduction: Douglas 2001:xiii-xxv.

cities of refuge for those who have shed blood unintentionally (in Num. 35:1-15; Douglas 1993:120, 148). Her conclusion, in the light of this: 'If a commentator asks now what the woman in ch. 5, suspected by her husband of infidelity, is doing in this section, the answer is in the strong structure which holds the matched pair together, two kinds of suspicion, unproven' (1993:149).

Childs' proposal that we need 'a close exegesis within the canonical context' has of course been subject to lengthy methodological suspicion in the intervening years,[15] but one need not settle all the theoretical questions it raises in order to see exactly where it leads in this particular instance. We need to recall first that this text names Yhwh frequently to the point where it is irreducibly Yahwistic not just in its present form but most likely in any tradition, and yet that it is a strong candidate for being the conceptuality of the ancient Near East transposed into the framework of the priestly legislation. If we assume, as we have throughout, that the text refers to actual legislated practice, then perhaps what we have here is a record of the ritual framed in such a way as to pass a certain judgment on it. It is recorded because the compilers of scripture have little chance of denying that such a practice ever existed, but it is recorded in a way that highlights key themes which go to undermine it.

We have taken care to clarify that the subject matter of the text is jealousy, and that the specific interpretative problem raised concerns how we evaluate a practice predicated on a jealousy founded on nothing more than unproven suspicion. The hermeneutical question we must ask, therefore, is what would be an appropriate hermeneutic for such a passage. What is a hermeneutic fit for suspicion?

In the midst of a section of the book where Israel is enjoined to put anything unclean (טמא) outside the camp (5:3), we encounter the *sotah* text, and commentators regularly draw a link in terms of the exclusion of different kinds of impurities (as well as in terms of מעל, 5:6, 12). But if this text is surrounded by the concern to demarcate Israel as a holy people fit for the occupation of the holy land, it is surprising that this very place in the narrative is where we encounter a text so easily attributed to an uncritical borrowing of ancient Near-Eastern culture

15) Most obviously, and at great length, in Barr 1983, esp 130-71.

and custom. If Israel is supposed to be set apart, then how should it judge its default to the dust of the tabernacle floor mixed with the bitter water?

If the text is a text driven by unproven suspicion, then what kind of reader is allowed to be suspicious of it? Is this a strangely subversive text where a suspicious reading could be, in a unique way, a reading *with* rather than *against* the grain of the text? Is a reader supposed to notice, in other words, that something has gone wrong here?

Furthermore, although Lee's analysis does not extend to chapter 5, he does make a strong case for seeing the failure to enter the promised land in chapters 13-14 as a key to the subject matter of the book (Lee 2003:213-79). When the people respond to the scouts' report in fear and they desire to go back to Egypt (14:4), Joshua and Caleb characterise the response as 'rebellion against Yhwh' (14:9). The key issue is refusal to believe that Yhwh is giving the land in fulfillment of the promise to the patriarchs: 'The underlying conceptuality of the spy story is Israel's failure to let Yahweh fulfill the promise of the land made to their ancestors' (Lee 2003:228). Failure to trust, failure to believe. If Lee is right, the subject matter of the book of Numbers (or at least of its 'migratory campaign') concerns an episode of national suspicion: 'Why is Yhwh bringing us into this land to fall by the sword?' (14:3) Lee spends a lot of time distancing the details of his proposal from that of Olson, but in the end the interpretative result is not so very different: Numbers concerns a failure to trust Yhwh followed by a second generation's chance to profit from divine forgiveness and a new opportunity.

Here then is a book about a failure of trust, and the demanding requirements of being a holy people. Holiness and trust. At the very moment of passing judgment on Moses and Aaron, Yhwh's words are recorded as 'Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.' (Num. 20:12). Milgrom suggests that the heart of the problem in this passage is Moses' failure to separate his actions from those that would look like the works of an Egyptian magician (Milgrom 1990:448-56). What does the ritual of Numbers 5 look like? And is a holy reader supposed to notice the tensions?

Numbers 5:11-31—A Proposal

This then is the proposed reading of the *sotah* text as it occurs in Numbers 5. As an 'independent' text, the *sotah* text recalls a procedure mandated in Israel for dealing with a husband's suspicion, the on-set of the קנאה־רוח. But in its canonical location in Numbers 5, there is little 'independent life' left in this text, rather its life has been transplanted to another purpose, in the economy of trust and suspicion which forms part of the theological content of the book of Numbers. Something has gone wrong in Israel. Failure to trust impedes its entry into the land. The concerns of holiness, along with various structural indicators concerning the role of chapter 5 in the book as a whole, demonstrate that we arrive at the *sotah* text at the 'high-point' (or perhaps the 'low-point') of this trajectory. We approach the text, therefore, prepared to be suspicious. The text then celebrates the untamed exercise of suspicion, in ways which are morally and theologically problematic, and yet also canonically evaluated as inadequate. In this unique combination of circumstances, it turns out that a reading with the grain of the text (i.e. suspiciously) undercuts the value enshrined in the text (suspicion). Conversely a reading which takes on board the value of suspicion as advocated in the text teaches itself to be suspicious of the text which hands it that value in the first place. The reader of Num. 5:11-31, therefore, is left on the horns of a hermeneutical dilemma, and will be forced to trust one way or the other. Either the book of Numbers inculcates suspicion of the *sotah* text, or vice versa. It is not (hermeneutically) possible to embrace both. This, it almost goes without saying, is a very unusual position in the interpretation of biblical texts. One canonically expected reading of this particular text turns out to be a suspicious one.[16] Rather than calling this an exercise of the time-honoured 'hermeneutic of suspicion', it seems that one might indicate the precise issues involved in this case by labeling it a hermeneutic *fit for* suspicion.

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[16] Mark Allan Powell uses the phrase 'expected reading' to indicate not that an interpretation of a text is 'right', or morally sustainable, or theologically desirable, but simply that it is 'expected' (by either the author, or the editor, or perhaps by 'the text itself', with all the attendant worries that raises). See Powell 2001:57-74, 75-130 for an extended example.

The Hermeneutical Challenge

It remains briefly to reflect on the evaluation of this reading, and on what is at stake in reading scripture in the alternate modes of trust and suspicion. The first word, of course, belongs to Ricoeur: 'Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience' (Ricoeur 1970:27). Such a dynamic is implicit in Alice Bach's reading of the *sotah* text as a 'glass half empty/full': here is suspicion and here is retrieval. Indeed, here is where we return to the recovery of value in this text which some interpreters either feminist or sympathetic to feminism have discerned: as we noted above, the recent works of Bach, Haberman and Ellens have all in effect suggested that the very extremity of this text causes the reader to jump the rails and dissent from the value system implicit in the text. I now want to suggest that the problem with locating this hermeneutical impulse in something like a suspicion of patriarchy is that it sets up a false antithesis between trust and suspicion whereby one either believes the text or judges it inadequate. And yet Ellens herself notes that 'The author of this text is, in all probability, unaware of the gender asymmetries of the social construction of adultery and of suspicion in ancient Israel' (Ellens 2004:78). Neither is it coincidental that in the same article Ellens worries about the 'unqualified trust' which the *sotah* text appears to put in the ordeal it describes, and suggests that 'Only our collective twenty-first century, "scientific" sensibilities stand against the sincerity of the text' (2004:69).

The problem is that gender is not the interpretative key to this passage. Yes the text is gender imbalanced, and without a doubt this is hugely problematic on its own terms. The moral abrasiveness of this passage may usefully be flagged up by its gender-specificity, but the flag is planted in other soil. The human problem which this text foregrounds is living at the mercy of jealousy, and the destructive effects, all too clear in the passage, of letting suspicion triumph over trust. If gender were the issue, we might have opened up hermeneutical space to muse on whether the *sotah* ordeal offered a better alternative in cases of adultery than death by stoning (Deut. 22:22). And perhaps it is true, speaking empirically, that men have by and large been the ones possessed of a violent rage against their wives rather than women against their husbands, in which

case there is a large overlap between the concerns of a gendered reading and a reading in terms of jealousy, but nevertheless the reading which seeks its leverage against the judgments of the text on the basis of gender has not found the core of the problem. Gender-related readings, in other words, are 'unexpected'. One sometimes senses the critic wanting to say that if a man is entitled to suspect his wife then it is outrageous that the woman is not entitled to suspect her husband. Reading in terms of suspicion, however, the point is different: only men are allowed to suspect their partners, but this is not some kind of privilege to which women should aspire, rather it is a disastrous prerogative.[17]

Trust and suspicion require as careful balancing with texts as they do in human relationships. 'The problem is how to keep suspicion from turning into cynicism and trust from turning into facileness. Trust without suspicion is the recipe for a false and meretricious art; but suspicion without trust is the recipe for a shallow and empty art' writes Gabriel Josipovici (1999:3). Commentary on Numbers 5 is not ill-served with historical and cultural background information for making all manner of informed judgments about the status of various ancient practices regarding trials and ordeals, as we have shown. What is worrying is when it makes theological moves either from the text to today without pause, or from the text to theological oblivion without regret.

An important evaluative question with regard to any reading such as this, especially where questions of moral impropriety and textual exoneration are at the fore, is the extent to which one might think that the reading is self-legitimating. Has it found what it wanted to find?[18] If the *sotah* text can be made theologically constructive, then is there then *any* text in scripture which must be rejected? This is the question considered by Davis (2003:163), whose answer is 'No, no biblical text may be safely repudiated as a potential source of edification for the church' (2003:164), which conclusion she reaches by way of a careful inner-biblical balancing of tradition and criticism. The point gains from

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17) Powell makes a structurally similar point about power in male-female relationships in Matthew's gospel (2001:130).

18) It is irrelevant to such an evaluation that this article as a matter of fact has not done so, since it was conceived as an exploration of the issues raised by the presence of a morally 'unusable' text in scripture.

careful phrasing: it is not that the surface agenda of a given text represents the canonical communicative act of the passage. The *sotah* ordeal must be rejected. But we are only in a position whereby we might be called upon to make such a judgment because we are inheritors of a canonical tradition which passes the text down to us in the first place. The trust implicit in that tradition, however, is to lead us to neither 'facileness' nor 'a false and meretricious art'. The *sotah* text names the רוח־קנאה which is so destructive of human relationality, both then and now, and by way of taking up this text in the way it does into the book of Numbers, it brands human attempts to legislate for it as part of the failure which saw Israel stopped short of the promised land, condemned to roam the wilderness for forty years. Plenty of time to develop strategies of criticism which lead to the suspicion of men or the degradation of women, or the socio-cultural explanations concerning the Code of Hammurabi, the river ordeal, or the rampaging mob. It is in engaging with the very subject matter of this text—suspicion, jealousy, the breakdown of human relationship—that we may find the way out beyond this 'desert of criticism' (cf. Ricoeur 1967:349).

In the world in front of the text, the *sotah* text offers us a probing and yet terrifying insight into human jealousy. It has not, rabbinic debates aside, generated a particularly striking reception history. It is often noted that the story of Susannah in the Greek additions to Daniel (ch. 13) explores the logic of a woman required to defend herself against an unsubstantiated charge of adultery. There is also evidently some kind of link between the rabbinic interpretation of the *sotah* and the debate between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees concerning the woman caught in adultery, now located in John 8:1-11. Watson suggests that this debate finds its origin in an argument about the status of the woman's ex-husband (no longer identified as such in the passage we have), whose guilt or innocence is being challenged in 8:7 as a direct response to the *sotah* test for the woman's guilt or innocence (Watson 1999:105).[19] Even if one is not convinced about the precise issues at stake in the passage (e.g. Barrett 1978:590-91 who thinks that dis-

[19] Watson is developing a point made by Daube 1978:187-97 in an article significantly titled 'Biblical Landmarks in the Struggle for Women's Rights'. On the John 8 passage see also Rooke 2000.

crimination against women is a less likely subject than Jesus as a merciful judge), the rarity of connections between guilt and innocence, witnesses, and writing and the ground, suggest that John 8, *inter alia*, is offering a better way than the suspicion of Numbers 5.

Subsequent rabbinic reception of the text has been charted in full detail by Grushcow (2006). Other aspects of its reception are harder to discern. It has not fared well in the often unimaginative world of Pentateuchal research, nor, for that matter, has it generated particularly striking responses in wider literature, as witnessed by examples of poetry (Barfoot 1991) and even a novel (Ragen 2001) inspired by it. It is ironic in the extreme that it is the abrasive and violent moral world depicted in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2004) which offers a plot line startlingly congruent with the social world depicted in the *sotah* ritual: suspicion, ordeal, discovery of innocence, and the dramatic inadequacy of the justification: 'I overreacted'. Indeed Tarantino's own particular moral vision is heavily reliant on just the sort of assertion and counter-assertion which allows him to depict strong ethical codes in the midst of frightening moral disarray (see Botting and Wilson 2001).

Biblical criticism mapped through canon and hermeneutic leads ineluctably to cultural criticism, and to questions of ethics and values. It is important to say that these questions are not foreclosed. Canonical sensitivity does not require the interpreter to see canon as only and always a productive hermeneutical framework (so Aichele 2001). In the end it is only possible to guarantee that a biblical text can be theologically 'edifying' if one accepts that the strength of the overall claim of the Christian (or Jewish) canon overcomes the theological diversity within it. This is akin to Hans Frei's late cultural-linguistic turn: all reality is interpreted into the framework of reality which the text projects, rather than being allowed to exercise determinative control over the interpretation (Frei 1993:147). In this sense, the title question of Frei's late and great hermeneutical project found its answer: 'The "Literal Reading" of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?', to which he responded 'It will stretch and not break' (1993:149).

Our comparable question is this regarding the moral and ethical value of biblical texts in Christian (or, perhaps, Jewish) theology: Will the text stretch or will it break? It is not clear that a programmatic

answer can be given short of taking each text in turn and seeing what might be expected of it. If the *sotah* text can be turned to advantage without doing violence to its communicative function, then perhaps the picture is a little clearer. But 'the jury only trickles in—here and there, now and then' (Brueggemann 1997:750).

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