Abstract: This paper re-reads the story of Cozbi, Zimri and Phinehas as told in Numbers 25. After establishing the significance of names as interpretive devices in Old Testament writings, the story is read as a way of examining the validity of Cozbi's name. What is found is that her name coerces us to understand the story in a particular fashion that paints her as an enemy and Phinehas as a hero, an outcome totally at odds with the text as it presents itself. Should Cozbi then be re-named? Would this redeem her from the text? Or perhaps could her name point us towards to some other way of understanding this text?

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[Re]Naming Cozbi: In Memoriam, Cozbi, daughter of Zur

It is well acknowledged that names are important interpretive tools within the Old Testament corpus. Names represent people's essence; they tell us something about the nature of a character. This comes even more sharply into focus when a name is changed as it symbolizes a new beginning for that character. The classic example of this is Abram, whose name is changed to Abraham (Gen. 17:5) – the father of a multitude, signifying something of the extraordinary change that was to be wrought in his life, going from childlessness to being the ancestor of countless people; from someone whose name would be eternally forgotten, to a man whose name will never be erased from human history. Instructive also is Naomi, whose name means pleasant who asks to be called Mara (Ruth 1:20), which means bitter, on account of her difficult situation.

Running parallel with the power of a name is the power of the person who gives a name. Abram's name change is brought about by divine decree, though this is extremely rare. Names are given by parents, though sometimes these too are divinely instructed, such as the children born to Hosea[1]. Either way, the names say something about the children. This power also belongs to the narrator. It is through their words that the story is revealed, that characters names are given, that people's essences are revealed (or perhaps better, suggested!). From Ruth we see another example of the power to name. Orpah, Ruth's sister, has a name which means 'neck', and so symbolically, 'stubborn'. Pushed further, this could also mean 'abandoner'; the one

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[1] See Hos. 1

who turns their neck away.[2] She does not travel with Ruth and Naomi. Ruth goes on to become an ancestor of the Davidic King while Orpah is remembered by this name which contrasts her poorly against her sister. The narrator's choice of name for Orpah tells us something about her; even though she too loves Naomi, weeps with her and kisses her farewell, her name still leaves her very much in Ruth's shadow. Characters are subject to their name, even determined by them. Their names play a narrative role in the revelation of meaning[3]. This is particularly true of Cozbi, daughter of Zur.

Cozbi makes her only appearance in Numbers 25. This chapter narrates events which are said to occur while the Israelites are camped at Shittim (vs 1). Presumably, this location is in the plains of Moab (Num 22:1) as this chapter seems to flow naturally from the Balaam narrative which immediately precedes it. Given that those chapters (22-24) involve Balaam and Balak, the King of Moab and no details are given of further movement, we can assume that the events portrayed are presumed to take place in the same location. This seems to be confirmed by the travelogue in Numbers 33.

The chapter commences with the Israelites yoking themselves to the Baal of Peor (vs 3), kindling Yhwh's anger against them. The Israelites are said to have become involved in sexual relationships with the women of Moab and subsequently accepted invitations to sacrifices made to their gods. In verse six, the scene changes. The people of Israel are gathered, weeping at the tent of meeting. The context would lead

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[2] Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love : Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 73.

[3] Ibid.

us to believe that what is in view is some sort of confessional ritual. 'Just then',[4] two figures appear, who we later discover are Zimri and Cozbi (vss. 14-15). Zimri is said to be bringing Cozbi, a Midianite woman 'into his family'. This expression suggests that what is occurring is a wedding ritual. Had Zimri acquired Cozbi for purely sexual purposes, it seems unlikely that he would follow the ritual of introducing her to his family in this manner. Had he engaged her for some ritualistic purpose as some have suggested,[5] it seems strange that this has not been expressed more explicitly. Cozbi then appears in the story as the new wife of Zimri. It is her role, or perhaps better, her silence, which concerns this reading of the text. Our story ends with a divine commission to harass and defeat the Midianites, which points forward to the sequel: the war on Midian recorded in Num 31.

As is typical of such stories the history of and in the text plays a significant role in their interpretation. The opening scene, which encompasses the first five verses, amounts to what we might call the 'Baal Peor' tradition. It is referred to in Hosea 9:10, though nothing of the ensuing drama featuring Phinehas, Zimri or Cozbi is mentioned at all. In Psalm 106:28 this scene is mentioned again, this time also mentioning Phinehas, but again omitting Zimri and Cozbi. Psalm 106, on account of the plea 'Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations' can be dated to the exilic period. In Numbers 25, the Baal Peor tradition and the figure of Phinehas are bound together with this story of Zimri and Cozbi. It seems then, that the text as we have it follows a historical progression of Hosea – Psalms – Numbers.

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[4] The particle   is used, which invites us to lift our eyes and see a new piece of the action. It functions to focus our attention on the new development.

[5] See, Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21-36 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 286.

This is consistent with the theory that the Torah is a late work, compiled in the exile or even post-exilic period by priestly scribes returning to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon. This too makes sense of the danger associated with foreign women, read in light of Ezra's sermonic confession in Ezra 9, the result of which was the 'putting away' of foreign wives and children born of union with them (Ezra 10). The scribes, it seems, have re-written this story as a way of legitimizing their racial purity programme.

Nonetheless, the events depicted within the story itself show evidence of an earlier period. The gathering at the tent of meeting for example clearly harks back to an earlier tradition when the tent was thought to be the central point of the Israelite people. Even the use of Midianites as a protagonist within the story relies on an historical tradition, though one that is itself complicated. Fleeing from Egypt (Ex 2), Moses happens upon a Midianite Preist, Jethro, who becomes his father-in-law. Later, in the shadows of Sinai (Ex 18:10), Jethro is clearly a believer in Yhwh and offers sacrifices. He goes on to advise Moses on how to structure the judicial system of Israel, which we might presume mirrors that of Midian.[6] The war on Midian, recorded in Numbers 31 records the death of five Midianite Kings, which suggests a federation of city-states much like the Philistines. Their names are repeated in Jos 13:21, suggesting there is some historical basis to this battle. Mendenhall suggests that that Midian represents a complex and cosmopolitan civilization, with control over parts of Palestine and Transjordan,[7] at odds with older scholarship that equated Midian with nomadic Bedouin lifestyle. Perhaps then, Midian was a powerful

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[6] George E. Mendenhall, "Midian," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D.N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 816.

[7] Ibid, 817.

imperial presence in Palestine right at the commencement of Israel's history.[8] For a group of people seemingly lacking social organization, it seems that they may have exerted some influence over the development of structure within nascent Israel.

These historical matters inform any reading of such stories. It should be noted that the biblical material only loosely reflects these factors, and so it is in our story. The powerful Midian suggested by Mendenhall was unfamiliar to the Priestly compiler of the Torah. However, what he found was a tradition that could be used for his purpose, an opportunity to put forth a powerful ideological statement regarding the danger of the foreign woman.

The root from which the name Cozbi derives is   , which in its verbal forms is best translated 'to lie' or 'to be a liar'[9]. Its noun forms are consequently translated 'lie', 'deception' and 'falsehood'.[10] The overwhelming majority of its use is to be found within the prophetic material, though it is also found in Num. 23:19; 'God is not a mortal that he should lie…' Lutzky argues that the euphemistic, sexualized nature of Cozbi's name must surely have been known in Hebrew, given the eroticized nature of the early commentators.[11]   In Akkadian, *kubzu,* which derives from the same root,   , means 'voluptuous, sexually vigorous'[12], or further, 'luxuriant, abundant, charm,

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[8]Ibid, 816.

[9] R. Mosis, "*Kzb I*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes et al. Botterweck (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 104ff. Mosis notes that *kzb* appears to operate as two homonymous roots. These will be discussed presently.

[10] BDB, 469.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Rodney R. Hutton, "Cozbi," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D.N. Freedman (New York: Double Day, 1992), 1202. Mosis, 105, notes that this second use is common in Akkadian names.

attractiveness' and euphemistically, 'sexual parts'.[13]   Together, these understandings

paint quite a particular picture of Cozbi.   She is beautiful and charming;

unquestionably sexually alluring, an object of desire.   But she is also a deceiver, a

woman who cannot be trusted, a woman of lies.   An additional layer of meaning is

added when one realizes that *kuzbu* is an attribute of several Mesopotamian deities,

including Asherah and Ishtar, both figures that the people of Israel found repeatedly

irresistible!   That her name is in some way linked to local goddesses adds a religious

or cultic element to this tale, linking it very strongly with the opening of the chapter

and the daughters of Moab.

This view of Cozbi is further developed through the chapter, and also in post-biblical

tradition.   Num. 25:18 links her to the Midianites who had 'fooled' the Israelites[14] as

'their sister'.   Cozbi too then, is a trickster, a deceiver, as her name attests; her name

carries a metonymic function.[15]   Talmudic tradition recalls her powers of seduction,

suggesting that even Moses fell victim to her irresistible charm.[16]

However, while the choice of Cozbi as a name appears to condemn her, it is perhaps

not as simple as it appears.   The sister of the Midianites is remembered in Num. 25:18

as being part of a sequence of deceptions, each of which had fooled the Israelites.

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[13] Harriet C. Lutzky, "The Name "Cozbi" (Numbers Xxv 15, 18)," *Vetus Testamentum* 47, no. 4 (1997): 547.

[14] Presumably these are the daughter of Moab in vss. 1-5.

[15] This is the same narrative play as is used with Orpah. For more on use of metaphor and metonym in socio-linguistics and discourse analysis, see Victor Harold Matthews, *More Than Meets the Ear : Discovering the Hidden Contexts of Old Testament Conversations* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2008), Chapter 1.

[16] Cited in J.F. Ross, "Cozbi," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 724.

The 'delusion' reflects the expectations and perception of the people deceived only after the ruse, and so the use of the name 'Cozbi' perhaps represents a justification on the part of the narrator for this failure; Cozbi can only be so named after she has 'proven' herself to be such. Of course, in this the power of the narrator is evident. Having read the story once, we cannot but know who Cozbi is, and who she has always been. But the Israelites too are condemned. It is they who fall prey to deception. And while the result of these events is the war on Midian and the divinely sanctioned death of many of her people,[17] Cozbi can only be so named because she in some way was too formidable an opponent for Israel. And so in an admittedly cruel way, her naming is a testimony to her own power(s), a compliment given out of begrudging respect.

On this basis, there appears to be a link between this episode and the Adam and Eve story of Gen. 3. Classical interpretations of Gen 3 have blamed Eve for the fall of humanity. The suffering of men has been linked to female sin. Tertullian stepped, perhaps even leaped a little further, stating emphatically that it was because of Eve that Christ had to die, in doing so absolving men of all responsibility and placing the cause and consequence of the fall on a woman's (who comes to represent all women) shoulders.[18] Feminist readings have revisited this scene and figuratively 'turned the tables'. Eve, rather than being a weak willed failure is noted for her ability to converse, to reason, to appreciate beauty and to act independently, even in the pursuit of wisdom. Adam on the other hand, the man who 'was with her' is passive, even

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[17] The appearance of Midianites as an oppressive force in Judges 6 is evidence that the command to defeat Midian was not fulfilled. Note that in Num 31, Moses issues a command to kill all the non-virgin women and all the small males. Virgin girls were to be taken by the Israelite men.

[18] Quoted in Pamela Milne, "No Promised Land: Rejecting the Authority of the Bible," in *Feminist Approaches to the Bible*, ed. Phyllis Trible et al (Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1995), 55.

mute, unable to contribute anything to the articulate Eve.[19] Also prominent amongst

such readings is the recognition that the Hebrew word   which is traditionally

translated 'helper', which suggests subordination, actually is used of God; God, the

helper of Israel. So in fact, Eve is pictured as Adam's superior[20], which is more than

evident in the story of Genesis 3! Eve in no way deceives Adam. Rather, Adam

seems utterly defenceless against her, or perhaps better, entranced by her such that he

simply complies with whatever she wishes. Eve wields a power over Adam, a similar

power perhaps, that Cozbi, and the Midianite women hold over, rather than against,

the Israelite men.

None of this material however, takes account of what Cozbi actually is reported to

have done. In a sense it simply accepts the outcome of the events, and while utilizing

a form of rhetorical criticism[21] in dealing with etymological issues to rescue Cozbi

from the shame of her name, it does little to 'rename' her; that is, to use a form of

interpretive power to redefine her essence.   Indeed, by simply following the

conclusions of the text as we receive it, we have discovered the great significance of

the hermeneutics of suspicion. To rename Cozbi, which in some part will be her

redemption, we need to examine more closely what the text reports, and also examine

what has been said about Cozbi and how that has coloured our view of her. Before

this though, it will be important to assess Israelite attitudes towards family and

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[19] Phyllis Trible, "Eve and Miriam: From the Margins to the Center," in *Feminist Approaches to the Bible*, ed. Phyllis Trible et al (Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1995), 11.

[20] This is of course tempered by Adam's power over Eve that is inherent on account of his position as her 'namer'. It is a power he wastes no time in asserting! See also Elyse Goldstein, *Revisions: Seeing Torah through a Feminist Lens* (Toronto: Key Porter, 1998), 53ff.

[21] See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror : Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

marriage. Though Cozbi is reported to be a Midianite, it appears that she has married an Israelite and so become a part of Israelite society. This will assist us in understanding the social place of Cozbi.

In Num 25:14-15, the names of the couple at the centre of the drama are revealed.[22] The language is quite formal, linking both Zimri and Cozbi first to their father's and then to their 'ancestral houses'. Zimri we learn, is a Simeonite, a prominent Simeonite in fact. His father, Salu is identified as   , or 'chief'[23] of the ancestral house. Cozbi's ancestral house is unnamed, though we discover that her father, Zur, is the   , or 'head of a tribe'[24] or, his ancestral house.

That the fathers of both Zimri and Cozbi are referred to in similar, if not identical ways lends credence to the possibility that socially, Midian and Israel were similarly structured.[25] Within Israel, the family unit was termed   , literally rendered

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[22] That their names are withheld until this point is telling. Now they are named, and forever shamed. Bal, 129 points out that the naming 'completes' their formation; their names, in particularly Cozbi's name, is 'fixed' into our memory.

[23] This form derives from the verbal form   , 'to lift', BDB, 669. The chief then, is the one who is lifted up, an exalted position indeed!   It is also sometimes translated as 'Prince', BDB, 672.

[24] This form can carry both a literal and symbolic meaning. It can mean the physical head of a being, human or animal, and also the 'top' of a mountain (Gen. 8:5). It also has this positional aspect, so that one is the 'head' of a band of men or company (Judg. 10:18). Its use in describing the head of a family is rarer, though not unattested. The genealogy of Exod. 6:14 ff. uses this designation. We can see that this term used to describe Cozbi's father is very much synonymous with term used to describe Zimri's. See BDB, 910 ff.

[25] Helmer Ringgren, "'Abh," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes and Ringgren Botterweck, Helmer (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 8. Ringgren notes that the social structure of Israel was closer to that of the nomadic Semites rather than the city states of the ANE. The life of the tribe surpassed in importance the life of the town or village, and consequently, parentage and lineage took on far greater significance. Of course, in light of the earlier discussion it should be clear that the story world and the history are here incongruous. Midian and Israel are pit

'father's house', though its usage goes beyond the immediate notion of the nuclear family and includes extended family and also genealogical lineage. Indeed, its use has been noted as being inconsistent, referring to families, subdivisions of clans, or even a whole tribe.[26] Its present translation as 'ancestral house', (that is, something beyond a nuclear understanding) in verses 14 and 15 is justified on the grounds of the context; both Salu and Zur are presented not just as fathers of their immediate families, but are also linked to the larger structure of the ancestral house.[27] The term 'ancestral house' makes it clear that lineage in Israelite society is patrilineal; family members tracing their ancestry through their fathers, to a 'founding' father. The genealogies of the Torah narrative[28] indicate the primacy of the male; women are rarely mentioned. Within marriages, the wife was to refer to her husband as *ba'al*, that is, master.[29] The father of the family unit wields absolute power over his children, even his married sons and wives if they live in his household.[30] This

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against each other here as peers, while in reality, at this stage Israel was highly unstructured in a social sense.

[26] Ibid., 9.

[27] Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve : Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 35.

[28] Ringgren, "'Abh," 9. Ringgren points out that the expression is most commonly found in lists. However, it is not exclusively so. Abram is commanded to leave his   at the commencement of his journey towards the promised land.

[29] This language is borrowed metaphorically in Hos. 2:16.

[30] Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961), 20.   See Gen. 38. Also, the difficulty confronted by David as he struggles to exert his fatherly control over his family in 2 Sam. Harry A. Hoffner, "Bayith," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes and Ringgren Botterweck, Helmer (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 114.   Hoffner notes that there is a certain solidarity between a man and his house. That is, if the father sins, the house suffers. If the father is innocent, the house is spared. The house of David shows evidence of both of these observations; 2 Sam. 12:10 has Nathan prophesying that the sword will never leave David's house on account of his sin. Throughout the Deuteronomistic history God is recorded as upholding the Davidic line on account of David's faithfulness. See 1 Kgs. 11:34.

language, the language of master and slave is telling, as the women of Israel become possessions. Either they belong to their father, or upon marriage, pass into the possession of their husband, or master. The husband is the master of his wife in the same way that he is the master of his house or field.[31] However, she did not become a full member of his house until she bore a son.[32] Until this was accomplished, the wife existed in a place of ambiguity, no longer belonging to her own family, nor yet a member of her husband's.[33]

The custom amongst Israel was that wives were traditionally taken from within the tribe. The patriarchal stories establish this pattern; Isaac's wife is sought from within his family (Gen. 24), a pattern which is followed with Jacob being sent to Laban (Gen. 28). This however, was not mandatory; it was possible to marry outside of your family. Despite the fact that Israelites were commanded to not marry women of other nations[34] there is abundant evidence that adherence to these laws was far from uniformly heeded. Indeed, many of the great heroes of the Old Testament show scant regard for this legislation. Moses had a Midianite[35] wife, Ruth and Orpah were

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[31] Ibid, 26. Hoffner, 115 notes that '*bayith*' can also designate 'what is in the house', which includes wives, servants, livestock and so on, so that a wife is relationally or politically a part of the house, while also being an object within it.

[32] This situation could lead to jealousy between co-wives. See 1 Sam. 1 as an example.

[33] Yee, 38. Yee also points out that daughters were married into other families with the purpose of strengthening relations between her own and her new husbands. This places further pressure on her to produce the son necessary to seal the new bond. It also shows the inherent lack of self-determination women had in Ancient Israel. See Num. 30.

[34] Exod. 34.17-18, Deut. 7.

[35] Or perhaps a Cushite.

Moabite,[36] evidence that Naomi's sons had married outside Israel, Samson married a Philistine. David had foreign wives, a practice multiplied by his son Solomon. The prohibition was based on a fear that such mixed marriages would not only weaken the racial purity of Israel, but that these foreign women would ultimately lead the Israelites away from their relationship with Yhwh.[37] This is a theme repeated through scripture, reiterated at the return of the exiles to Jerusalem by Ezra, evidence that across the history of Israel, this was a law that never took hold.[38]

The purpose of these mixed marriages was political expediency, particularly in the cases of David and Solomon. Their foreign wives were taken as part of international diplomacy, gifts from other heads of state. Moses' marriage to his Midianite wife Zipporah appears also to have a political element to it. Moses and his father-in-law share a special relationship, particularly given Jethro's position as a cultic 'outsider'. It is clear that often, these 'mixed-marriages' are explicitly condemned by the narrator. Moses' marriage comes under attack from within his own family (Num. 12.1) however the narrative outcome seems in some way to justify Moses. Miriam is punished for raising her voice against Moses (though Aaron, equally culpable, is spared. The implication seems to be that Miriam was behind the plot against Moses!)

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[36] Though Ruth herself is a Moabite, her offspring, through Boaz's Israelite nationality, are Israelite children. This demonstrates patrilineal descent. The presence of Ruth, the direct descendant of David destabilizes the notion of the danger of foreign women.

[37] This 'threat' was amply demonstrated by the narrator as well. Perhaps the most spectacular example is the relationship between King Ahab and his foreign wife Jezebel (1Kgs. 16:31ff). Ahab's marriage to her is one of the great disasters in the Deuteronomistic Historian's theological history. Ahab's actions provoke the Lord more than all of the previous Kings on account of his flagrant worship of Baal and construction of Asherah poles. Together with Jezebel they suffer much at the hands of the prophets, particularly Elijah and Elisha. Jezebel, the foreign Queen meets a very gruesome death in 2 Kgs. 9:30-37.

[38] See Mal. 2.

while Moses emerges even more powerfully as God's chosen leader of Israel. However, his union with his Cushite/Midianite wife is never explicitly endorsed, nor is any other mixed marriage.

We see then that Cozbi, despite her seemingly lofty position in her community is still in many ways a socially marginalized figure in our text. The fact that she is someone's daughter immediately makes her a commodity. Indeed, the prominent social position of her family may serve only to increase the reality of this situation, a valuable asset in the family's striving to consolidate its social prestige. Secondly, that she had left her own people, marrying into another nation only served to strip her of any power she may have held within her own nation. The example of Num. 12 seems to indicate that even within families so affected such marriages were coolly received. Nonetheless, this particular example, along with the others already cited seem to suggest that this practice, if not common, was at least not unknown. There is no reason to doubt that foreign women were a part of Israelite society.

What is evident then is that even within the book of Numbers there is an ambiguous attitude towards foreigners and foreign women in particular. It at once seems to allow if not condone inter-marriage while at the same time displaying some very xenophobic tendencies as well,[39] of which the treatment of Cozbi and her 'sisters' is a major part. Perhaps we might even say that these stories together represent the extreme of the xenophobic polemic. Camp finds it unsurprising that these events require a death, a victim. In fact, she goes so far as to suggest that the Midianite

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[39] Claudia V. Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy : The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 224.

woman, Cozbi is a surrogate victim of Moses' wife-sister.[40] Perhaps this is pushing

the issue too far. After all, Num. 12, as we have seen appears to regard the foreign-

ness of Moses' wife as a non-issue. In fact, it is those who oppose Moses in that

instance who are made to suffer. Nonetheless, that a polemic is being raised, and in

this instance a violent, ugly, even xenophobic one, is very clear.

But we have leapt too quickly to the end of the story. Now that we have an

understanding of the social world in which Cozbi has been thrust, certain element of

the story come more sharply into focus. In verse 6 an unidentified Midianite woman

is brought into the camp, specifically, 'into his brothers' by an unidentified Israelite

man. From what we know of ANE marriage ritual, a woman leaves her family home

and is joined to her husband's clan. The process itself is purely contractual.

Typically, the proposal would be put to the girl's parents who would then make a

decision as to whether the union would take place, including the issue of *mohar*.[41]

This was not always the case though, as sons were able to act of their own accord,

perhaps even against the wishes of their parents.[42] Perhaps we might surmise that

such an arrangement fits the story as we have it. It seems unlikely that a prominent

Israelite patriarch may be happy to see his son marry a Midianite woman,[43] and so

this may indeed be a marriage of love. It may also make sense of the reporting that

she is brought into 'his brothers' rather than the family tent. Of course, it could be

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[40] Ibid, 267. This claim is made in the context of the rise of the Priesthood. Cozbi's death, at the hand of a priest accomplishes much for those who will later speak in Moses' name, particularly Ezra and Nehemiah.

[41] This is a payment made by the bridegroom to the bride's parents.

[42] de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, 30. For example, Esau is Gen. 26:34-35.

[43] Of course, we must not assume this. After all, as we have seen, such marriages were not unknown. It is just offered as a possibility.

that the parents were happy with this arrangement. The Midianite woman is from a prominent family, and so it is not impossible to imagine that this was a happy arrangement for all of the interested parties. In any case, the chief ceremony of marriage is the entry of the bride into the bridegroom's house[44] which we may imagine to be a scene of some celebration.   The culmination of this celebration is the consummation of the marriage; the 'knowing' or 'taking' or 'going into' of the wife by the groom.[45]

This family celebration[46] takes place during a time of national tragedy. The context of this joyous occasion is the national lament at the tent of meeting. But what does the young Midianite woman have to do with this? She has of yet no part in the machinations of Israelite social life. Indeed, we might even imagine that their well being or otherwise may well have been completely unknown to her and even further, of little concern, particularly on the occasion of her wedding. She has left, perhaps against her own wishes, the relative safety of her ancestral home and the protection it affords and now presumably exists in a place of some ambiguity without any of her family or friends around her. Yet in the following moments she is tragically caught up in an extraordinary display of nationalistic fervour. Phinehas, a priest-guard who witnesses the bride's arrival is gripped with a rage that he cannot contain. He rushes towards them and spears the two of them, into her stomach. The newly wed couple are skewered together in a gruesome display of capitol punishment. It appears that

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[44] de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, 33. de Vaux suggests that such occasions were marked by the singing of love songs, citing Ps. 45 and parts of Cant. as possible examples. This was followed by a seven day feast, though the consummation took place on the first evening.

[45] Gen. 24:67, Gen. 29:23,30

[46] That is, the family of the bridegroom. There is no reason to assume that the bride has it in mind to celebrate! Of course, her involvement in the event, if not the celebration is nonetheless mandatory.

the Israelite man had committed a crime of some seriousness, though what it is certainly not specified.[47] That it involves his new wife is implied by her slaying, though this punishment is at best, unwarranted. She is not yet a full member of any ancestral house; not in any real way bound by Israelite law. Indeed, the narrator is at pains to emphasize her punishment; verse 8 stressing that the spear pierced both of them, 'in(to) her stomach'. Cozbi's punishment is deserved, this seems to say; she is no accessory to the indiscretion but plays an active role.

Of course, such a view is baseless. Even if Cozbi is a willing partner in the marriage, she is still the possession of her father or new husband and as such is subject to their own wishes. That is to say, she has most likely been a passive observer of the process; an object of the discussion rather that a subject to it. At this point she is vulnerable, lacking any tangible sense of self-determination.

The following question is telling; 'What makes a woman like Cozbi do this?'[48] It represents much of the history of interpretation around this issue which has levelled

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[47] Shectman, 163, in attributing this passage to H suggests that the crime committed is encroaching upon the sanctuary, a crime punishable by death. This seems plausible in some sense, though it makes no sense whatsoever of the ensuing decree to war with Midian. Neither does it account for the linking of Cozbi to her 'sisters' that seems to indicate a commonality not just of ethnicity but also culpability. Neither does it seem to fit with the notion of trickery or deception for which she is condemned. What does Cozbi or Zimri stand to gain by encroaching on the tent of meeting? And in what way does that represent a deceit that justifies the extermination of a whole people? This view is also based on the assumption that the tent to which they approach is the tent of meeting as opposed to the family tent, a view advanced in Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic; Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, Mass.,: Harvard University Press, 1973), 201-03. This seems to dismiss the notion that a wedding celebration is in view. This suggestion has not garnered any significant support; most scholars agree that some other tent is in view.

[48] Matthew Schwartz and Kalman J. Kaplan, *The Fruit of Her Hands: A Psychology of Biblical Women* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 87.

blame at Cozbi. The uncritical nature of Schwartz and Kaplan's approach is illustrated by their discussion of the affair; 'The rituals of Peor were not strange and abhorrent to Cozbi and her countrymen, as they were to the Israelites, for such practices were widespread in the ancient world.'[49] If these practices were so widespread, how were the Israelites unaware of them? And if they were so strange and abhorrent, why, as it appears, were the Israelites so quick to engage in them? It also ignores the history between Midian and Israel, which indicates a similarity of both experience and religious expression. The marriage of Moses to a Midianite wife would also suggest a keen awareness of such rituals and practices. Schwartz and Kaplan are quick to condemn Midianite and Moabite leaders for sending out their daughters for the purpose of deceiving the Israelites, without mentioning the dubious record of Israelite Patriarchs who did similar, if not worse things! Their entire reading of Chapter 25 is based in the tradition which sees Balaam as the mastermind behind this deception.

Schwartz and Kaplan attempt to psycho-analyze Cozbi, suggesting that her seductive skill may have imbued within her a sense of power. They wonder if she could have used her talent in a constructive way, could she have been a strong moral force in her community?[50] Finally, they wonder why Zimri was drawn to her. Perhaps she initiated the whole thing? Perhaps this was all pleasure, no responsibility. Such questioning ignores the realities of the situation; that men alone were the initiators of sexual encounter, that as a daughter within her father's house, Cozbi was powerless. Either way, she is in no way responsible. Her actions are regulated by Salu, her father, or Zimri, her new husband. We should in no way assume that she is acting as

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid, 88.

a prostitute. The biblical writers are very quick to reveal women as prostitutes if that is what they are. Instead, the view of Sivan is adopted; that '[a] respectable couple, each a member of a highly distinguished clan, is murdered in the privacy of their own bedroom by a zealous priest carrying a deadly weapon.'[51]

This move from the couple to their slayer is an important one. While our reading is focussed on the person of Cozbi, it is the relationship between her and Phinehas rather than Zimri which can take steps towards her 'rescue'. Reading Phinehas through the work of Meike Bal will assist us here. That Phinehas emerges as a hero through this text is self evident. He is not only praised by Yhwh, but rewarded. Phinehas' actions disturbed the Rabbis[52] who understood that Phinehas had taken the law into his own hands without recourse to the justice system. It was an impulsive act; a murder, and set a dangerous precedent. According to the Rabbi's, it was this divine interjection which saved Phinehas from excommunication.[53] Milgrom claims that it is possible to defend Phinehas on the grounds that he was following a command from God.[54] Where though is this command? Moses had received a command from God which he had passed on, with modifications, to the judges (vss. 4-5). Phinehas was not a judge, he was not privy to this command. Nor is there indication that his actions were prompted by a sense of divine command. Simply, as Milgrom seems to agree, this was an impulsive, perhaps even reckless act. Sivan takes this even further. She

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[51] Helena Zlotnick Sivan, "The Rape of Cozbi (Numbers Xxv)," *Vetus Testamentum* 51, no. 1 (2001): 69ff.

[52] TJ Sanh. 27b, cited in Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-Midbar] : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New Jps Translation*, Jps Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 477.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

suggests that the stabbing of Cozbi with a spear which penetrates her belly constitutes an act of rape.[55] His action 'impregnates her not only in a manner to inflict death but also to degrade her legal relationship to a level of arbitrary passion.'[56] Her marriage to Zimri is de-legitimized. In doing so, Phinehas restores divine 'honour'.

Bal has noted that honour and shame are closely linked to gender, and particularly, foreign women.[57] It is a striking claim in relation to this text. The presence of Cozbi, the foreign woman, so near to the sacral precinct represents a great dishonour to Yhwh, and by association the Priests and officials of the cult, and further, the people of Israel. They are shamed by her close proximity. Phinehas acts against her presence as a way of defending Yhwh's honour, his own honour, the honour of his people. In doing so, even greater honour is heaped upon him individually. In this, even further shame is poured upon Cozbi and Zimri. The distinction between them could not be painted in sharper focus.

Phinehas emerges then as a hero. Heroism is displayed by the use of force, by unusual integrity and zeal, by an enlarged sense of honour. There is of course an intimate link between the heroism and the expression and justification of patriarchy.[58] Sadly, it is often the weak who are put at risk in such systems, as it is the weak who exist on margins, whose presence is a source of shame to the community. Such

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[55] Sivan, "The Rape of Cozbi (Numbers Xxv)," 74. See also, Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy : The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible*, 266. Camp describes Phinehas' spear as 'a fully realized identification of the priestly penis with divine phallus.'

[56] Sivan, "The Rape of Cozbi (Numbers Xxv)," 74.

[57] Mieke Bal and David Jobling, *On Storytelling : Essays in Narratology*, Foundations & Facets. Literary Facets ([Sonoma, Calif.]: Polebridge Press, 1991), 68.

[58] Bal, *Lethal Love : Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*, 37.

figures are easy targets for 'heroes'. Victories over them justify one's claim to the centre[59] which is where the divine decree places Phinehas and his descendants.

We see then, that Phinehas is polemically set against Cozbi. Where Cozbi threatens Israel, Phinehas emerges as a heroic saviour. Where Cozbi is by nature deceptive, Phinehas is seen to be decisive. Indeed, Phinehas is a revelation of Yhwh's own zeal for righteousness. Where Cozbi is a source of shame, Phinehas is a defender of honour.

How then do we honour the memory of Cozbi? A woman ill-treated by a man in the story world; a woman misrepresented by (male) story-tellers and misunderstood by centuries of (male) story readers? Is rehabilitation possible for her? To re-name her[60] would be to inappropriately exert our own control over her. No matter how noble the intention, the exercise would be the same. However, in the notion of 'the deceiver' arises a further possibility. It seems true that there has been an element of deception in this tale about Cozbi, though Cozbi herself is not responsible for the deception. Phinehas, the tellers and readers have been deceived, ironically, by their own false understanding of Cozbi and who she is. The characterization of her as the 'strange woman' by Camp, borrowing from the book of Proverbs helps us here, in that Cozbi is only strange, only foreign, only 'deceptive' from a place that sets clear boundaries around what is normative, exemplified here most strikingly by Phinehas, and echoed by writers and readers since.

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[59] Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy : The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible*, 225.

[60] Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam : A Woman's Commentary on the Torah* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1996), 235. Frankel points out that in rabbinical tradition, Cozbi has been known by another name: *Shevilanai*, related to an Arabic cognate meaning 'womb opening', or, 'whore'. Either way, the misogynist bent against her is glaringly obvious.

A recent article by Deborah Rooke clearly articulates the issue.[61] Rooke's argument is that stories such as these reinforce the beliefs of those who already hold such views. In looking at the stories of Gen 2-3, Rooke points out that for people who already hold a position that women are subordinate to men, it is easy to read these chapters in a way which concur to a position already held. In the popular mind, these views have reigned for centuries, which makes following this traditional line all the easier. It is not until feminist consciousness challenged the unthinking andro-centric interpretation that new light was able to be cast upon it. In this way, the 'deception' is removed, or perhaps better, revealed. Similarly with the story of Phinehas and Cozbi, it is clear that within Israel, women, and in particular, foreign women have traditionally been considered a danger; a tradition which has been used in the condemnation of Cozbi within the lines of this story, and in the history of its reception. This history is one of deception; a deception of the self on the part of the reader. Perhaps then, this is how we remember Cozbi; as the woman who reminds us of our own deception of ourselves and so as a woman who points us forward with newly opened eyes, able to see things in a new way.

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[61] Deborah W. Rooke, "Feminist Criticism of the Old Testament: Why Bother?," *Feminist Theology* 15, no. 2 (2007).

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