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[Re]Reading Again: A Mosaic Reading of Numbers 25

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Section II – A History of Interpretation in Three Parts

Chapter II.1

Certificate of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged.

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Anthony Rees

April 20, 2013

Acknowledgments

No project of this size occurs without significant investment by many people. The work of research and writing can be a lonely one. The support of colleagues, friends and loved ones has allowed me to persevere through that loneliness, and to overcome the inevitable anxieties that accompany an exercise such as this. No gift could ever match the value of that support, so to those who have been colleague, friend or loved one, I pray that you accept my thanks, inadequate as it is, in the spirit that it is offered.

In 2006 I first joined the UTC community to study Hebrew. I had little idea then what an important place it would become for me, nor did I realize what impact my teacher, Jione, would have on me. Jione has pushed me, challenged me, encouraged and trusted me, and has taught me how to do the same for myself. The consequences run far beyond the pages of this thesis, but are also to be found within them. Jione, I owe you a debt I can never repay.

Finally, this project began just months after the arrival of my first child. It finishes in the shadows of the second birthday of another. No one could ever be more important to me than their Mother, whose tireless love and support has made this possible. Janice has sharpened every thought and smoothed out any kink, again, far beyond the pages of this thesis. This work is dedicated to her, and to our children, Jesse and Penelope. Again, it is a gift far too small.

Publications Arising from Research

During the course of candidature, two sections of this thesis have been accepted for publication.

Chapter III.2 B appeared as *[Re]Naming Cozbi: In Memoriam, Cozbi, Daughter of Zur* in *Biblical Interpretation*, Volume 20, Issue 1-2, (2012), pg. 16-34.

Chapter III.3 C appeared as *Numbers 25 and Beyond: Phinehas and Other Detestable Practice(r)s* in Athalya Brenner and Archie C.C. Lee (eds). 'Leviticus and Numbers.' Texts@Contexts. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013.

The forms of these chapters are slightly revised in their present format.

Abstract

This study is interested in issues of method. For a long time, historical criticism dominated the landscape of biblical studies. It still does. But its dominance is being unsettled. New reading methods, often labelled 'post' something have begun to take hold in the discipline, their practitioners growing in influence. However, battles over reading strategy have choked the discipline. While new methods could have revitalised the field, the burgeoning of methods has served to grind the discipline to a halt. Some have wondered if the end has come. Others have called for the end. Others have called for dialogue, but little, if any, has resulted.

This thesis takes seriously the work of past scholars and their methods, while also taking stock of the present, and trying to look to the future. In that sense, it is conciliatory. It unfolds in three sections. The first takes on the methods of historical criticism, and critically reads the text of Numbers 25 through a historical lens. First, a translation is established, and secondly, a historical reading of the text is undertaken. The second section is a survey of the history of interpretation of Numbers 25, reaching back to the 1st century, and following major figures to the current day. What is found is that the interpretation of this text has always featured creativity and imagination, the hallmarks of all good reading. In this way, the survey sets the scene for the final section, which is made up of three distinct readings of the text employing contemporary methods: a narrative analysis, a feminist reading and a postcolonial reading.

The thesis is guided by the overarching metaphor of the mosaic. It recognises that all readings are temporal, that as the mosaic is subject to the wear and tear of time, so too are readings. A mosaic is an artwork made of many pieces. Comprised of pieces of glass, of clay, or polished stone, its appearance is fleeting, changing as often as the viewer changes position, or as the light shifts upon its surface. This thesis assumes that biblical interpretation is much like viewing a mosaic: what one sees depends on the position one takes in relation to the text. No one reading is final or definitive; rather, by reading from multiple places, a far richer form of reading can take place. Further, each reading adds to the mosaic. Perhaps it highlights other pieces, or perhaps it overshadows. In either case, no reading lacks consequence. The mosaic is constantly shifting, always beyond our control.

Like a mosaic, this thesis invites diversity and resists 'flat' readings. It recognises that reading position is vital in determining what is seen. Finally, it imagines a future for biblical studies; aware of difference, but not resistant to it. The mosaic celebrates diversity in its solidarity, seeing its plurality as its great strength. That being the case, calls for the end of biblical studies are premature. Instead, what remains is unfinished, unending business.

Introduction

In 2007, John Barton released a book titled *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*[1] which, in and of itself, is not so remarkable. Barton has an established history of commentary on the wider field of biblical studies.[2] His contribution to the analysis of biblical criticism is not a lone voice. Indeed, the field of biblical studies has been saturated with volumes committed to applying and explaining various reading strategies.[3] What is interesting about Barton's book is that, through ten theses, he seeks to define in clear terms what 'biblical criticism' is, or more pointedly, what he doesn't count under the banner of 'biblical criticism.'

Barton sees biblical criticism as a literary exercise[4] concerned with the discovery of the 'plain sense'[5] of biblical texts. Given the established association between what is called the 'Historical-Critical method' and 'biblical criticism', Barton is quite clear in his definitions. He is not speaking of a historical method, or of attempting to reconstruct a history of or in a particular text. Rather, Barton sees the biblical critic's job as about 'understanding' biblical texts.[6] Therefore, the 'plain sense' is differentiated from the 'original sense', so that critics are seen to be interested in what texts mean now, equally if not more importantly than what

[1] John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).
[2] John Barton, "Classifying Biblical Criticism," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 29 (1984); John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, Rev. and enlarged. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); John Barton, "The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation," In *Cambridge Companions to Religion*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Robert Morgan and John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, Oxford Bible Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
[3] Some notable examples include Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, *Mark & Method : New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold, *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999); Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and their Application*, Rev. and expanded. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999); Gale A. Yee, *Judges & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).
[4] Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 1.
[5] Ibid., 2. For a savage critique of 'plain sense', see Adrian Thatcher, *The Savage Text: The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, Blackwell Manifestos (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).
[6] Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 5. The use of the term 'understanding' brings Ricoeur's classic essay, "Explanation and Understanding" into conversation. For Ricoeur, explanation is about method, and understanding is a nonmethodological moment, a moment which 'precedes, accompanies, concludes and *envelops*' explanation. See, Paul Ricoeur, "Explanaton and Understanding," in *From Text to Action, Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

they have meant across history.[7] Clearly, Barton's assumption is that meaning is flexible and contingent on circumstances.

Barton is also clear in that it is necessary to bracket pre-conceived notions of 'truth' before reading a text.[8] One must attend to the semantic possibilities of a text before evaluating whether or not its claims are true.[9] As an example of reading strategies that to his mind fail this test, Barton mentions certain 'committed', 'advocacy' and 'theological' readings, regarding them as misconceived.[10] This is linked to a subsequent thesis concerning objectivity. Barton says that critics have been less objective than they have claimed to be. This is hardly news![11] Barton calls scholars to objectivity, as opposed to 'committed' or 'advocacy' critics who see their position as a central tenet of their interpretive process. That is not to say that Barton is unsympathetic to those interpretive programs. Later in his book, he cites R.S. Sugirtharajah's ambivalence towards the historical-critical method and his claims that the method has been damaging in its appropriation for the conquering and subjugation of other people's lands and stories.[12] Barton acknowledges the grave nature of the claim, and appears to agree with its substance: '…good intentions are not enough to excuse lamentable blindness to the effects of one's actions.'[13]

But what is objectivity? Or, what is an objective posture towards a text? Surely the acknowledgement that meaning is flexible, and that the shift of meaning is related to situation, can only further reiterate the importance of recognising our subjectivity, our placement, our histories and so on. As Fewell so forcefully commences a paper, 'The purely objective reader is, of course, an illusion.'[14]

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[7] Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 7.
[8] Here we are reminded of Bultmann's question: 'Is exegesis without pre-supposition possible?' See Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, Living Age Books (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 289-96.
[9] Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 6.
[10] Ibid. This is not a dismissal of all such readings, just a portion of them. Barton saves his strongest critique for Fernando Segovia.
[11] George Aichele and Gary A. Phillips, "Introduction : Exegesis, Eisegesis, Intergesis," *Semeia*, no. 69-70 (1995).
[12] R.S. Sugirtharajah, "Critics, Tools and the Global Arena", in Heikki Räisänen, *Reading the Bible in the Global Village : Helsinki* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000). Cited in Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 151.
[13] Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 151.
[14] Danna Nolan Fewell, "Feminist Reading of the Hebrew Bible: Affirmation, Resistance and Transformation," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 39 (1987), 77.

That being the case, what exactly is the 'plain meaning' being sought? Or rather, 'whose'' plain meaning'?

In the end, Barton, comes clean. He says quite plainly that he is not proposing a new program for biblical studies, but rather championing the cause of the old one, which he claims to have been widely misunderstood and in places, poorly carried out.[15] He hopes though that his wide definition of criticism as a literary exercise may open the door for the 'healing' of some of the rifts within the broader field of biblical studies, revealing similarity where some have assumed difference.[16]

Across the Atlantic, John J. Collins released a similar book: *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age*.[17] The title of the book tells us something about where Collins situates himself. Like Barton, Collins sees a future for the historical-critical method, though for him, it will evolve with the significant insights gained from 'committed' or 'advocacy' readings. This is not to differentiate him from Barton, nor to suggest that Barton is necessarily opposed to such an evolution. Rather, it seems that Collins can only see a future where these methods come closer together. As he says, '…it would be naïve to think that scholarship a century from now will look much like it does today…'[18]

A Shocking Invitation

Barton's and Collins' books are indicative of the current state of biblical studies: there is a multiplicity of methods being used, and those using more traditional methods are coming under attack by those using newer methods. While Barton is quick to acknowledge the validity of the critique coming from some sections, as we have seen, he also has been able to see the damage that has been done within the guild. That is why he speaks of the necessity for 'healing.' This issue moved from conversations between colleagues to a more public forum with the publication of "An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible"[19] in 2009. George Aichele, Peter Miscall and

[15] Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 7.
[16] Ibid., 8.
[17] John Joseph Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans 2005).
[18] Ibid., 3.
[19] George Aichele, Peter Miscall, and Richard Walsh, "An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 2 (2009).

Richard Walsh open their article in remarkably frank style: 'As everyone in the Society for Biblical Literature knows, historical critics and postmodernists are entrenched, embattled groups that speak to one another across the field of biblical studies only in sniping, intellectually unengaged footnotes.'[20] The comment is both critical, and self-critical, acknowledging the role that both sides have played in creating the impasse. This level of discourse is a little more charged than Collins' more sanguinely titled chapter 'Historical Criticism and its Postmodern Critics'.[21] It seems as if they are aiming to shock the guild into a response. Aichele, Miscall and Walsh then proceed to describe the goal of the historical-critical method as seeking an assured, agreed upon interpretation, understood in relation to the author's intention, the understanding of the first recipients, or in reference to actual historical events.[22] This is contrasted against a postmodern embrace of diversity of method and result, the possibility and even invitation of other readings.[23]

Aichele, Miscall and Walsh claim not to set out to prove the superiority of postmodern approaches (no matter how much it may appear so, they remark), nor to overcome the gap that separates them. Instead, their wish is to make conversation between the two sides more acceptable, even desirable.[24]

The article prompted a response from historical-critic, John Van Seters.[25] Van Seters wastes no time in coming to his point, arguing immediately that 'modern' and 'postmodern' approaches are unsymmetrical conversation partners'.[26] He claims that post-modernism can only be defined against what it isn't, namely modern, and that modernism is in no need of an 'Other' to understand itself.[27] At various points he refers to the three authors' methods as disingenuous and concludes that the caricature of the historical-critical method and its practitioners make the article unconducive to dialogue. In the end, he likens their approach to

[20] Ibid., 383.
[21] Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age*, 1-26.
[22] Aichele, Miscall, and Walsh, "An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible," 384.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 387.
[25] John Van Seters, "A Response to G Aichele, P Miscall and R Walsh, "An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible"," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9(2009).
[26] Ibid., 2.
[27] Ibid., 3.

that of a novelist, referring to a private interaction with one of the three authors in which that particular author claimed to have no problem with such an observation.[28] In fact, Van Seters mentions that he had made contact with all three authors asking for clarification on a possible forum, but says that no ideas were floated, despite the claim that the invitation to dialogue was genuine.[29]

This exchange did not go un-noticed. Bloggers from around the world had witnessed the exchange and hoped that further responses would be forth-coming. However, they were to be disappointed. To this point, there has been no attempt to further this conversation, or to steer it onto territory where something substantive may occur. The rifts that Barton mentioned appear to still be very much in need of healing.

However, the rifts in biblical studies run far more deeply than a division between so-called modern and post-modern methodologies. Recent publications, both in press and online, bare these divisions out.

In 2007, Roland Boer published a highly political book, *Rescuing the Bible*.[30] In his manifesto, Boer calls for an alliance of the left, what he calls a 'worldly left', a coalition of the old religious left and secular left.[31] Boer hopes the coalition will 'reclaim and rescue'[32] the bible from those who now hold it in their clutches: the religious and political right. Boer clearly sees battle-lines drawn, and hopes that the left can claim back the bible, a 'book too important to be left to the religious right.'[33] On one hand, this is a call to some form of unity. On the other, it is predicated with a common foe in mind, and so pre-supposes animosity. Ultimately, it pits religious left and right against each other. While these arguments are far broader than biblical studies, the appropriation of the bible into the discussion makes biblical studies relevant. After all, biblical studies takes place on both sides of the religious left-right divide.

[28] Ibid., 13.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Roland Boer, *Rescuing the Bible*, Blackwell Manifestos (Oxford: Blackwell Pub. Ltd, 2007).
[31] Ibid., 1.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 2.

Boer's own ideological positions are crystal clear. After all, this is a manifesto, which is a call to action; a statement of belief; a declaration of intent. His understanding of what good reading is stands in distinction to that of Barton. For Barton, objectivity is the goal. For Boer, his ideological position explicitly drives his reading strategy. What is interesting about his proposal is that secular and non-secular readers, confessional and non-confessional readers, may be able to unite together. This blurs boundaries: are left wing religious people more closely aligned with left wing secularists than they are with their religious right colleagues? What is at stake? The bible? Religion? Or politics? Can the three even be teased apart?

In 2010, in his introduction to the edited volume, *Secularism and Biblical Studies,*[34] Boer takes a slightly different view. As he notes, the secular-anti-secular divide is a complicated one, taking several forms.[35] It includes the study of the scriptures due to religious conviction and those who have no such conviction; it may be the struggle between those who rely on a transcendent category, or matters of worldview.[36] In his contribution to the volume, another manifesto,[37] some of the difficulties of the proposed alliance are evident once more. Boer is highly critical of the church throughout his paper, wanting to hold it to account.[38] At the same time, he recognises the important work done by the religious left, a work done within the parameters of the church.[39] Here, echoing the thoughts from *Rescuing the Bible*, Boer recognises the need for alliances between the religious and secular left. Again, politics, religion and bible come together: the alliance would show that the various causes of the religious left are actually parts of a deeper common political agenda.[40]

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[34] Roland Boer, *Secularism and Biblical Studies*, BibleWorld (London: Equinox, 2010).
[35] Here, the notion of the 'worldly left' coalition seems a little further off. Instead, a division down religious/non-religious lines is more in view, but this is an entirely different discussion to that found in *Rescuing the Bible*. Perhaps the proposed coalition partners were further apart than Boer first imagined.
[36] Roland Boer, "Introduction," in *Secularism and Biblical Studies*, ed. Roland Boer (London: Equinox, 2010), 9. It was these groups who Boer had hoped to align in his coalition!
[37] Roland Boer, "A Manifesto for Biblical Studies," in *Secularism and Biblical Studies*, ed. Roland Boer (London: Equinox, 2010).
[38] Ibid., 31.
[39] Ibid., 36. Mark Brett critiques the breadth of Boer's claims, asking 'Which church?' He too applauds the 'heroic' struggle undertaken by scholars battling right-wing conservatism in America, while questioning whether the manifesto will be of any use in other non-Western contexts. See, Mark G. Brett, "Theological Secularity: A Response to Roland Boer," in *Secualrism and Biblical Studies*, ed. Roland Boer (London: Equinox, 2010).
[40] Boer, "A Manifesto for Biblical Studies."

Debates rage in other places too. The website *Bible and Interpretation*[41] features opinion pieces from a variety of notable scholars on either side of the faith-non-faith divide. This debate has grown out of the minimalist-maximalist debate which also features heavily at this site. The minimalists, headed by Niels-Peter Lemche, take aim at the conservatives, headed by Iain Provan and V. Phillips Long. The charge from Lemche is that the conservative, evangelical interpretation on which he comments is predicated on religiously motivated, conservative ideology and so claims that such scholarship is actually just 'disguising itself' as mainstream scholarship.[42] Long's response[43] wonders if Lemche's angst might be born of a frustration that minimalism had seemingly been ignored or passed over amongst the guild, and that his 'own interests' might be served in his characterisation of the conservative scholars. It seems then that his sub-title, 'Can we Talk?' is a little ironic. Even just a brief look at the website reveals a lot of talking, with little, if any, discussion.

It would be wrong to assume that minimalism belongs only to 'non-confessing' scholars. Even on *Bible and Interpretation*, people who work in confessional contexts write as clear supporters of the minimalist position. This 'cross-over' is common to all of the binaries that are set up in the guild. Each 'method', whether new or old, is utilised by a variety of scholars, confessional, non-confessional, secular and non-secular, so that the so called 'divide' is itself problematic. The result is a continued fracturing of the discipline and an increased specialisation of its practitioners.[44]

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[41] www.bibleinterp.com

[42] Niels-Peter Lemche, "Conservative Scholarship-Critical Scholarship: Or How Did We Get Caught by This Bogus Discussion," http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Conservative_Scholarship.shtml. Accessed 19th July, 2012

[43] V. Philips Long, "Conservative Scholarship-Critical Scholarship: Can We Talk?," http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Long_Conservate_Critical_Scholarship.shtml.Accessed 19th July, 2012

[44] See, R. S. Sugirtharajah, "The End of Biblical Studies?," in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003).

The End?

Sugirtharajah's claim seems correct: the increased specialisation of biblical studies is making the discipline inaccessible, saturated as it is with its own set of languages and self-referential nature.[45] Actually, inaccessibility has turned to irrelevance. Even in confessional contexts, where the scriptures take a privileged place, there is a disconnect between the work done by biblical specialists and the people who actually read the bible, and listen to it as it is read. Even those who proclaim the scriptures are often far removed from the work done by biblical experts, even confessional ones.

Not only that, the space in which biblical studies takes place has evidently become an inhospitable one, marked by battlelines and populated by snipers. Sugirtharajah's provocatively titled paper, "The End of Biblical Studies?" has been joined by other similarly titled works. The use of 'End' is a double *entendre*, simultaneously referring to the temporal end, and to the philosophical goal. But it does raise significant questions. Perhaps we have come to the end, given the irrelevance which now clouds the discipline. Or perhaps more accurately, if the end is to be averted, biblical studies is in need of a new end, a new project.

Hector Avalos has been the most prominent voice in raising this polemic. His book, *The End of Biblical Studies*[46]attracted significant attention, and instigated a series of posts on *Bible and Interpretation.* A chapter which covered much of the same material soon followed.[47] His position is a little more certain than Sugirtharajah. He doesn't question the end, but forcefully calls for it. Avalos' argument is that biblical studies as it is practiced now, and across its history has been tainted by religious agendas. In fact, he calls it a 'religionist apologetic enterprise.'[48] The mechanisms that support it, such as university departments, media outlets, publishing companies, churches and organisations such as the Society for Biblical Literature also come under his withering critique.

[45] Ibid., 134.
[46] Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2007).
[47] Hector Avalos, "The End of Biblical Studies as a Moral Obligation," in *Secularism and Biblical Studies*, ed. Roland Boer (London: Equinox, 2010).
[48] Ibid., 85.

But it is more than just biblical studies which irks Avalos. It is ultimately the bible itself. Avalos raises several concerns, most significantly the reality that the bible's morality reflects a world alien from our own, and which has encouraged people to kill others.[49] For this, he sees the point of any ongoing biblical studies as stopping the discipline, as we know it,[50] in order to create a post-scriptural world, a world in which people abandon their reliance on this book.[51]

The rhetoric of Avalos' work is blistering. However, Philip Davies' response to it reveals that Avalos may have over-reached, despite his sympathies with some of his criticisms. Most importantly, the post-scriptural world which Avalos imagines is impossible to comprehend, given the rise of religious fundamentalism, with its heavy reliance on scriptural texts. Avalos is also concerned about the relevance of the scriptures,[52] a result of which is illiteracy. But the scriptures are not disappearing, and so Davies asks a penetrating question: in the light of the ongoing moral danger that the bible represents,[53] isn't a critical discipline that can expose that danger exactly what is required?[54] Indeed, the bible is relevant, just in ways we may not like, and as such, critical engagement is exactly what is required.[55]

Or A[nother] New Beginning?

What might a new biblical studies look like, a biblical studies where the old and new talk together? What if the 'end' is different to what Avalos imagines? If relevance is to be important in a reconfiguration, biblical studies will need to turn its attention to significant cultural issues. Readings that engage world affairs and world issues can help to re-establish the disciplines place. In a 2008 book,[56] R.S. Sugirtharajah suggested such a thing, briefly examining religious fundamentalism, suicide bombing, and asylum seeking. This is a short list, but a good start. Others may include exile, human trafficking, prostitution, and the ongoing issues of gross imbalance in the world's resources. Each of these have had a beginning, but more

[49] Philip R. Davies, "The End of Biblical Studies," *Journal of Theological Studies* 60(2009), 216.
[50] Avalos, "The End of Biblical Studies as a Moral Obligation," 85.
[51] Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies*, 25.
[52] Avalos, "The End of Biblical Studies as a Moral Obligation," 87.
[53] See Chapter II.3: A Violent Turn.
[54] Davies, "The End of Biblical Studies," 216.
[55] Ibid., 218.
[56] R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Troublesome Texts: The Bible in Colonial and Contemporary Culture*, Bible in the Modern World (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008).

work remains to be done. As Davies notes, some of these discussions filter down into the church. Where would these debates go if biblical studies was to disappear?[57] Glossing Avalos, perhaps biblical scholars might see this as a moral obligation.

But another issue remains. How is such work to be done, given the atomised nature of the field and the ongoing battles around appropriate method and practice? Is it possible that Sugirtharajah was not quite right, and that the atomisation of the discipline may well play a role in the new world of biblical studies? Perhaps diversity in the field is its greatest strength, and can create room for the sort of strategic alliances Boer wants to develop.

In various places, different methods have been brought together quite fruitfully. Kwok Pui-Lan[58] and Musa Dube[59] have both produced work that brings feminist and postcolonial critique together. Boer's survey of the field notes that a Marxist critic can be a historical critic, or so too may a feminist or postcolonial critic. (Such critics may even 'switch sides', he suggests, as if the methods are pitted against each other.[60]) Boer's own work shows such diversity.[61] Given the desire to create a relevant biblical studies discipline, and to engage meaningfully with issues that confront the world, this diversity is not just a strength. It is a necessity. However, Daniel Patte's warning here is timely. There must be a willingness to speak with each other, rather than speaking for, or listening to others, and with an acute sense of respect for their 'Otherness'.[62]

The aim of this thesis is to read a passage of scripture using a variety of methods now common in biblical studies. In doing so, I am endeavouring not to privilege

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[57] Ibid.
[58] Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).
[59] Musa W. Dube Shomanah, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).
[60] Boer, "Introduction," 9.
[61] Roland Boer, *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies*, Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Roland Boer, *Last Stop Before Antarctica: The Bible and Postcolonialism in Australia*, 2nd ed., Semeia Studies (Leiden Brill, 2008); Roland Boer and Jorunn Økland, *Marxist Feminist Criticism of the Bible*, Bible in the Modern World (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008).
[62] Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 25. Patte's comments are in reference to advocacy critics, such as feminist or African-American critics. However, it can be extended from groups to methods.

any one method, but to recognise that each method can make a valid contribution to an understanding of the text in view. I undertake this project expecting that each individual reading will enrich our understanding of the text and that by reading in a multiplicity of ways, different aspects of the text will be discovered. As Patte argues, different readings based upon different meaning-production dimensions are equally legitimate.[63] There is strength in diversity.

The guiding metaphor for this approach will be the *mosaic* art form. Mosaics have a rich history, with examples coming from as early as the Mesopotamian period. In religious history, mosaics have adorned floors and rooves of sacred spaces; Jewish, Islam and Christian. Many of these have been restored and continue to adorn these places. However, these pieces of art are highly stylised, protected from the elements. As a result they are stable, not permeable. In every sense, they stand beyond our manipulation and evade our control.[64]

Not all mosaics are found in sacred spaces. Others are made outside from a variety of elements: glass, tile, rock, stone. The component pieces are held together by some adhesive, itself a part of the mosaic, always visible even if it is ignored, or overshadowed by the more brilliant lustre of the mosaic pieces. Open to the elements, they are constantly 'under construction', worn down by the sun, wind and rain, damaged by creatures who examine it a little too closely. Their shine can be subdued, their sharp edges worn down, only to be reinvigorated by some form of repair. These mosaics need to be considered from multiple angles. The light catches them differently, casting different shadows, reflecting different hues depending on the time of day, and from where one stands to view it. Perhaps there is no one singular, definitive viewing of the mosaic, its character always changing, always elusive.

For the purposes of the analogy, the component parts will comprise of four distinct readings of the text of Numbers 25, as well as a history of its interpretation written in three parts (Section II). The readings are: an historical-critical reading (Chapter I.2); a narrative analysis (Chapter III.1); a feminist reading (Chapter III.2); and a postcolonial reading (Chapter III.3) The adhesive

[63] Ibid., 9.
[64] See, Jione Havea, *Elusions of Control: Biblical Law on the Words of Women* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

element is the text of Num 25, which binds the readings (and through the history, previous readings) together. What that text has been throughout its history, through its development and translation, gives the mosaic an element of elasticity and permeability.

Each reading utilises methods appropriate to its interpretive agenda: this serves to make each section of the mosaic distinct. The incorporation of previous readings and an emphasis on inter-textuality ensure that the mosaic retains a sense of depth, referring to works beyond itself from all angles, continually evading our control.

The Structure of the Mosaic

A Historically Oriented Reading

The thesis is divided into three sections. The first contains two parts, in which the bulk of the historical-critical work of the thesis is to be found. First is the translation, which guides the ensuing interpretations. It is based upon the Masoretic Text, and is placed into conversation with several leading critical translations.

Translation is itself a matter of interpretation, and so where there are divergences from the other translations, they are noted and considered. Where there are significant differences between the various translations, these too are examined. The translations come from a variety of contexts: Some are religiously motivated, such as the recent *Common English Bible* and that of the *New Jewish Publishing Society*. Some come from a single hand: those of Robert Alter, Philip Budd and Baruch Levine. Also included are the *New Revised Standard Version*, the translation most widely used amongst biblical studies academics, the *New Jerusalem Bible*, the translation favoured amongst English speakers in the Roman Catholic Church, and the N*ew American Bible*.

The second chapter, I.2, is the first of the constructive readings of the text and utilises historical-critical methods to approach the text. It examines the insertion of this particular text at this point of the narrative, just after the oracles of Balaam (Num 22-24), and just before the second census (Num 26). It examines structure, with an eye to sources and then to the references to the represented traditions within the canon of the Old Testament itself. This enables us to consider the

development of the text as it is finally assembled. What is found is that while the events of the text are seemingly possible to reconstruct, the text is overlaid with ideology which come from different times, places and people.

Recognition of the ideological construction of the text bring the work of David Clines into view, in particular his famous phrase, 'reading left to right.'[65] Reading against the natural flow of the text, against the grain as it were, (bearing in mind that Hebrew is written right to left) creates a new world of reading strategies. Borrowing from Clines, the first section is titled 'Reading right to left.' The third, utilising contemporary approaches is subtitled 'Reading left to right.'

A Reading of the History of Interpretation

The second section of the thesis is a history of the interpretation of Numbers 25. The history is divided into three parts. The first, Chapter II.1, begins with the historiographical work of Josephus and Philo and concludes with the work of Jean Calvin. In between, major rabbinic figures are considered, as are relevant sections of the *Talmud.* The reception of the story in the Arabic work, *The Samaritan Chronicle,* is also reviewed. The early church father Origen is also considered, through his homily on Num 25:1-10. This section is diverse in its sweep, including works that are religiously motivated, such as the work of Josephus, Philo and Calvin, as well as works which are written for liturgical use, such as Origen's homily and the *Aramaic Targumim.* What is discovered is that in these early interpretations, readers have been troubled by the gaps in the text, and by some of the content of the text, and in their efforts to make he text relevant to their readers, have displayed creativity in their reconstruction and re-telling.

The second chapter, II.2, begins in what we might call the 'modern period', and looks at a number of the more significant historical-critical engagements with the text. Beginning with Spinoza and Astruc, this part traces the history through to the work of the contemporary scholar, Baruch Levine. In between, we see the beginning of the splintering of the classical source hypothesis, and as a result, a variety of ways of reconstructing the text. We also have in the work of Keil and Delitzsch a denial of the source theory, which is a precursor to the sort of

[65] David J. A. Clines, "Reading Esther from Left to Right: Contemporary Strategies for Reading a Biblical Text," in *Bible in Three Dimensions* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990).

divisions we see in the guild today. Keil and Delitzsch were conservative scholars and were perturbed by the progressive views of the time which to them, appeared to undermine the authority of the scriptures. What we see is that the historical critical method has not provided the 'assured, agreed upon' interpretation that Aichele, Miscall and Walsh claimed was its aim. Nor, really, do we have a sense of Barton's 'plain meaning'. Even amongst the historical critics we have speculation, invention and creativity.

The final portion of the historical review, Chapter II.3, takes quite a different turn. This part looks at ways in which the text has been read that have made a departure from what had been established as 'normal'. This part looks at feminist readings of the text, firstly in the creative work of Ellen Frankel, and then in the joint project called *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. Moving the emphasis from history to gender enables the text to be read in an entirely different way, and enables a different way of reconstructing the text, driven as the reading is, by different questions. A creative work by Philip Davies is also considered: a letter, from one father to another on the occasion of grief and fear.

The history concludes with one final appropriation of the text, and a reminder that the bible is a public book with public consequences. The Priest who takes centre stage in the story, Phinehas, *gives his name* to a particular type of white supremacist, the so-called Phinehas Priesthood. This use of the bible demands our attention as biblical scholars, because it reminds us of the urgent necessity of our task. When the Bible is used as justification for deeds of terror, it spurs us to answer Sugirtharajah's challenge to find a way to speak about the bible beyond the narrow confines of the academy, to speak about the bible in a forceful manner that creates a counter-narrative to the senseless acts of hate committed in the name of the (god of the) Bible.

This history of interpretation alone gives justification to the metaphor of the mosaic as a guiding principle for interpretation. The history itself is a mosaic of many parts. The creativity of past readers allows for further creativity not only in

singular readings, but also in the assembly of multiple readings. Actually, the mosaic is already in place, and this work continues to add to it.[66]

[Re]Reading, Again

The final section of the thesis is comprised of three distinct readings of Numbers 25. The first is a narrative analysis, modelled on the poetics style readings of Robert Alter,[67] Yairah Amit,[68] and other interpreters.[69] The text is read in its final form, and is analysed under standard narrative categories: characters, plot, time, space and so on. Following Gunn and Fewell, this reading is also interested in the ideological underpinnings of the narrative. Being a religious text, it is assumed that there is an ideological agenda to be found behind the text. Indeed, what is found is that there are two powerful ideological concerns within this text. The first is the championing of the priesthood, and the second is the danger of foreign women. These two matters become very significant in the following readings, but how they are manifest in the text is analysed within the narrative reading.

The narrative reading also contains a large section on the manipulation of space within the narrative. Utilising the space theory of Edward Soja,[70] it becomes clear that space is an important locus for understanding this particular narrative as its scenes move from the centre to the margins, from sacred space to public space and to private space. This section also borrows from recent work by Victor Matthews[71] as a way of exploring issues of spatiality.

The second part of this section engages feminist hermeneutics as its strategy (Chapter III.2). It begins with a survey of various approaches used in the service

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[66] In this sense, the metaphor of the mosaic operates on a variety of levels. The text is a mosaic, or a part of the mosaic. Subsequent interpretations add to the mosaic. So as we look at the mosaic, we are also helping the mosaic to evolve.

[67] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

[68] Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

[69] Including, but not limited to, Mieke Bal and David Jobling, *On Storytelling : Essays in Narratology*, Foundations & Facets. Literary Facets (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1991); Shimeon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series (Sheffield: Almond, 1989); D. M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford Bible series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[70] Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996).

[71] Victor Harold Matthews, *More than Meets the Ear : Discovering the Hidden Contexts of Old Testament Conversations* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008); Victor H. Matthews, "Back to Bethel: Geographical Reiteration in Biblical Narrative," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 1 (2009).

of feminist biblical hermeneutics, and then uses such approaches to consider the text of Num 25. This application takes the reading into other texts as it considers the characterisation of women and the feminine in this text and beyond.

The reading which follows, "[Re]Naming Cozbi" is in the style of *In Memoriam* readings discussed in the survey of approaches. It is an attempt to redeem Cozbi from the negative portrayal within the text, and the subsequent interpretation of the story across history. This negativity is also clearly demonstrated in the History of Interpretation chapters, (Section II) even while dissenting voices are also to be heard. The reading considers Cozbi's name as an interpretive device and then considers the possibility of renaming her, which is to say, redefining her essence.

The final reading engages postcolonial criticism as its methodological framework. Chapter III.3 begins with a brief survey of postcolonial theory, looking firstly at Said's notion of 'fixity', and then Bhabha's theory of 'ambivalence'. These two concepts and related themes are discussed in light of the broader biblical narrative and its reception in scholarship. Then, attention is given to the use of postcolonial theory in biblical studies through the works of R.S. Sugirtharajah, with an emphasis on the third edition of *Voices from the Margin*.[72] The second work considered is not explicitly postcolonial in its conception, but is reflective of postcolonial concerns. *They Were All Together in One Place?*[73] is a work drawn from scholars within the United States who are from minority groups. They each engage in talking back to the dominant voices of biblical studies, and so there is an element of power discourse which aligns this work to a broad conception of postcolonialism. It is not so hard to postulate an imperial centre and its backwater colonies in this situation. That two of its editors, Tat-Siong Benny Liew and Fernando Segovia are also prominent voices in explicitly postcolonial endeavours[74] only serves to make this alignment all the more appropriate.

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[72] R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed. *Voices From the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, Rev. and expanded 3rd ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006).

[73] Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *They Were All Together in One Place? : Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009).

[74] Tat-Siong Benny Liew, "Postcolonial Criticism: Echoes of a Subaltern's Contribution and Exclusion," in *Mark and Method*, ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008); Tat-Siong Benny Liew and R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Interventions : Essays in Honor of R.S. Sugirtharajah*, The Bible in the Modern World (Sheffield: Sheffield

What follows is a reading called “Numbers 25 and Beyond: Phinehas and Other Detestable Practice(r)s.” This reading moves from Num 25 to other biblical texts: from Ezra 9 and 10, to Psalm 137 and finishing with Deuteronomy 22. It is guided by a further text: the recollections of an indigenous Australian, recalling stories told by her grandmother. This interweaving of texts, what Said calls a ‘contrapuntal’ reading, also responds to a call from Sugirtharajah to bring such colonial texts into conversation with the biblical text. The title, borrowed from Ezra’s prayer, may give an indication of the view taken of Phinehas’ actions. It reads against the text’s attempt to establish Phinehas as a hero, instead seeing a senseless, cold-blooded execution.

It should be clear at this point that the mosaic metaphor is employed at multiple levels throughout the thesis. While the chapters are pieces within the mosaic, the chapters themselves have a sense of being mosaic in nature as well, comprised of various parts, each adding to the character of each chapter. Perhaps this is most evident in the History of Interpretation, but it is also true of the surrounding chapters.

. It is hoped then, that this thesis helps in the ongoing project of biblical studies by opening a discussion within the discipline Each method used has a place in the guild, but the ongoing atomisation, which appears to be creating the rifts, threatens to alienate biblical scholars from themselves, and to make the entire endeavour irrelevant. What is hoped here, is that this project is indicative of the depth and richness of the resources available to biblical scholars, and the way in which when harnessed together, they create a far richer way of understanding and speaking about the biblical text. The use of the metaphor of the mosaic reminds us that readings get worn out, that they are imperfect and incomplete. From one perspective, they lack lustre and are overshadowed by other more prominent things. From another, they may take central position, helping to bring other matters into focus. Either way, when placed together with other readings, of

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Phoenix Press, 2009); Fernando F. Segovia, "My Personal Voice: The Making of a Postcolonial Critic," in *Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1999); Fernando F. Segovia, "Postcolonialism and Comparative Analysis in Biblical Studies," *Biblical Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (1999); Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View From the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000).

different type and nature, each reading still contributes to make a greater landscape.

The mosaic metaphor invites further readings, additional ways of understanding the text. It resists the notion of a definitive reading. The mosaic calls readers to conversation, to share the experience of reading. Understanding and respecting the role that each reading plays in the construction, it demands a certain methodological humility, alongside the plurality it champions. It does not claim to be a definitive way of healing the rifts which mark our discipline. But rather, it is hoped to be a starting place for dialogue to begin.

Section I

Reading Right-to-Left

Chapter I.1
A Critical Translation

Note: As was mentioned in the Introduction, the following translation is based on the MT, and differences are placed into discussion with a number of other critical translations. For the sake of ease of reading, those translations will be referred to using the following abbreviations:

NRSV:	New Revised Standard Version
CEB:	Common English Bible
NAB:	New American Bible
NJPS:	New Jewish Publication Society
NJB:	New Jerusalem Bible
Alter:	The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary. (New York: Norton, 2004)
Budd:	Word Biblical Commentary, *Numbers*. (Waco: Word, 1984)
Levine:	Anchor Bible, *Numbers 21-36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. (New York: Doubleday, 2000)

Additionally, use of the lexicon of Brown, Driver and Briggs[1] will be indicated using the common abbreviation, BDB. This will be found throughout the thesis.

[1] Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English lexicon of the Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996).

Numbers 25

1. While Israel was staying[2] at Shittim,[3] the people[4] defiled[5] themselves by committing fornication[6] with the daughters of Moab. *2.* They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed[7] to their gods. *3.* So the sons of Israel[8] were bound[9] to Baal of Peor and the anger of Yhwh burnt[10] within Israel.

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[2] The form ישב suggests an elongated stay. This is picked up across the various translations, which offer 'settled' or 'staying'. CEB and NAB are even stronger, offering 'lived'. The choice to translate the conjunctive ו as 'While' is intended to link this episode with the beginning of Num 22. This is ignored by the NJB and Levine, but taken up by other translations, mainly with the conjunction 'And'.

[3] 'at Shittim' is literally, 'in the acacia trees'. This is not taken up in any of the translations.

[4] העם is rendered 'the menfolk' in NJPS in light of what follows. It seems clear that 'the people' in this scene does not include the women.

[5] חלל can be 'to begin', which is used is some translations, such as NRSV. It can also be 'to defile, to pollute, to profane' which is used in NJPS, coming from LXX. NJB renders 'gave themselves over'. The present choice reflects the theme which develops across the chapter.

[6] זנה is 'to be a harlot' or 'commit fornication'. Translation choices reflect these ideas. NRSV and Budd tone down the negative connation, simply suggesting 'to have sexual relations'. This reflects their previous choice to not translate חלל as 'to defile'. NJPS suggests 'by whoring', reflecting the opposite extreme. Likewise CEB, who offer 'having illicit sex'. Levine treads a middle way, 'pursue improper relations'.

[7] 'bowed' is omitted in CEB and NJPS, and rendered simply as 'worshipped'. The choice of 'bowed' is a more literal understanding, and also forms a nice euphony with 'bound' in the following verse.

[8] Normal practice would be to translate this in a non-gendered way. However, 'sons of Israel' parallels the 'daughters of Moab', and also makes clear the lack of culpability upon the daughters of Israel.

[9] צמד means 'to bind' or 'to join together'. Most translations render 'attached', though NJB differs with 'committed'

[10] ויחר־אף יהוה has to do with Yhwh's anger. NJB suggests it is 'aroused', NJPS suggests 'Yhwh was incensed', NRSV and Budd suggest 'was kindled' and NAB suggests 'flared up'. The present choice reads as a passive form of חרר ('to burn').

4. And Yhwh said to Moses,

> ‘Take all the heads[11] of the people and impale[12] them before the sun for Yhwh, in order to turn the fierce anger of Yhwh from Israel.’

5. And Moses said to the judges[13] of Israel,

> ‘Each of you, kill[14] your men who have been bound to Baal of Peor.’

6. Just then[15], a man from the sons of Israel came, and he brought the[16] Midianite woman into his brothers in view of Moses, and in view of the entire congregation[17] of the sons of Israel. They were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

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[11] Almost all translations render this as ‘leaders’ (Alter has ‘chiefs’). The choice ‘heads’ allows for a double meaning: the heads of the people, that is, the leaders, but also the literal ‘heads’, which plays with the notion of impalement which follows.

[12] הוקע derives from יקע and carries the sense of being dislocated. BDB suggests a solemn sort of execution, though the meaning is uncertain. That this is a public execution is implied by ‘before the sun’ and ‘for Yhwh’.

[13] ‘judges’ is translated ‘commanders’ by Levine, suggesting a military rather than judicial leadership. This also differentiates the group from the ‘heads’, which would appear to be a social leadership. To what degree these distinctions can be made is not clear. However, distinct words are used to describe leadership throughout, so these different words are each translated consistently.

[14] הרג gives the impression of a gruesome murder, perhaps to complement the use of הוקע earlier. The most common word for murder is נכה, used most commonly in the hiphil stem (this form is translated ‘destroy’ in verse 17 of the present text), while rarer forms are נכא and רצח.

[15] והנה is an important marker, to draw the readers attention to something new. But it is ignored by NJB and CEB. Alter translated ‘And look’, giving full attention to the meaning conveyed.

[16] The definite article is commonly omitted, used only by Alter, Levine and NJB.

[17] The use of עדה signals a change of expression. To this point in the text, the form עם (people) had been used. The change to ‘congregation’ or ‘community’ is picked up in all translations and is regarded as evidence of a shift in source material.

7. And Phinehas, son of Eleazer, son of Aaron the Priest saw, and he stood up from the midst of the congregation and he took a spear in his hand.

8. He went after the man of Israel, into the tent[18] and he pierced[19] through the two of them, the man of Israel and the woman, in(to) her stomach.[20] And the plague was restrained from the sons of Israel.

9. And those who died in the plague were 24 000.

10. Then Yhwh spoke to Moses saying,

> *11.* 'Phinehas, son of Eleazer, son of Aaron the Priest has turned back[21] my wrath[22] from the sons of Israel; by his zeal[23], my zeal is displayed in their midst.[24] So, I did not annihilate[25] the sons of Israel in my zeal. *12.* Therefore say, I now give to him

[18] The form קבה is a *hapax*, and is translated here using the most common rendering. Alter suggests 'alcove', which is a very similar idea.

[19] The most common alternative is 'stabbed', while NJB suggests 'ran them both through'. Both those choices seem to be too fleeting for the extent of the physical exertion required.

[20] קבה is used here again, modified with a singular feminine possessive. NAB ignores it, while Alter, Budd and Levine refer to it as 'tent' once again. However, the rendering allows it to be 'her stomach', which is in line with the action of the piercing which precedes it. Older translations and reading read much into this, as will be seen in The History of Interpretation, in particular Chapters II.1 and II.2. Knox's translation serves as a good example: 'groin to groin', while LXX has 'womb'. The decision here is based largely on what one imagines is happening in the tent.

[21] NJB suggest 'deflected', though the root form שוב is more commonly 'turn'. Again, it fits with the enormity of Phinehas' action also.

[22] חמה, rendered here as 'wrath', also carries connotations of heat, and so links with the earlier 'burning', and also the heat of the sun.

[23] קנא can be either 'jealous' or 'zealous', though 'jealous' as an adjective is only used of God. Only CEB renders jealous. Interestingly, NJPS use 'passion'

[24] This is complicated construction, rendered in a variety of ways. The general sense is indicated in the present translation: that the divine zeal is enacted by Phinehas.

[25] 'annihilate' here follows Levine. The root means 'to come to an end', which is widely used. The noun form means 'destruction', so 'annihilate' picks up this aspect of the form.

my covenant of peace.[26] *13.* And it will be for him and for his seed after him a covenant of everlasting Priesthood.[27] In return for his zeal for his God he has made atonement[28] for the sons of Israel.'

14. Now the name of the slaughtered Israelite man, slain with the Midianite woman, was Zimri, son of Salu, chief[29] of an ancestral house of Simeon.
15. And the name of the slaughtered woman, the Midianite woman, was Cozbi, daughter of Zur, head[30] of a tribe, an ancestral house in Midian.

16. Then Yhwh spoke to Moses saying,

14. 'Be hostile to the Midianites, and you destroy[31] them. *18.* Because they were hostile to you in their deceitfulness with which they fooled[32] you in the matter of Peor, and in the matter of Cozbi, daughter of a chief of Midian, their sister. She was killed in the day of the plague from the matter of Peor.'[33]

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[26] בריתי שלום is rendered 'my covenant of fellowship' by Levine, and 'my pact of friendship' by NJPS.

[27] NRSV and Alter speak of a 'perpetual priesthood.' I take that it be implicit in the mention of the descendants.

[28] NJB places the atonement of Israel in the future: 'he will have the right to preform the ritual of expiation', not acknowledging that the act of murder was an act of atonement. The other translations differ in this respect.

[29] Again, a different word for a position of leadership is used.

[30] The earlier word ראש is used here to describe the father of Cozbi. It appears that he holds a similar position to that of Zimri's father who is described as a נשיא.

[31] The words 'harass' and 'destroy' are rendered in a number of ways, none of which departs from the sentiment expressed. The word 'destroy' has many forms in Hebrew, the most significant being חרם, the word associated with the 'law of the ban' – the utter destruction of cities associated with Yahweh warfare. While this form is not found in the present text, the word most commonly used in parallel with it is the word which is found here, נכה.

[32] 'Deceitfulness' and 'fooled' both derive from נכל. Budd and Alter talk of 'their wiles', playing off the idea of 'craftiness', with NJB similarly rendering 'guile'.

[33] For the purpose of this thesis, the translation finishes at this point. However, the MT has an additional verse, linking this chapter to the census which follows in chapter 26. English translations have broken the chapter as I have here, attaching the final verse to the beginning of 26:1.

Chapter I.2

Historical-Critical Interpretation

A. Initial Explorations

There can be no question that Numbers 25 is crucially located within the Torah narrative. Num 25 comes at a pivotal moment in the narrative of Numbers; the final scene before the census of the conquering generation. In a literary sense, the Numbers narrative extends back to the great scene of the Exodus, and ideologically, all the way back to the announcement made to Abraham in Gen 12. Here are the descendants; before them is the land promised to their ancestors.

Having left the foot of Mount Sinai with the instruction to 'go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (Ex 32:1)[1] the Israelites find themselves in camp by the Jordan (Num 22:1), with Jericho and Canaan in clear view. After 40 years wandering in the wilderness, Moses camps with the people of Israel on the boundary of the land Yhwh had told him about in Exodus 3:17. We might expect this to be a moment of triumph for Moses and the fledgling nation. Having already experienced Yhwh's assistance in winning battles at Hormah (Num 21:1-3), at Heshbon and its surrounding territory (Num 21:21-25) and Bashan (Num 21:33-35) we assume that Israel would be full of faith and optimism as they drew nearer to the promised land. Instead, what we find is that this people still resembles that people who created the golden calf in the shadows of Mount Sinai in Exodus 32 and who had doubted their god's ability to take the land in Numbers 13-14. Indeed, what transpires in Numbers 25 is even more grievous then these episodes of great failure and is projected through the canon of the Old Testament, and into the New Testament as well, as the archetypal Israelite failure.[2] By the end of its nineteen verses, this chapter will have related the demise of the Sinai generation and paved the way for the new generation which, under Joshua, will cross the Jordan and take possession on Canaan.

[1] This is a reiteration of the message received by Moses at the burning bush in Ex 3:7-17.

[2] Strangely, Martin Noth dismissed Numbers 25 as 'Inconsequential and fragmentary'. While it is true to say that the text is fragmentary, the designation 'Inconsequential' is an error in judgement. The fact that it is within this chapter that the final members of the Sinai generation are killed off, that the events of this chapter are readily recalled in the memory of the biblical writers, that within this chapter Phinehas is granted a perpetual covenant suggests that this chapter is anything but 'inconsequential'. Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, trans. James D. Martin, The Old Testament Library (London: S.C.M. Press, 1968), 195.

Having reached the banks of the river Jordan, the narrative is broken by the insertion of the story of Mesopotamian prophet Balaam and the Moabite king, Balak. This runs from Numbers 22 through to 24, climaxing in Balaam's astonishing words of blessing over the nation of Israel, much to the chagrin of his would-be employer. While the insertion of this three chapter unit does disrupt the narrative of the Israelite's seemingly relentless march to Canaan, within it we discover a number of elements which project into what follows and so become crucial to our understanding of chapter 25.

Firstly, there is some confusion regarding the distinction between the Moabites and Midianites. In 22:3-4, we discover that Moab is in great dread of the horde of Israelites that have camped in their territory, and they voice this fear to the 'elders of Midian'. The Israelites have camped in the 'plains of Moab' (Num 22:1). The sense of the text suggests that Moab is surrounded by the Israelite camp. Subsequently, Balak sends a delegation to summon Balaam; a delegation which includes elders of both Moab and Midian (vs 7). At this point the Midianites disappear from the story, their presence presumably taken for granted. In Balaam's oracles of doom for the surrounding nations, Moab is named as a land that shall have its borders crushed (23:17) but Midian does not raise a mention. Within chapter 25, we see this pattern reversed. In the opening verses, with the scene clearly set at Peor, the daughters of Moab are in view, but by the end of the chapter, Moab seems to have been dissolved into Midian and the charge is given to destroy Midian for, amongst other things, the 'matter of Peor.'[3]

Secondly, there is the matter of Balaam's knowledge of Yhwh. Balaam reveals himself as a Yahwist in Num 22:8 when he tells the delegation of Moabite and Midianite officials that he will seek the word of Yhwh before making a decision whether or not he will return to King Balak with them. When the delegation returns a second time with offerings of gold and silver following Balaam's initial refusal to go with them, he asserts in even stronger language that he could 'not go beyond the command of Yahweh, my God!' (Num 22:18). It is apparent from this that Balaam knew Yhwh, and though the scriptural account eventually turns against Balaam and castigates him as an enemy of Israel, there seems to be an integrity to his claims in Numbers 22. In some ways this mirrors the portrayal of

[3] See the section 'The Moabite/Midianite Problem' below.

the Midianites in the Pentateuch. Moses is married to Zipporah (Ex 2:21), the daughter of the Midianite Priest Reuel, later named Jethro (Exodus 18). Jethro also appears to be a Yahwist, declaring Yhwh to be above all other gods (Ex 18:11) and offering sacrifices of praise in response to Yhwh's deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt. While Midian are not bound to Yhwh in covenant like the Israelites, it seems clear that they maintain a respect of Yhwh, and in the case of the Priest Jethro (religiously speaking, a representative of his people), and see Yhwh as a god worthy of their worship. Additionally, from the marriage of Zipporah and Moses we deduce that these are nations on good terms. Yet by the end of Numbers 25, the perception of the Midianites has changed and they are cast as the enemies of Israel, and so by extension, enemies of Yhwh; a people to be destroyed (Num 25:17).[4]

Thirdly, and most telling, is the nature of Balaam's oracles. Balak has solicited Balaam with the intention of having him curse Israel (Num 22:6) in the belief that Balaam's prophetic utterance will be efficacious in enhancing his nation's ability to hold the horde of Israelites at bay. Balak's plan is thwarted by Balaam's insistence that he can do no such thing. Indeed, he is compelled by Yahweh, his god, not to curse Israel, but to pronounce oracles of elaborate blessing, including the announcement that Moab is to be crushed. Israel is likened to a ravenous lion that will not lie down until it has eaten its prey and drunk the blood of the slain (Num 23:24). Against this prophetic backdrop of the elaborate blessing of Yhwh comes the moment of Israel's greatest failure resulting in Yhwh's great anger (Num 25:4) and punishment in the form of a plague.

The NRSV commences chapter 26 with the words, 'After the plague'. This is a pattern witnessed in the other English translations also. In doing this, the translation severs the events of chapter 25 from what follows, a second census of the Israelites (following on the initial census of chapters 1-4). However, this represents a departure from the MT, which renders that clause as the conclusion of chapter 25. So chapter 25 ends with a link to what follows; 'And so it was, after

[4] This is not to suggest that a single historical narrative of these events, linking Exodus and Numbers exists. The differing attitudes towards the Midianites is reflective of the views of the particular source documents in use. This is not a singular history we are reading, but rather, an edited history.

the plague'.[5] It is apparent that the compiler of the MT is urging us to see that the events that unfolded in chapter 25 are inextricably linked to the second census,[6] that there is continuity between them, manufactured or otherwise. This compels us to view the plague in a particular way, the characterization of Phinehas in a particular way, and the apparent demise of Moses in a particular way.

Structural Outline

While Numbers 25 comes to us as a unit, there is within it a sense of some division. It seems reasonably clear that the text commences with two distinct stories. The first is told within verses 1-5 and deals with the Israelite men's engagement with the daughters of Moab and the subsequent apostasy that ensued.[7] The second story is that of Zimri and Cozbi as well as Phinehas as read in verses 6-9. The use of the form והנה, a marker designed to alert us to something new[8] introduces this new development within the narrative and functions as a clear sign that what follows is in some manner distinct for what has transpired thus far. These two stories are welded together into the form as we have it. The material that comprises verses 10-18 could belong to this second story or it could be an editorial addition. Certainly the material within it relates to the story just told, but there is a strong suggestion that it was added later when the stories were wed together. George Buchanan Gray, in his magisterial commentary[9] originally published in 1903, and which dominated the literature on Numbers until Martin Noth's 1968 commentary divided these verses even further, suggested that verses 10-13 be separated from verses 14-18 on the basis that verses 10-13 deals with the granting of Yhwh's covenant while verses 14-18 focuses on the Midianites, and the justification for the impending holy war with them. As is usually the case in Pentateuchal studies, the division of text is along 'source' lines. While this method is debatable, particularly in the contemporary era,[10] a division of the text with these views in focus (while at the same time remembering that these

[5] See 'Translation'.
[6] See, Dennis T. Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New : The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch*, Brown Judaic studies (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985).
[7] Even within this set of verses there is a suggestion of the combination of traditions. We will deal with this presently.
[8] Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, Bible and Literature Series (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 62-63.
[9] George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, ed. S.R. Driver, A. Plummer, and C.A. Briggs, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1903). See 'History of Interpretation', Chapter II.2 for closer analysis.
[10] See 'History of Interpretation', Chapter II.2.

divisions are at best arbitrary) does shed some light on this chapter and the narrative development of the embedded themes.

Verses 1-5

Verses 1-5 are generally attributed to JE,[11] which is to say that it is a composite of traditions. This designation is based on the use of העם ('the people') to describe the Israelites in verses 1 and 2. This source is traditionally dated to around 1000 BCE and is sometimes known, most famously through the work of F.M. Cross,[12] as the 'epic' tradition. This places the text approximately 200 years later than the events which it purports to describe. In comparing these verses to the rest of the material that comprises JE, some instructive patterns emerge. Within the epic tradition, the Midianites are treated favourably. It is within this body of material that the story of Zipporah and her father are found. Baruch Levine[13] notes that within these verses no blame is attached to the women involved. It is the Israelite men who are held responsible by Yhwh, Israelite leaders who are commanded to be put to death, the failure of the people which cause Yhwh's great fury. There is no sense of culpability lain upon the shoulders of the Moabites, the blame lies squarely upon the sons of Israel. This is in great contrast to what follows later in the chapter.

Verses 6-9

Almost immediately we detect a shift in the naming of Israel in verse six, when they are referred to as כל־עדת בני־ישראל ('the entire congregation of the sons of Israel'). The root עדה follows again in verse seven. This is regarded as a Priestly term, that is, originating from a source assumed to be composed by Priest or a

[11] In the classical formulation of the documentary hypothesis, J stands for 'Yahwist' (following German spelling) and is thought to originate from the Southern Kingdom. E stands for 'Elohist' and is claimed to have originated in the Northern Kingdom. The separation of the Kingdoms occurred in around 928/7 BCE and lasted until the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 721. JE represents an editorial 'rationalization' of these two supposed sources. Recent European scholarship has revisited the classical formulation of the documentary hypothesis with significant results. Confidence in J, E and JE has faltered, even collapsed. It has become customary then, to refer to this material using the more circumspect term, 'non-P'. See, Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz, *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

[12] Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic; Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

[13] Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21-36 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 296.

school of Priests. Such material is generally dated to the 5th-6th century BCE,[14] either during the Babylonian exile or following the return to Jerusalem when the Priests took control of the running of the nation. As such, it betrays a southern and cultic bias. Clearly, this dating places a great chronological[15] distance between the two traditions as they sit side by side in the text.[16] Nonetheless, it is clear to see the thematic ground which binds them together and how they have been used to form a 'unified' text. As Nihan notes, this is not a Priestly variation of vss. 1-5, but rather, a development of the story in order to introduce a new element.[17]

Verses 10-18

These verses, which divide internally at verse 15, are etiological in nature. Verses 10-14 deal with the nature of the covenant bestowed upon Phinehas and his descendants. These verses point to a time when there was a secure Priesthood and importantly, a Priesthood of succession.[18] Verses 15-18 serve as divine justification for the ensuing war with Midian. As such, it is easy to assume that this material is retrojected into the text at a later date. It is here that we see the shift in attitude towards the Midianites, a concern of later generations far removed from the events described as they sought to 'purify' Israel racially. That is, after the return to Jerusalem as they sought to rebuild their nation. This material then appears to belong to a Priestly redaction.[19]

On the issue of structure, it is worth noting that within the Jewish community this chapter is divided between two *parashot*. Verses 1-9 form the conclusion to *Parashat Balak* (which commences as 22:2), while verses 10-19 belong to

[14] Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel, with a Reprint of the Article "Israel" From the Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Meridian Books (Cleveland,: World Publishing Co., 1965).
[15] And so also social, ideological, religious and so on.
[16] It must be borne in mind that there is great debate around the issue of P. Indeed the notion of any complete 'P source' has been rejected by many scholars. However, there has been a recasting of 'P' as a stage, or indeed stages, of redaction. That being the case, the tradition around Phinehas, as we read it in Psalm 106:28-31 may have been adapted here for Priestly purposes. We can also conclude from this that the book of Numbers as a whole has undergone a history of composition, a point recognized by Gray in his 1903 commentary.
[17] Christophe Nihan, "The Priestly Covenant, Its Reinterpretations, and the Composition of "P"," in *The Strata of the Priestly Writings: Contemporary Debate and Future Directions*, ed. Sarah Shectman and Joel S. Baden, *Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2009), 120.
[18] Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, 195. Specifically, an Aaronite Priesthood, through Eleazer.
[19] See, Nihan, "The Priestly Covenant, Its Reinterpretations, and the Composition of "P"."

Parashat Pinchas (the transliterated form of Phinehas, and which continues through to 30:1). This division is telling in what it combines and what it separates. The two stories of immorality and apostasy along with Phinehas' violent response are joined together, giving that particular reading a very jarring conclusion. However, this separation results in the second reading opening with a note of triumph for the newly heroic figure of Phinehas whose name is forever grafted to the next *parashah*.

B. Reading Numbers 25 Int[er/ra]-textually – An Historically Oriented Reading

Verse 1 commences by placing the story in a particular location, Shittim. This practice of locating the text in a place serves to separate it from the previous section. In naming a particular place, the narrator also suggests that what we will witness is also particular, a specific event that happened, at this place. Joshua 2:1 tells us that it is from Shittim that spies were sent in to Jericho. It is from Shittim that the Israelites cross the Jordan (Josh 3), create the monument at Gilgal (Josh 4), consecrate themselves through circumcision (Josh 5) and finally, take Jericho (Josh 6). In the travelogue of Numbers 33:49-50, Abel-Shittim, a place in the plains of Moab (Num 22:1) is listed as the last of the Israelite's camp sites before the conquest of Canaan. Not only is Shittim a particular place, it is, so it seems, a particularly important place, and so the events which take place here are likewise, important.[20]

Levine asserts that the use of the verb ישב suggests that the Israelites were not just camping, but were 'settling'.[21] This suggests a prolonged stay, perhaps even with the view to inhabiting the space.[22] Certainly the text of Numbers 22-24 appears to allow us to conclude that the Israelites had spent some time in the plains of Moab, certainly long enough for the delegation of officials to travel to see him twice! The placement of Shittim in the travelogue (Num 33:49-50) sheds no light on the length of their stay, which is, in reality, irrelevant. Indeed, the first clause of Numbers 25, which links it as the continuation of 22:1 shows us in fact that the

[20] See 'Narrative Analysis: Space', Chapter III.1.
[21] Levine, *Numbers 21-36 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 282.
[22] Eventually, the land surrounding Shittim would be apportioned to Gad (Num 32)

Balaam pericope is an insertion, and so any suggestion of a possible time-frame drawn from it is purely speculative.

Some time during their stay in the plains of Moab, the Israelites begin to enter relationships with the daughters of Moab. The word translated 'began to fornicate' derives from the root זנה which is often translated 'to fornicate' but it also has the implication of 'be a harlot'.[23] This understanding of the word is often used in a metaphorical sense in relation to Israel's relationship to Yhwh,[24] so that when Israel is allured by other deities, this is understood as an act of זנה. In addition, when the people of Israel engage sexually with people of other nations, this is regarded as זנה. As we read these verses, it appears that all of these nuances of the word are in use. Israel's men have sex with the Moabite women (or as Levine renders it, 'began to pursue improper relations.')[25] At this stage the relationship is purely physical, fornication. But before long, the daughters of Moab invite the men of Israel to participate in their religious ceremonies, involving eating and bowing down (vs 2). The result of this activity is that Israel is bound to Baal-Peor. The word 'bound' is צמד which can also mean 'yoked' or 'attached'. It is a rare form, used only in this sense at this point and in Psalm 106 which revisits this story. This rarity suggests that the term itself had some cultic meaning which is now lost. This sense of 'attachment' continues to build upon the sexual imagery which has dominated these verses. As Noth observed, 'the sex had no cultic background, but did have cultic consequences.'[26]

A passage from Exodus 34 is illuminating here;

> 15 You shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land,
> for when they prostitute themselves to their gods,
> someone among them will invite you, and you will eat of the sacrifice.
> 16 And you will take wives from among their daughters for your sons, and their daughters who prostitute themselves to their gods
> will make your sons also prostitute themselves to their gods. (NRSV)

[23] 'זנה' in BDB, 275.
[24] See Ezekiel 16, Isaiah 23, Hosea for examples of prophetic use of this metaphor.
[25] Levine, *Numbers 21-36 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 281.
[26] Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, 196.

Here we have what appears to be a prediction of the very thing that has happened, or as Olson suggests, a dire warning fulfilled.[27]

Yhwh's Anger

Accompanied with this is the first statement of Yhwh's anger which 'burned' within Israel. The word for burned is derived from the root חרה, the same root used in Deut 7:3-4 which warns the Israelites that intermarriage with Canaanite people will lead to Yhwh's anger burning against them, destroying them quickly. This 'burning' anger clearly has a physical element to it, not just a metaphorical understanding.

Yhwh's anger manifests itself in a number of ways throughout the text. Firstly, Yhwh commands that the 'heads of the people' be impaled in the sun 'for Yhwh'. The word 'heads' is ראש which takes a double meaning. While it can mean the physical head, which adds a graphic image to that of impalement, it also has the sense of 'head of a tribe', or 'chief'.[28] These ideas are combined here in a gruesome way. The gravity of this punishment cannot be understated. The only other use of impalement within the Old Testament occurs in 2 Samuel 21:6 when seven of Saul's family are handed over for impalement, with the express purpose of 'expiation' (2 Sam 21:3). If this is the understanding of the use in the present text, then we are witnessing the divine sanction and receipt of human sacrifice as a means of atonement. The sense of ליהוה could also be rendered 'for Yhwh', as opposed to 'before Yhwh', which gives the impression of 'in Yhwh's sight'. The ambiguity of the preposition allows us to read this action in a number of ways.

The use of impalement, that is, the hanging of a body is described in Deuteronomy 21:22-23 as a signal of divine curse. Moses is commanded by Yhwh to put the most socially significant Israelites to the most brutal, publicly shameful death. However, this is fundamentally not a warning to Israel, (though it almost certainly would appear to do that), but the efficacious way to appease Yhwh's anger.[29]

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[27] Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 154.
[28] 'ראש' in BDB, 910-911.
[29] Thomas B Dozeman, "The Book of Numbers," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 199.

Interestingly, Moses' response to Yhwh's command (vs 5) is contrary to what he is told. Moses calls his judges together[30] and orders them to put to death only those who were guilty of the sin at Peor. It is difficult to understand why Moses acts this way. Noth suggests that verse 5 may be a late addition to reinforce the sense for later readers that the guilty deserve, and cannot escape punishment[31] along with the 'heads', who are held responsible simply because of their position as societal leaders.

At the end of verse five, the first scene of the chapter is over. Even within these five verses are parallels with some of the events of Israel's recent past. In Numbers 13 we read the stories of spies sent by Moses to reconnoitre the land. Of seventy sent, only two, Caleb and Joshua return with a report of optimism. At the edge of the land, in a position of promise Israel loses their composure. In Numbers 14 the people of Israel rebel against Aaron and Moses, complaining bitterly at their fate in the wilderness. And here again, with the promised land in view, the people of Israel rebel, this time in a far more dramatic way. Earlier than this, in the shadows of Mount Sinai with the memories of the Exodus burning in their memories the people of Israel had faltered and created the golden calf. All the while, Moses was on the mountain top meeting with Yhwh. At the moment of greatest promise, Israel flinches. At Baal-Peor, the pattern continues. As Milgrom comments, 'Israel's glorious promise is immediately dashed by the sickening reality of Israel at Baal-Peor…Israel's first encounter with Canaanite culture is an unmitigated disaster. Baal-Peor is etched into their memory as a nadir in Israelite history'[32]

A Sudden Change

Verse six commences with והנה. The word itself is a symbol that a dramatic shift is taking place within the flow of the narrative. Behold! Attention! New actors have appeared and our focus is immediately upon them. The setting appears to be different also. Suddenly, the entire congregation of the Israelites are gathered together, weeping, at the entrance to the tent of meeting. The tent here is called

[30] See Exodus 18. The judges are Moses' appointed leaders, not the hereditary leaders of the individual tribes.
[31] Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, 197.
[32] Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-midbar] : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, ed. Nahum M. Sarna, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 480.

אהל מועד. It is a form which belongs to the 'epic' tradition and is the place where Moses met with Yhwh 'face to face' (Ex 13:11) but is retained in the Priestly material within the Pentateuch.[33] The tent is a symbol of Yhwh's presence with the people of Israel and as such is a site of extreme significance. There are differing traditions as to where the tent stood in relation to the camp; the epic tradition (Exodus 33:13-17) places it outside the camp, while later tradition places it in the middle of the camp (Numbers 2:2). Whatever the case, in the matters of the cult and the religious life of Israel, the tent is central. The mention of the tent, the primary cultic symbol of Israel, also links this section to the cultic element which has dominated verses 1-5.[34] The events which are to transpire take place at a site of great significance.

These events also take place in a moment of great national significance. The congregation of the Israelites are engaged in a communal lament. It is difficult to know with any certainty, but it seems that the compiler of the text is relating it to the events of verse three.[35] Nonetheless, the Israelite people have gathered at the tent, a sign that they are experiencing a national crisis.[36]

The new actors are introduced in a very vague, non-descript fashion; 'a man from the sons of Israel' and a 'Midianite woman'. The introduction of the Israelite male immediately distances him from the כל־עדת, the entire congregation that are gathered at the tent. The use of 'the Midianite woman' is equally polarizing. She is an outsider suddenly placed in the full view of an entire nation gathered at their most sacred site. The description of her as a Midianite seems inconsequential to us at this point. The first five verses involved Moabite women. By the end of the chapter, this national division will have dissolved.

The ambiguity of the couple's identity is paralleled by the ambiguity of their actions. Apparently, the man brings the woman 'into his brothers'. The language seems to suggest that the man is introducing his new wife to his family. It is this

[33] Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961), 295. de Vaux points out that within the Priestly material, the tent also takes the name משכן. This has the sense of a temporary dwelling.
[34] Dozeman, "The Book of Numbers," 199.
[35] Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).
[36] Levine, *Numbers 21-36 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 286.

understanding which dominates translations and commentaries. However, as Levine points out[37] a Hiphil conjugation of the verb changes the meaning to 'bring a sacrifice'. This is in line with Levine's attempt to de-sexualize the history of interpretation of this whole passage.[38] However, the possibility of it further charges the narrative with cultic significance, and the theme of human sacrifice potentially links this verse with the first five verses.

Man of Zeal, and the Aftermath

At this point Phinehas enters the scene. Besides appearing in a genealogy in Ex 6:25, this is his first appearance in canonized shape of the bible, though it certainly isn't his last! Unlike the Israelite man and Midianite woman, Phinehas is given a very clear introduction, 'son of Eleazer, son of Aaron the Priest' as if the writer is trying to impress his credentials upon us. The genealogical tracing of his parentage is significant, and it is certainly not the only time when Priestly credentials are seen to be important. Aaron, the brother and deputy of Moses stands as the fore-father of the priestly tradition in Israel. He had four sons, two of whom, Nadab and Abihu are dramatically consumed by fire in Leviticus 10 for cultic offences.[39] The remaining two sons, Ithamar and Eleazer continued to serve as Priests (Num 3:4), but Eleazer seems to have been privileged, being the chief of the Levitical guard who had responsibility for the tabernacle (Num 3:32). Then, when Aaron died (Numbers 20), Moses chooses Eleazer as his successor, and dresses him in the vestments of the High Priest.[40] In 1 Chronicles 24:3, during the reign of King David, Zadok is described as being 'of the sons of Eleazer'. When Solomon is anointed King, Zadok is anointed as Priest, which is to say, High Priest. This distinguishes him from Abiathar who was also a High Priest under David's rule, but who traced his heritage through Eleazer's brother, Ithamar. In the return after the exile, Ezra is similarly linked to Phinehas, Eleazer and Aaron as way of legitimizing his function amongst the new Jerusalem community (Ezra 7).

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[37] Ibid. Levine's argument has some merit in that this rendering would also fit in with Priestly concerns of sacrifice and atonement. However, the sense of the ensuing text does not seem to support his suggestion.

[38] See 'History of Interpretation'.

[39] For another example of the sons of a significant Priest acting inappropriately, see 1 Samuel 2: 11.

[40] Of course, this expression is a little anachronistic, as there is no 'high' priest during the time of Moses. Nonetheless, Aaron's robes, now Eleazer's, do seem to be symbolic of a special place in the community which would eventually become the High Priest.

1 Chronicles 9:20 lists Phinehas as the chief of the tabernacle guards, which seems to suggest he took his father's role when Aaron died and Eleazer was promoted.[41] It is no surprise in light of these texts to discover that Phinehas was present at the tent and on the look out, fulfilling his role as the chief guard of the sacred precinct, particularly given that the entire house of Israel was gathered at a moment of crisis. Phinehas, clearly angered by what he sees, rises from the midst of the congregation and takes a spear in his hand. Spencer describes Phinehas as a strong, violent defender of Israelite worship.[42] In what ensues, Phinehas distinguishes himself[43] as just that, establishing the exemplary model of militaristic Priesthood.

It is evident that it is the action of the Israelite man and Midianite woman which provoked Phinehas. The text however gives us no explicit description of their action or intent. Without hesitation, Phinehas marches upon and slays them. The description of this act[44] is far more vividly captured than that of the poor, unsuspecting couple. Phinehas stabs the two of them, the man and woman through the belly. The text allows us to read 'her belly'. The method is cruel. Being stabbed through the belly ensures a slow, painful death. The description points to the closeness of the two bodies, seeming to suggest that they were stabbed together, joined together on the one spear. It seems reasonable to assume from this that the couple involved were engaged in a sexual union and that the familial introduction of verse six is what it appears to be. There is an argument that the union between the Israelite and the Midianite woman is cultic, which is to say, that the Israelite man has solicited a cultic prostitute. Hugenberger is emphatic, 'the very obvious implication [is] that they were caught in the very act of ritual prostitution.'[45] Hugenberger is not alone, as Levine[46] also follows this

[41] The verse also adds 'The Lord was with him', a word of veneration for this emerging hero. See also Psalm 106: 30-31 and Sirach 45: 23-25, where Phinehas is listed as 'third in glory', behind only Moses and Aaron.
[42] John R Spencer, "Phinehas," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D.N. Freedman (New York: Double Day, 1992), 346.
[43] To use Gray's term.
[44] And following, the intent.
[45] G.P. Hugenberger, "Phinehas," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Broimley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986).
[46] Levine, *Numbers 21-36 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 287.. See also, Cross, 201-203, who links this religious prostitution to the story of Eli's sons. The classic statement in this light is the article by Reif in which he argues that the word translated 'belly' is actually to be translated 'shrine', following an Arabic word for 'tent'. This 'tent-shrine'

line of thought. However, there is no suggestion of this in the text. Indeed, other texts seem to render it unlikely. Psalm 106 reports that the sacrifices eaten by the people at Baal-Peor were made 'to the dead' (Psalm 106: 28), which suggests a funerary cult rather than a fertility cult. As Milgrom points out, an engagement with the cult in this circumstance would surely be an attempt to terminate the plague. People would not consult Baal for this purpose, as Baal was the fertility God.[47] The suggestion that this is a cultic union then seems a little forced.

However, this still leaves the reason for Phinehas' response unanswered. Such a dramatic intervention must surely mean that some blatant transgression has taken place. Ashley summarizes scholarly opinion around three options, each of which could apply given certain assumptions;[48] illicit sex, foreign marriage or cultic offense. All three of these factors could be part of the equation. Indeed, it is possibly the combination of all these things which caused Phinehas to respond with such impunity. Noth also makes a contribution to this argument. With a communal lament taking place, it is almost certain that some form of abstinence would be in order. The Israelite man's action (this of course assumes that the relationship was sexual in nature) is a clear, defiant breach of that observance, committed in the full view of the community and its leaders and committed in the sacred precinct.[49] It seems most reasonable to assume that Phinehas' response is based upon the Israelite man bringing the Midianite woman into the camp; that this is an issue of foreign marriage. This explains the reiteration of her nationality. This issue also links it to the opening scene of the chapter and suggests an emerging theme which is surely what a compiler would be attempting to do. Of course, it is not without difficulty; it does not account for the fact that Moses had a Midianite wife and that the women involved earlier were Moabite. This though, seems to be a function of the period of the text and the issues which the later writers were looking to address. Rather, it is a religious 'use' of history to achieve a purpose in the present time.

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accompanied nomads in the desert. Reif assumes that these were in use by the Midianites, though this is unattested. He also assumes that this is a ritualistic intercourse, which is again, at best, implicit. Admittedly, Reif qualifies this by stating that the primary offense is not sexual, but cultic, though his explanation also fails to account for why this Midianite tent is in such close proximity to the tent of meeting. Stefan C. Reif, "What Enraged Phinehas : A Study of Numbers 25:8," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 90, no. 2 (1971).

[47] Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-midbar] : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, 476.

[48] Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 520.

[49] Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, 198.

A Plague?

The final sentence of verse eight and verse nine are stunning. A plague, previously unmentioned and which is left unexplained is ended. This plague had left twenty-four thousand Israelites dead yet there is no rationale given for it at all. Its appearance at this point provokes several questions but no firm answers. We are left to assume that the plague is the reason for the gathering of the nation at the tent. This would certainly fit within the realm of national crisis suggested by Levine. Beyond that, it seems that this plague is a punishment for the activities of Baal-Peor, perhaps even the physical manifestation of Yhwh's anger burning 'within Israel' in verse three.[50] Or perhaps this plague is the plague mentioned in Exodus 32: 34-35 and this is the day of punishment mentioned in those verses. Milgrom's suggestion that Numbers 25 is an extension of the golden calf episode[51] has merit here, as the theme of fidelity is common and the plague acts as a form of bridge between them. Olson also follows this thinking, commenting that the golden calf and Baal-Peor episodes represent bookends of the struggle of the old generation,[52] a struggle which ends at this point as the plague effectively exterminates the wilderness generation and makes way for the new generation who will step into the promised land.

In Ps 106:28-31 the plague is linked directly to Baal-Peor, and Phinehas' actions are credited as the reason for its ending. Interestingly, there is no mention of the Israelite man and Midianite woman in Psalm 106. In 1 Cor 10:8 is a passing reference to this episode in a catalogue of Israelite failures. The writer, warning the new Christian church says that 'We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.' This also seems to point to the Baal-Peor incident rather than the affair with the Israelite man as the epistle's writer points to 'some of them', rather than a single figure. Interestingly, the people who died from the plague (strangely, one thousand fewer than recorded in the Numbers 25 account) all died on a single day. It seems clear from the Numbers text, which seems to borrow from the Psalm, that the plague

[50] This is the view of Ashley in his commentary.
[51] Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-midbar] : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, 211.
[52] Olson, *Numbers*, 156.

was a recognized part of the Israelite tradition and that Phinehas' actions caused it to end. This explains the reason why it is unmentioned; it is assumed knowledge.

Yhwh's Response

Verse ten serves to move the focus away from the violent scene played out by the tent of meeting. Instead, the only characters in view are Yhwh and Moses. Yhwh explains, and in doing so praises Phinehas for what has just happened. The consequences are extraordinary.

Firstly, Phinehas' credentials are again listed, linking him to Eleazer and Aaron. The significance of re-iterating his position as a Priest becomes significant in what follows. Yhwh's decision to 'turn back his wrath' is linked to Phinehas' display of zeal. In fact, Phinehas' zeal is described as an expression of Yhwh's own zeal. The root for zeal is קנא and can also mean 'jealousy'. It refers to the exclusive, intolerant devotion that Yhwh expects from Israel (Ex 20:5). It demands a fanaticism which Phinehas upholds. In Exodus Aaron does not just sit by, but participates in the making of the golden calf. His action leads to the plague. At Baal-Peor, in the face of some offence Phinehas responds and defends Yhwh's honour and in so doing, protects Yhwh's people.[53]

The praise of Phinehas continues. Not only is he regarded as capable of expressing Yhwh's own zeal, but he is rewarded for it in the most lavish of ways; Yhwh's granting of 'My covenant of peace'. The granting of a covenant places Phinehas in elite company within the canon of the Old Testament. Such a footing with Yhwh belongs only to Noah, the Patriarchs and David. That this is an everlasting covenant, rendered ברית כהנת עולם ('covenant of everlasting Priesthood') places Phinehas alongside David.[54] If we project this covenant into the future, we see that the life of Israel is governed both civilly and spiritually by these two 'everlasting' covenants.[55]

Nihan presses this point even further. This Priestly redaction establishes the primacy of the priestly class. Where Moses held authority over Aaron, it is now

[53] Somewhat ironically, Phinehas' action defends Yhwh's people from Yhwh!
[54] It is certainly high praise to be bracketed in this fashion with such a luminary figure as David. Sir. 45:23-25 lists him as 'third in glory' behind Moses and Aaron in the list of famous men.
[55] Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-midbar] : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, 217. The wording of this covenant also suggests that it is unconditional.

the High Priest who acts as the main mediator of the community; where the Davidic King once held sway, the High Priest is now the supreme political figure in Israel.[56]

The irony of this covenant, Yhwh's own covenant of peace, is that it is a reward granted for a zealous (or perhaps, fanatical) act of extreme violence. Tikva Frymer-Kensky attempts to rationalize this by saying that 'Phinehas acts with violence to end violence.'[57] It is as if the cycle of violence that had consumed Israel's existence needed such a dramatic act to shake it out of the seemingly interminable rut she was in. In Phinehas' action, Yhwh's zeal was manifest in a human agent and the result was so shocking that things could not return to how they had been. The violence had to stop and it would be replaced by a system of reconciliation with god through the mediation of the Priesthood. The act of Phinehas murdering the couple marks a significant moment in Israelite history. To this point, there has been no mention of any person killed for the violation of the covenant or any reason to suspect that any person had the particular authority to carry out such an act. Yet there appears to be a tacit acknowledgement from the congregation that the act is acceptable. Phinehas' unflinching loyalty to Yhwh is thus interpreted as restoring the stature of Priests as an efficacious mediator between Yhwh and the people of Israel.[58]

Yhwh's commendation of Phinehas climaxes at the end of verse thirteen when it is declared that Phinehas' action has 'made atonement for the sons of Israel.' This phrase bears all the hallmarks of a Priestly hand! Acts of atonement belong to Priests alone and are the method by which individual's and community's sins are absolved. It is the function of the Priest which averts Yhwh's wrath from the people.[59] Atonement is always made by sacrifice. Repentance alone cannot absolve sin; it must always be augmented by sacrifice.[60] This makes sense of Yhwh's command to Moses in verse four, a command which appeared to go

[56] Nihan, "The Priestly Covenant, Its Reinterpretations, and the Composition of "P"," 125,27.
[57] Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, "Another View: *Parashat Pinchas*," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism URJ Press, 2008), 982.
[58] Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "Central Commentary: *Parashat Pinchas*," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism URJ Press, 2008), 963.
[59] Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 523.
[60] Jacob Milgrom, "Numbers, Book Of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D.N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1152.

unheeded. The murder of the couple however satisfied Yhwh's need for sacrifice and Phinehas' killing them becomes an atoning act, their blood becomes the blood of sacrifice.

A Royal Affair

Having kept the couple's identities hidden thus far, the narrator suddenly names them at this point. The Israelite man is named Zimri who is a prominent member of the Simeonite tribe. Levine suggests that the wording implies that Zimri, not his father Salu, is a chief within the tribe.[61] Other translations assume that it is Salu who is the chief. The point is that the man involved is a social leader, a high ranking member of the civil structure. The Midianite woman is named Cozbi. Her father, Zur, is an equally high ranking member of Midianite society, so that we may think of Cozbi as a Princess or something similar. In the ensuing war on Midian, a Zur is listed as one of five Kings that are murdered (Num 31: 8). We have no way of attesting that these are the same man, but the link between the two chapters is strong enough as to make the suggestion feasible. Of course, their social positioning is immaterial if the sin was so serious. The point in naming them and giving their lineage is to paint their actions as even more reprehensible. As leaders, role-models within the society, they are people of influence and so their public disregard for the community only further justified Phinehas' response.

Indeed, their high ranking social position creates even greater problems if the union is permitted. Cozbi, through an attachment to a tribal leader would become a Matriarch. Her children, the following generation of the tribes leaders would be of mixed allegiance,[62] both nationally and cultic-ally.[63] This creates an enormous

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[61] Levine, *Numbers 21-36 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 290.

[62] Horst Seebass, "The Case of Phinehas at Baal Peor in Num 25," *Biblische Notizen*, no. 117 (2003).

[63] The distinction between these two descriptors is almost too minute to be noticed. When we talk about cult we are talking about the practices and rites that belong to a group's religious expression. Religion refers more generally to the set of beliefs that form a particular group. Of course, those beliefs are given expression through the practice of the cult, so the two are closely linked. Nations are defined by their ability to have a government peculiar to themselves, which may well be large enough to take in a variety of languages or ethnic groups, but which may also have a common tongue. Of course, cultic practice can blur these lines, or mark them even more acutely. It appears at times that Midian and Israel share certain similarities, but it is also true that the events of Peor seem to be etched in Israel's memory as the principal example of why foreign women are a threat. Against this, we must remember to talk of nations is in some sense anachronistic, in that the nation, as we imagine it, is a modern construction. As Renan pointed out in 1882, '[c]lassical antiquity had republics, municipal kingdoms, confederations of local republics and empires, yet it can hardly be said to have had nations in our understanding of the term.' Cited in Bill Ashcroft,

threat for the ongoing viability of Israel as a distinct, set-apart, holy nation. It also heightens the drama around Phinehas' stabbing Cozbi through the belly, the area where children are carried. The symbolism of the stake penetrating the womb is immensely powerful, and final; two generations die, a future is lost.

In the midst of all this, we must also bear in mind that Cozbi is an outsider. As a Midianite she is not bound by Israel's covenant,[64] she bears no responsibility to the congregation of Israel, and so actually, what we are referring to is Zimri's culpability. She is an unsuspecting victim of Zimri's perceived failure and Phinehas' fanaticism.

Retribution

The chapter concludes with Yhwh speaking to Moses. The two stories are entwined into one outcome: war with Midian. The actions of the Moabite women, who are now called Midianite women, was seen as 'deceitfulness'. The people of Midian are condemned for a conspiracy to seduce the Israelites, which is nowhere to be found in Num 25:1-5. This deceitfulness is portrayed as aggression, to which the only response is retaliation. The verbs used by Yhwh as commands are צרור and הכיתם, meaning, 'Harass and destroy them'! These commands are cruelly observed in Num 31, when Israel marches against Midian, accompanied by Eleazer and Phinehas. Men and children are all put to death. So too are women involved in the affair of Peor. The only people to survive, incredibly, are the young women who are yet to have intercourse with a man (Num 31: 18).

In Numbers 31:15, during the war with Midian, Balaam is implicated with this conspiracy. Moses berates his army officers for not killing Midianite women who were involved in 'the affair of Peor'. There is no biblical evidence for this position. Indeed, as we have seen, Balaam regarded himself as a Yahwist, incapable of uttering anything other than what Yhwh said to him, and the mouthpiece of some of the most lavish words of blessing found in the Old Testament. We must also remember that Balaam was solicited by the King of Moab, not Midian. That there is a mixture of traditions here seems beyond

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Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, "Nation/Nationalism," in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2007), 135.

[64] See section below, 'The Moabite/Midianite Problem'.

dispute. Balaam, like Midian, is being established as a scapegoat. Both have had a positive role to play within the narrative, but are now being portrayed as the archetypal enemy of Israel. These views cannot be harmonized. The appearance of the Midianites in Numbers 22 and the appearance of Balaam in Num 31 represent late additions, designed with the express purpose of legitimizing חרם, holy war, an ideological war which endeavours to establish 'cultic purity' by destroying the 'disease', or 'impurity', that threatens it.[65]

The affair of Cozbi is listed as another example where the women of Midian fooled the Israelites. Cozbi crystallizes the danger. Foreign women, like the daughters of Moab, or their 'sister', Cozbi, keep their religious traditions.[66] As a result, the future of Israel is endangered by them because, ironically, their own cultic faithfulness is far stronger than that of the sons of Israel. Cozbi is the archetype of the dangerous woman. A dalliance with her can only end in disaster. In fact, she is so dangerous, that the solution is war, divinely sanctioned.

The reliability of the report of the war on Midian, in which every man and child is said to be put to death is severely jeopardized by the book of Judges, in which Gideon rises up to lead the people to fight Midian. Phinehas also appears in Joshua and Judges, so the Priestly influence extends not just through the Torah but also into the Deuteronomistic history.[67] This reinforces the ideological nature of Numbers 25, in particular Num 25:17-18, and the report of the war in Num 31. This is again, use of 'history' to achieve some purpose in the present time. It justifies the war on Midian and its barbaric totality[68] while also championing all efforts to maintain cultic or national purity. The compiler of the text would have

[65] Thomas B Dozeman, "The Midianites in the Formation of the Book of Numbers," in *The Books of Leviticus and Numbers*, ed. Thomas Römer (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2008), 277. It is worth noting that Num 24:25 notes that after his encounter with Balak, Balaam immediately leaves and return to his place. His appearance in Num 31 in Midian is completely at odds with the previous account. While the term חרם is absent from this account, in Num 21:2 the Israelites vow to 'utterly destroy' the towns given over to them by Yhwh, the verb being חרם. As was mentioned on pg .24 n. 31, the word used נכה is the most common parallel term. While the Israelites to take booty from the war with Midian in Num 31, Yahweh commands that a tribute should be given. Given the narrative continuity, it is reasonable to consider this an early form of holy war. See, Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God*, The Bible in the Modern World (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 80.
[66] Eskenazi, "Central Commentary: *Parashat Pinchas*," 964. The use of the word 'sister' is another attempted linkage between Cozbi and the Moabite women of the first few verses. At this point, the distinction between Moab and Midian has completely dissolved.
[67] Dozeman, "The Midianites in the Fornation of the Book of Numbers," 281.
[68] At least in the way it is reported.

surely been aware of this unresolvable tension, yet allowed it to settle within the text.

C. Pro/Retro-jected Themes – The Canonical Trajectory of Numbers 25

The wording of the heading above hints at the ideological positioning of Numbers 25 within the Old Testament canon. Situated within the Pentateuch, it is a part of the opening section of the Old Testament, thus giving it canonical primacy. In Jewish traditions, the Torah has long been recognized as the most revered part of the canon, the most sacred of all texts. Torah[69] explains what it means to live in relation to God within the community of God's people. It is a public memory of a shared past to define a common future.[70] Within this Torah, this teaching, this instruction, we find this story placed at a critical juncture. It is a story which is not only remembered in its being told here, but is retold, remembered and re-written throughout the rest of the canon.[71] Its themes[72] shape much of what follows; they are projected, or perhaps, retro-jected through the canon.

External Threats

The first theme that is evident is that of the danger of external threats to Israelite fidelity, and so to their national safety. In Num 22-24 this theme is established, and expanded upon in chapter 25. Balak's attempt to solicit Balaam potentially places Israel in danger, a situation to which they are completely oblivious. The irony is that while Balaam claims allegiance to Yhwh and blesses Israel while condemning Balak and his people, Israel immediately fall prey to apostasy and rebel against Yhwh in their actions at Baal Peor.

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[69] Both written and oral.
[70] Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, "Torah as Narrative and Narrative as Torah," in *Old Testament Interpretation: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. James L. Mays, David L. Peterson, and Kent Harold Richards (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 13.
[71] Remembering and rewriting also feature in the history of the texts reception. See especially, Chapter II.1.
[72] The themes which are examined here form a part of the network of texts that inform, and are informed by the so called 'Baal Peor' incident, and its various manifestations through the canon. They are in the main, major theological themes which are developed at various points in time through the redactional history of the Hebrew bible. These themes are chosen for their perceived importance, which is evident in the way that they will continue to appear in the subsequent [re]readings which follow.

The daughters of Moab and Cozbi, a sister of the Midianites are clearly portrayed as threats to Israel. Sexual liaisons with them are the source of great disaster within this chapter, on a national and personal level. But what of Zipporah, Moses' wife, the daughter of a Midianite Priest? And what of the evidence that Midianite virgins were spared in the ensuing war in Num 31? And what of the evidence that there were still Midianite men in the time of the judges?

In Ezra 9, on returning to Jerusalem, Ezra is stunned to hear that the returning citizens from the Babylonian exile had almost immediately on their resettlement married Canaanite women (including Moabites, though there is no mention of Midianites here). The 'holy seed' (Ezra 9: 2) had been mixed with the peoples of the land. What follows is a dramatic confession and intercessory prayer for the wickedness and faithlessness of the people. In Ezra 10, after a period of fasting, Ezra and the Levites determine that the foreign wives of the returning exiles be banned and sent away with the 'bastard' children, a condition met by the 'offending' males.[73] These women join the catalogue of women who are a threat, most dramatically portrayed by Cozbi.

The use of the term 'holy seed' is telling. The Israelites have a responsibility to maintain their 'holiness' which can only be done by remaining pure.[74] Ethnicity[75] is one such form of purity. Mixed marriages are a threat to ethnicity, and the returning exiles are most concerned with rebuilding not just a city, or a temple, but also a nation. The fact that Moses had a foreign wife and that we have reports that virgins were spared is evidence enough that ethnic purity was not such a consuming issue for the wilderness generation. This is a theme that has been retro-jected by later hands to justify an exclusionist, even isolationist stance. By enshrining it within 'public memory', within a sacred, community forming text, the ideology is canonized, and so also projected into the future.

[73] See, in the Postcolonial reading, 'Phinehas and Other Detestable Practice[r]s', Chapter III.3.
[74] The earlier reference to Ex 32 is again relevant here.
[75] Ethnicity has come to replace 'race' as a term to describe variation of culture, tradition, language and so on. Ethnicity refers to the collective traits of a group of people, formed by what we might today call cultural memory. See, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, "Ethnicity," 75-79.

Leadership

The parallels between Numbers 25 and Exodus 32 and the responses of Phinehas in contrast to his Grandfather Aaron have already been noted. It is Phinehas' zeal which 'rescues' the Priesthood and sees it enshrined as a perpetual part of the future of Israel. However, the portrayal of Moses' response through these two events is also telling and adds another dimension to the theme of leadership which is evident within this chapter.

In Exodus 32, having come down from the mountain and seeing the newly fashioned golden calf, Moses is incensed. The expression ויחר־אף משה (And Moses' anger burned) is the same expression used to describe Yhwh's anger in Numbers 25:3. In the Exodus story, Moses' response is immediate; he breaks the tablets, burns the calf, berates Aaron and then implores Yhwh to forgive their sin. While this is only partially successful (the name of the offenders are blotted out of the book and a plague comes upon them), what is evident is Moses' concern for the people and his understanding of his position as their leader.

This is in great contrast to his actions in Numbers 25. While the people were engaged in acts of sin at Baal-Peor he made no response. When commanded by Yhwh to put the leaders to death he called in his own appointed leaders and charged them with the responsibility of putting the guilty parties to death, which appears to have not happened. Then, while the nation was gathered at the tent and an apparently flagrant sacrilegious act took place within his view, he failed to respond. His passivity created a leadership vacuum which Phinehas, in his zealous action, fills.[76] Olson's observation is telling: Moses doesn't obey Yhwh, the judges don't appear to obey Moses, and while Moses passively observes, Phinehas acts. There is a sense that the carefully ordered camp with its clearly defined chain of leadership has broken down. The structure within which the wilderness generation attempted to be obedient to Yhwh had disintegrated.[77]

[76] Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-midbar] : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, 214.
[77] Olson, *Numbers*, 155-56.

The New Priesthood

Emerging out of the chaos of the broken down leadership structure is the figure of Phinehas, whose actions represent hope for the future generation. The covenant granted to him places his line alongside that of David, an everlasting presence in the leadership of Israel. In the later historical books, the Priesthood become a major part of Israel's life. Samuel is a priest, Saul is rebuked heavily for carrying out priestly tasks (1 Samuel 13), Nathan is a significant figure through the narratives of David's life, particularly the issue of Uriah and Bathsheba. Later again, Ezra comes to the fore as a significant community leader.[78]

However, after the covenant is announced, the priests play a very minor role within the narrative. They are present, yes. But on Moses' death it is Joshua that assumes leadership, and his is a leadership style that mirrors that of Moses. Yhwh exalted Joshua in the same way Moses had been exalted (Josh 4:14). Yhwh speaks to Joshua directly. Joshua's command over Israel seems absolute; the priestly influence on national leadership as witnessed in later periods is nowhere to be found. Even Phinehas himself, a now seemingly illustrious figure within the population is without any executive leadership. When the people of Israel transgress the covenant in Joshua 7, it is Joshua who acts in a mediatory fashion, not the priests. As strong as Joshua's leadership is, like Moses', it wilts across time. The Israelites fail to take possession of the land in its entirety and when Joshua's death is recorded, which is listed alongside the death of Eleazer, Phinehas' father (Joshua 24:29-33), there is again a leadership vacuum in Israel. During the period of the judges, Israel goes through period after period of apostasy, but there is no intervention from the Priesthood. Yhwh speaks directly to the judges with no engagement with the priests, who appear to be totally absent.[79]

[78] It is interesting to note that Phinehas' and Aaron's names are completely absent from 1 and 2 Samuel, traditionally dated to the period of the united monarchy. It is in the work of the Chronicler, thought to be much later, that Aaron is mentioned, along with Eleazer in the genealogy of Zadok (Ezra 7:1, 1 Chr. 5:30).

[79] There is some suggestion that the commands to Manoah and his wife regarding the raising of Samson (Judges 13:14) are evidence that Samson was raised a Nazirite (see Numbers 6). This would require some priestly function to be in place. There is no explicit statement of this though; it is an assumption based on the similarity between the divine commands to Manoah and some of the elements of the Nazirite vow.

We must question the historical claims as they relate to this aspect of Numbers 25. If the covenant made with Phinehas is as significant as it appears, it seems reasonable to expect to see a high level of involvement from the Priesthood in the leadership of the nation almost immediately. The absence of this leadership in the material that follows is a sign that we are again dealing with retro-jection. That the covenant is a paternal covenant, we would reasonably expect to read of Phinehas' line serving the nation through the ensuing period. That they are notably absent through the ensuing historical period, reappearing in the period after the exile (excluding a brief appearance by Zadok) is surely evidence that this is a late tradition. The genealogy of Ezra, which painstakingly traces itself through several generations, before finally reaching Phinehas, Eleazer and Aaron, hints that this may be close to the source of this tradition.

Therefore, we might consider Yhwh's words in Num 25:11-13 as etiological in nature. Budd suggests that at the time of compilation, Phinehas' credentials may have been in doubt,[80] which consequently calls into question the credentials of his descendants. By linking the genealogical reference in Exodus 6 to his actions here and the subsequent speech from Yhwh, his descendants' claims as heirs of the divinely sanctioned covenant are cemented for their time, and again, projected into the future.

The Moabite/Midianite Problem

That there are conflicting views of Midianites within the Old Testament has already been noted. The same is true of Moabites. While in the text of Numbers 25 the daughters of Moab are a snare to the Israelites, Ruth the Moabite is presented elsewhere as a heroine who saves Israel. She is the matriarch of David's family.[81]

The reason for these contesting views is hard to comprehend. There is no doubt that within the epic corpus, the Midianites are idealized as sharing religious experience with Israel.[82] While they are not Yhwh's people, at least as Israel

[80] Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word Books, 1984), 282.
[81] This shows a great distinction between these two texts. In Ruth, a foreign woman as matriarch saves Israel. In the Numbers text, Phinehas 'saves' Israel from a foreign matriarch. Another example of the foreign woman as saviour is Rahab, who like Ruth, is later found in an important genealogy, that of Jesus (Matt 1:5).
[82] See, Dozeman, "The Midianites in the Fornation of the Book of Numbers."

understand that relationship and there appears to be no covenantal binding between them, the Midianites experience of God is real. In this way, they are not dissimilar to the prophet Balaam who claims Yhwh as his god. Ruth the Moabite makes the same claim. So in the older material, a tension is held whereby Israel still lays claim to an exclusive relationship to Yhwh, but this claim by means denies that other nations can also have an experience of Yhwh.

Dozemann argues that it is exactly this familiarity that the Priestly writers attack. It is simply a polemic raised against the alternate position. Aware of Moses' marriage to Zipporah and the contribution of Jethro, the writers present an alternate view; Zimri and Cozbi, a couple whose union is an anathema to Israel. Their violently symbolic death effectively terminates the internal relationship Israel has shared with Midian. Phinehas the priest stands tall as the hero whose divinely charged zeal saves Israel from disaster. His actions are placed on the outskirts of the promised land with Israel poised to enter Canaan, though his influence is felt in a much later period.

This change in stance towards the Midianites occurs drastically and is crystallised in the appearance of Phinehas. Dozemann has recently commented that Phinehas replaces Moses in defining Israel's relationship to Midian. Even in the war in Num 31 in which all living things are to be put to death Moses softens his stance. Phinehas remains the zealot. The two views display differing views of the social and religious boundaries that define Yahwism. The epic tradition offers a more fluid boundary. The Priestly view is rigid, allowing no relationship with Yahweh outside of the cult, no relationships which threaten the purity of Israel, no more infidelity.[83]

None of this however solves the great textual problem of Numbers 25, which is the dissolving of Moab into Midian across the length of the text. Yhwh's final speech makes it clear that, ideologically at least, Moab has become Midian, and is to be destroyed for their trickery. While the Bible makes it clear that both nations continued to exist, the command is clear, they are to be destroyed. Noth's observation, that there is an addition of the Midianites into the Balaam pericope,

[83] Interestingly, P does allow access to Elohim and El Shaddai, though this must occur *outside* the Israelite cult.

seems plausible. Balaam is engaged by Balak, King of Moab, but the people of Israel are called on to harass the Midianites, with reference to the events which involved the daughters of Moab in Num 25:1-5. In raising the polemic, it appears that the Baal Peor tradition, which involved foreign women, Moabites in particular, has been fused with another story. In doing so, some glosses have been made elsewhere to lend continuity to the story. In the process, Moab and Midian have become at first aligned, and secondly, indivisible. The daughters of Moab (vs 1) have a slain Midianite sister by the end of the chapter. Sadly for them, the whole ideological family must also die.

Scholars are divided on the issue. Some, such as Cross[84] and Noth[85] see the co-existence of the two in the text as evidence of a conflation of sources. Milgrom[86] takes a different, a more persuasive view, arguing that the two are interchangeable on 'geopolitical grounds.'

Psalm 106: 28-31 and Numbers 25

Perhaps a good way to evaluate the historical placement of this reading of Numbers 25 is to consider it alongside Psalm 106:28-31. The psalmist's version of the events at Baal Peor is far shorter than those found in Numbers. There are some things which are common; the people of Israel were bound to Baal Peor (the verbal root צמד is used in both), they engage in what appears to be a cultic meal,[87] the Lord is angered and there is a resultant plague.

The Numbers account then turns to the entry of Zimri and Cozbi, and then the action of Phinehas. However, in Psalms, the offending couple are missing but Phinehas' action is strikingly similar. Psalms 106: 30 says that "he stood up". A different form is used here than in the Numbers account, yet the end result is the same, the plague stops. The psalm also states that the plague is a direct result of Baal Peor; it breaks out after the Israelites attachment to Baal of Peor. Phinehas' action is in response to Baal Peor and its aftermath, not to the actions of Zimri and

[84] Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic; Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 201-03.
[85] Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, 194-99.
[86] Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-midbar] : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, 477.
[87] Psalm 106 says the food is 'sacrifices offered to the dead', Numbers is more ambiguous about the nature of the cultic actions, saying only that the people 'ate and bowed.'

Cozbi. This supports the assumption that this story is an addition to the Numbers text.

Verse 31 in the Psalm account is telling, 'And that has been reckoned to him as righteousness, from generation to generation.' This verse echoes the covenants between Yhwh and Abraham ('And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.' Genesis 15: 6) and David ('I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.' 2 Samuel 7:13b). However, there is no mention of a covenant in the Psalm, though it may be argued that it is implied.

What is implicit in the Psalm is explicit in Numbers. What is granted is not just righteousness, but covenant, unconditional and perpetual. This, along with the addition of the story of Zimri and Cozbi, suggests that Psalm 106 is a source for the compiler of Numbers 25. In other words, if there is a Baal-Peor tradition, it is found in Psalm 106. The final text of Numbers 25:1-15 is a reworking of that tradition, adding the tale of Zimri and Cozbi and the divine proclamation. That Psalm 106 is 'late' is evident from the historical survey that it presents, because it includes the period of exile (vss 40-46). The foregoing adds up to position the final version of the text no earlier than the post-exilic period.[88]

Conclusion

The events which comprise Numbers 25 are set on the eve of Israel's entry into Canaan. They appear to be the final moments before the triumph which the reader has anticipated since the dramatic announcement made to Abram about his future ancestors in Gen 12:1-3. But, just as we expect triumph, tragedy rears its head: the moment of great promise dissolves into one of great failure, one last twist before the final, triumphant scene.[89]

The apostasy at Baal Peor is etched in Israel's memory. It is clear that there is an old Baal Peor tradition, reflected through the first few verses of Numbers 25 and the excerpt from Psalm 106.[90] This tradition has been developed and placed at a

[88] We must also bear in mind that this text carries the marks of multiple redactional layers.
[89] Whether we read the conquest as a moment of triumph or not has much to do with where we situate ourselves.
[90] Most commentators date Psalm 106 to the last period of the exile. The exilic period is pre-supposed in its content. The psalmist shows a strong knowledge of the sacral history of Israel which may place it in the hands of the compiler of the Pentateuch. It is not so hard to imagine

crucial juncture in Israelite history. But it has been laden with other issues which belong to another time. The issues of the Priesthood and atonement, and of national identity, do not belong to the wilderness period and as one reads the 'history' that follows, that these are an ideological additions becomes blatantly obvious. So our text, Numbers 25 thus presents us with multiple voices, multiple histories, multiple problems.

While it is impossible to recreate the history described in the text, another history can be found. It is this other history, the history of the final text's development and the ideology which under-girds it's construction, which needs to take centre place in any discussion regarding the interpretation of this text. This history goes beyond the boundaries of the text itself, as is evident in history of interpretation, which follows.

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such a psalm, a communal psalm, being used as a way of sharing that public history in the return from exile when matters of nation determination were crucial.

Section II

A History of Interpretation
In Three Parts

Chapter II.1

Introduction

While the narrative of Numbers 25 is not as bare as other Old Testament narratives, including sections far more celebrated than this particular tale, it still leaves the reader groping for further details. Perhaps this is part of the biblical story-tellers' genius, given that brevity is one of the defining stylistic characteristics of this remarkably enduring literary corpus. What this scarcity of detail lends itself to is expansion in its retelling, which is exactly what we find in the reception of Numbers 25. The 'afterlife' of this story has seen this tale padded out, in both religious and non-religious texts.

Our history begins with the work of two Hellenistic Jewish historiographers, Philo and Josephus and follows more or less chronologically from there. The first section takes us from the first century up to the commentary of Jean Calvin. It explores distinctively Jewish religious texts, such as Talmud and Targumim, while also dealing with major rabbinical figures, Rashi, Rashbam and Nachmanides. It also examines Christian texts: Calvin, but also the homily of Origen, like Philo, by whom he was greatly influenced, an Alexandrian.

This first section already shows something of the remarkable variety that marks the history of interpretation of Numbers 25. While each text takes Numbers 25 as its basis, each interpretation is written with different purposes in mind. For Philo and Josephus, an *apologia*; for Origen, proclamation; for the rabbis, and for Calvin, instruction; for the scribes, liturgy. As the history continues, this pattern will continue, laying the groundwork for the second part of the thesis, in which the text is read and [re]read, continuing in the creative tradition established by the texts examined.

Philo

We begin with Philo, an Alexandrian Jew who lived from around 20-50 CE, looking particularly at his *On the Life of Moses, Book 1*. Philo is quite forthright in his intentions for writing a biography of Moses: '…the historians who have flourished amongst the Greeks have not chosen to think him worthy of mention.'[1] This is unpalatable for Philo, who regards Moses as 'the greatest and most perfect man that ever lived.'[2] Philo's work amounts to an apology both for Moses and for the Jewish law which had 'reached over the whole world and penetrated to the furthest limits of the universe.' These statements make clear that Philo was unswervingly loyal to the Jewish scriptures, religion, and people even while being thoroughly familiar with the philosophy and learning of the Greek culture which formed him as a wealthy, well-to-do Alexandrian.

What we find in the work of Philo, and also Josephus who we will come to shortly, is a concern to smooth out the biblical narrative.[3] While the scriptures remain their primary source, their work is a re-writing, or re-telling, an interpretive act in which the materials are adapted for a Greek thinking audience.

In Numbers 31:16 we read, 'These women here, on Balaam's advice, made the Israelites act treacherously against the Lord in the affair of Peor, so that the plague came upon the congregation of the Lord.' (NRSV) Moses' words here, in the aftermath of the war against Midian fills in some information otherwise missing from the narrative of Numbers 25, in which we simply read that the people of Israel started whoring themselves with the women of Moab. Moses' utterance in chapter 31 is the only detail we have available to us in the scriptures. However, in an attempt to harmonise the account, Philo relates the scene which is only alluded to in the scriptures. In the manner of a harmony, it of course appears before the events of Peor are narrated, taking the form of a dialogue between Balaam and the Moabite King, Balak, interspersed with Philo's own commentary.

[1] Philo, "On the Life of Moses, I," in *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 459.
[2] Ibid.
[3] This concern is also seen in the later work of Calvin, whose commentary on the Pentateuch is in the form of a harmonisation. Calvin's work is covered in Chapter II.2.

From *On the Life of Moses, I LIV 295-*

> As he knew that the only way by which the Hebrews could be subdued was by leading them to violate the law, he endeavoured to seduce them by means of debauchery and intemperance, that mighty evil, to the still greater crime of impiety, putting pleasure before them as bait; for said he, 'O King! The women of the country surpass all other women in beauty, and there are no means by which a man is more easily subdued than the beauty of a woman; therefore if you enjoin the most beautiful of them to grant their favours to them and to prostitute themselves to them, they will allure and overcome the youth of your enemies.[4]

Balaam warns the King to encourage the women to surrender themselves not too quickly, because coyness and resistance will only serve to inflame the passion of the Israelite men, making their desire all the more impetuous, so much so that they will be subdued to the point where they will do or suffer anything.

In the scriptural account, the people of Israel seem to move from sexual relations to cultic sacrifices and meals in a straightforward way. Philo's account is a little more detailed. Balaam's advice continues as he suggests what the damsels may say to the smitten Israelites;

> It is not fitting for you to enjoy my society till you have first abandoned your native habits, and have changed, and have learned to honour the same practices that I do. And I must have a conspicuous proof of your real change, which I can have by your consenting to join me in the sacrifices and libations which I use, and which may then offer together … the lover being, as it were, taken in the net of her manifold and multiform snares, not being able to resist her beauty and seductive conversation, will become wholly subdued in his reason, and, like a miserable man, will obey all the commands which she lays upon him.[5]

Now, if we are to take the expression 'enjoy my society' euphemistically, then it appears that what Philo has done here is reverse the order of the biblical account. He sees the act of worshipping the gods of Peor as preceding the sexual relations between the Israelite men and Moabite women.

What happens next in Philo's account is really quite extraordinary, and in some sense, diminishes the assumed depravity of the Moabites. Their King, Balak,

[4] Philo, "On the Life of Moses, I," 486.
[5] Ibid., 487.

needs to repeal laws against adultery, seduction and harlotry before exhorting his women to admit their favours without restraint.[6] Of course, the fact that those laws existed – laws which share common ground with those of Israel, is a way of suggesting the universal nature of the laws given to Moses, universalising the particular.

Once again, Philo's account takes a major departure from its scriptural template. Many young men are seduced by the Moabite women, which makes young Phinehas indignant; 'it appeared to him to be a most scandalous thing for his countrymen to give up at one time both their bodies and souls – their bodies to pleasure, and their souls to transgression of the law, and to works of wickedness.' He sees a young man of his nation make sacrifices and enter the tent of a harlot, all done without casting his eyes down to the ground…'but making a display of his licentiousness with shameless boldness, and giving himself airs as if he were about to engage in a creditable action, and one deserving of smiles.'[7] Phinehas sees the action, and runs into the tent, cutting the young lovers in two pieces.

This is quite at odds with the scriptural account, in which the people of Israel are gathered in a mourning ritual, and in which it is clear that the young Israelite man is bringing this young lady into his family tent, not her tent. The Numbers account also makes no mention of them sacrificing together. Neither, as is common with the biblical narrative, does it engage in such a theologically critical analysis of what is taking place.

Philo jumps back to the opening of Numbers 25, or at least to the events of the first five verses, but even here he chooses *not to follow the script.* Moses orders the slaying of those who had sacrificed to idols. 24,000 are put to death, harmonising the command of Num 25:5 with the plague of 25:8, which is not mentioned in Philo at all. What this serves to do is to skip over Moses' failure in the scriptural account, in which he is commanded by Yhwh to execute one plan, but which Moses defies, opting for a less damaging plan, which from the scriptural account, appears not to have taken place.

[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

Philo's championing of Moses continues in the following section, in which Moses is said to be thinking how he might honour Phinehas for his excellent deed. But Yhwh beat him to it, and bestows upon Phinehas the perpetual possession of the priesthood.

The natural sequel to Num 25, the war on Midian which is read in chapter 31 does make mention of Phinehas. Philo makes more of his presence. Indeed, he is the military commander, and on their successful return, Moses makes a point of praising Phinehas, for the way he and the army had so meticulously adhered to the laws germane to the slaughtering of one's enemies.[8]

Philo's version of the Baal-Peor story is at odds with the script[ural] account on several occasions, though he too makes no attempt to distance himself from the actions of Phinehas. Indeed, if anything, Phinehas is even more heroic in Philo than in the Numbers account. Of course, we must bear in mind that Philo is, as was mentioned earlier, profoundly loyal to Jewish traditions, and it is possible that he too came from a Priestly lineage. His defence of Phinehas in this respect, is understandable. Redeemed also, is Moses, who enjoys a more positive reading here than in the biblical account. What is absent is telling; the gathering of Israel for mourning, the names of the offenders, the plague, and the assessment of Phinehas' actions as making atonement.

Josephus

Josephus was a contemporary of Philo, being born in 37. Their lives were similar in some respects: both were born into privilege, and both share Priestly lineage. Josephus however, was born in Jerusalem. As a young man he travelled to Rome as a diplomat, but returned to take part in the Jewish-Roman war. In 67 he was taken prisoner, only later to be released. The details around his capture suggest he was a cunning and yet cowardly figure, convincing his colleagues to enter into a suicide pact, while managing to spare his own life in the process.[9] After his release he worked for the Romans as a negotiator and interpreter, later being rewarded with Roman citizenship, accommodation and a state pension. It was in the Roman period, from 71 onwards, when Josephus set his mind to literary

[8] Ibid., 489.
[9] Paul Spilsbury, "Josephus, Flavius," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the BIble*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 403.

matters,[10] producing over the next twenty years some of the most important works for understanding the Second Temple period.

Josephus is quite forthcoming for his purpose in writing: he is concerned with facts, and by force and necessity is driven to record them for the advantage of posterity, and to draw said facts 'out of the darkness'[11] for the benefit of the public. He was anxious that the prejudice against Jewish people and their faith be allayed, and so he wrote hoping to inspire respect for his people.[12] Also, he expresses a dis-satisfaction with the recordings of the Jewish-Roman war, the truth of which he thought to have been perverted. Of course, Josephus had previously published a history of the Jewish wars, an expansive seven volume collection which preceded the Antiquities by some eighteen years.

With respect to the Baal-Peor tradition, Josephus' contribution is to be found in *The Antiquities of the Jews, Book IV,* Chapters 6 and 7. As with Philo's account, Josephus attempts to harmonise the story, beginning with Balaam's encounter with Balak. The biblical account[13] of this episode makes it clear that Balaam wants no part in cursing the Israelites. Indeed, Balaam declares himself to be a Yahwist, and that he will simply say what Yhwh has him say. Josephus too considers this to be true.[14] So far as he can tell, the people of Israel are a blessed people, as the prophetic oracles of Num 23-24 attest. Josephus picks this up, though he allows Balaam to concede that they may suffer small misfortune for a short time, though warning that they will flourish again quickly, to the terror of those who brought such mischief upon them. The directions for such a short term victory are as follows:

> …set out the handsomest of such as your daughters as are most eminent for beauty, and proper to force and conquer the modesty of those that behold them, and these decked and trimmed to the highest degree you are able. Then do you send

[10] Ibid.
[11] Flavius Josephus, "The Antiquities of the Jews," in *Complete Works Of Flavius Josephus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1960), 23.
[12] Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *Complete Works* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1960), xiv.
[13] Josephus presents the first 11 books of the *Antiquities* as a scrupulous translation of the scriptures. His hope, and here he comes close to Philo, was to present Jewish history in a way that may be more palatable for his Greco-Roman readership. See, Spilsbury, "Josephus, Flavius." and the introduction to Josephus and Whiston, *Complete Works*.
[14] Josephus, "The Antiquities of the Jews," 91.

> them to be near the Israelites' camp, and give them in charge, that when the young men of the Hebrews desire their company, they allow it; and when they see that they are enamoured of them, let them take their leaves; and if they entreat them to stay, let them not give their consent till they have persuaded them to leave off their obedience to their own laws and the worship of that God that established them…by this means God will be angry at them.[15]

Josephus' account of what follows is more detailed than that of Philo. While Philo moved immediately to the fraternising of the Moabites and Israelites, Josephus takes care to detail how Balaam's plan unfolds. Indeed, the women do come near the camp and arouse the interest of the men; and indeed, when they pretended for it to be time to leave, the men became disconsolate, begging them to stay and become their wives. At this point, we even hear the women speak, flattering the men with talk of bravery and honour. They express concern though, that the men will in time grow weary of them, and send them back to their parents, a claim the men deny. Then comes a crucial moment: the Moabite women argue that the customs and conduct of Israel are entirely different from all the other peoples of the earth, and if they are to become married, that it is not too much to ask that they conform to the worship of their gods, those common to all men.[16] The men are persuaded by the women, and resolve to sacrifice to the gods of the country, according to the laws of the country that ordained them. Further, they were delighted with the strange food, and went on to do all that the women asked, in transgression of their own laws.[17]

At this point, Josephus introduces us to Zimri and Cozbi,[18] giving the details of their lineage as it is found within the scriptural account. As with Philo, we read that they make sacrifices together. Where Josephus differs from Philo is that in his telling, Zimri and Cozbi are already husband and wife, and that their union becomes a catalyst for Moses to address the people of Israel with the hope that they might repent of their wrong-doing, lest things actually deteriorate. Josephus posits Moses as saying it is unreasonable, having lived so soberly in the wilderness, to now act so madly in their new prosperity. Zimri stands and confronts Moses at this event, calling him a tyrant and accusing him of invoking

[15] Ibid., 92.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

the name of God only to support his own aim of imposing slavery on the people of Israel., all the while depriving them of the sweet things in life; the ability to act in accord with one's own will, without being lorded over by another. Instead, Moses is the one who deserves to be punished for his assumption of knowing better than everyone else. His outburst concludes like this:

> I have married, as thou sayest rightly, a strange woman, and thou hearest what I do from myself as from one that is free; for I truly did not intend to conceal myself. I also own that I sacrificed to those gods to whom you did not think it fit to sacrifice; and I think it right to come at truth by inquiring of many people, and not like one that lives under tyranny, to suffer the whole hope of my life to depend upon one man; nor shall any one find cause to rejoice who declares himself to have more authority over my actions than myself.[19]

Josephus' interpretation of Zimri's outburst immediately follows. Moses refuses to respond in case he may imitate the imprudent language, thereby upsetting the multitude. So, the assembly dissolves, but we are immediately introduced to Phinehas, 'a man in other respects better than the rest of the young men.'[20] After we read his lineage, linking him to Aaron as per the scriptural account, we discover that Phinehas has been greatly disturbed by Zimri's actions, and he resolves to inflict punishment upon him. His actions are now familiar to us – he enters Zimri's tent, and slew him with his javelin, and with it he slew Cozbi too. All men with regard to virtue who witnessed this glorious action, imitated Phinehas' boldness and slew others guilty of similar crimes. The rest who remained were smitten by a plague which God inflicted upon them; those killed by spear and plague totalling 24,000. So, Josephus is familiar with the plague and the total killed, but harmonises them differently again.[21]

Josephus then also departs from the script[ural account], though his narrative contains more of its elements than that of Philo. The glaring omission is the divine praise of Phinehas and the announcement of the perpetual priesthood. No mention either of atonement. These are significant theological issues which speak to Josephus' own views in respect to the sacrifice of human life and the legitimacy

[19] Ibid., 93.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

of the office of High Priest, one which was crippled by moral bankruptcy and whose succession was subject to bribery and the whims of regional governors.[22]

Origen

Origen (185-254) was an Alexandrian author, perhaps the most important of the pre-Nicene theologians. Many of his ideas were condemned at the fifth ecumenical council in 553, and consequently much of his work is lost to us. Typical of such decisions, the council's decision represented an attack on contemporary interpretation of Origen, rather than a clear denunciation of Origen's own thoughts. This did nothing to safeguard the work of this brilliant early exegete though.

Origen's work on Numbers comprises of twenty-eight homilies. While not covering the entirety of the text of Numbers, these homilies provide a strong insight into the exegetical method of Origen and his contemporaries. That these homilies survive alongside many other writings of a homiletic nature[23] reflect Origen's deep concern for the church of his day and his commitment to his priestly vocation.

Origen's method is grounded on the historical revelation of the Christian mystery.[24] Taking Jesus as his guide, Origen seeks to understand the Old Testament as a pre-figure of the spiritual realities of the New Testament.[25] However, his method is more wide-ranging than this. Origen is a great admirer of his compatriot, Philo, as well as other Jewish rabbinic readers.[26] Nonetheless, it is the pattern that he finds within the New Testament which primarily guides him in his work, and as a result, his interpretations seek a spiritual meaning, often with a soteriological aim. The historicity of the stories are not as issue for Origen (which for the most part, he did), but rather, what warnings, what edification, what lessons can be gleaned from them?[27] His readings then, are most often allegories, and given the polemic nature of homiletics, are occasionally forced, even far-

[22] See *The Wars of the Jews* in Josephus and Whiston, *Complete Works*.
[23] Origen's homilies are the oldest surviving corpus of Christian sermons.
[24] Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*, ed. Gerald L. Bray and Thomas C. Oden, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), xxvii.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., xxvii.
[27] Ibid., xxix.

fetched. However, Origen is not an essentialist; he challenges his reader to pursue meaning for themselves, often giving more than one reading possibility for particular passages.

For our purposes, we will examine *Homily 20*, which takes as its basis Num. 25:1-10. After a brief summary of what the text contains, Origen wastes no time in turning his attention to Balaam. Balaam, he thinks, was keen to please Balak, despite having his power checked by Yahweh.[28] This idea is built upon a reading of 24:14 that assumes that what follows in 24:15-24, an oracle of doom against various nations, is not the same advice that is alluded to in the comment 'Come, I will give you counsel.' Instead, that advice is alluded to in chapter 31:16 and confirmed in John's Revelation, 2:14. Of course, these references lack specific details, prompting Origen to propose a very detailed scenario:

> This people conquers not by their own strength, but by worshiping God and protecting their chastity. If you want to conquer them, first overcome their chastity and they will be conquered of their own accord. Now you should attack them not by the force of troops but by the beauty of women, not by the hard strength of weapons, but by the effeminate softness of females. Remove the hand of your armed soldiers to a very great distance from here. Gather together select and beautiful girls and let them go around dancing with their feet and enticing them with their hands. For beauty conquers armed men, good looks captivate the sword, and those who are not conquered in battle will be conquered by beauty. But when the Moabite women perceive that these men have offered their hands to lust and inclined their necks to sin, do not let the women offer themselves to their lovers before the men have consented to taste the things offered to idols. Thus, under the compulsion of lust, they will comply with the counsels of the females and first be consecrated to Beelphegor, which is the idol of baseness.[29]

Origen immediately vouches for the integrity of his invention. He seems at very least to have convinced himself. His invention begins with the words '…saying something like the following to him'[30] and ends with his statement 'These were Balaam's counsels.'[31] What follows is an almost poetic explanation of what eventuated as a result of Balaam's counsel. None of the

[28] Ibid., 122.
[29] Ibid., 122-23.
[30] Ibid., 122.
[31] Ibid., 123. Origen's creativity seems to have impressed himself enough to be convinced that his invention was indeed the words of Balaam himself!

blame seems to lie with Balak or the other elders of Moab. Instead, Origen lays the fault at the feet of the women coerced into the plan:

> Shame keeps none of these women in check, modesty curbs not a single one. Love of country and the vice of the nation conspire together with lasciviousness, and a downright depravity appears for the deception. Horror! Lust is scarcely suppressed by the threat of laws, it is scarcely held in check by the terror of the sword. What crime does a woman not perpetrate when she is convinced that she will please the king by the deed and will secure her country's safety?[32]

Despite Origen's fondness for Philo, this section takes a significant departure from Philo's history. As we have seen, Philo suggested that Balak acted to change laws permitting this plan to go ahead without threat of legal sanctions. Origen on the other hand, has the women acting against the law in a way that makes their actions all the more repugnant. Indeed, his language seems to suggest that the women are so willing to engage in this activity, so excited by it, that they have no regard for the law whatsoever. What is revealed however, is a deep contempt for women. The perceived danger of women, which is so evident in Origen's invention of Balaam's plan, is fully realised in his explanation of what takes place. In some sense, Origen and his Balaam dissolve into each other.

To this point, Origen has been rehearsing the narrative in an inventive fashion reminiscent of Philo and Josephus. However, he next moves to the explication of meaning, the revealing of the certain mysteries and hidden things. Importantly, he warns his congregation, these battles of the flesh are still waged against them and they remain vulnerable to the 'javelins of luxury'. Fortunately, these javelins remain impotent if we wear the spiritual armour of Eph 6:14-17. These things guard believers in such battles.[33]

The second major division of the homily is a discussion of fornication. Fornication becomes the metaphor in which Origen discusses a range of spiritual matters. He introduces it in this way:

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[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

> Now fornication in a general sense is spoken of when the soul, which has been associated with the union of the Word of God and has been joined with it in marriage, so to speak, is corrupted and violated by another, namely, by a foreigner who is hostile to that husband who betroths the soul to himself by faith.[34]

Origen's characterisation of the metaphor is as we might expect. Following 2 Cor 11, the chaste, pure bridegroom is the Word of God, Christ the Lord. The union of the Word with our own soul produces certain offspring: chastity, justice, patience, goodness and so on, so that, glossing 1 Timothy, our corrupt, feminine souls may be saved through the generation of such sons.[35] The opposite is also true. The union of our souls in a fornicating embrace with the devil and his demons, the sons born of the embrace will be imperfect. Thus, summarises Origen, our soul is always generating sons, through which we may be saved, or sons which are doomed for destruction. These sons are deservedly hated, an allegory on the Jacob and Esau story.[36]

Origen's next move sees him allegorise Psalm 137. The 'Babylonian' Origen has in view is the 'son of destruction' within us, even if that 'son', presumably some form of sinful attitude or thought, has not yet done any 'work'; that is, if it has yet to manifest itself in a way which causes us to sin, or be 'destructive'. That infant should be dashed against the rock, shown no pity, it is worthy of hatred, dashed against the rock that is Christ.[37]

In bringing this section to a close, Origen reflects upon 1 Cor 6:17. He determines that a human soul is joined either to the Lord, or to a prostitute. The Lord represents what he calls 'virtues': wisdom, truth, justice and so on. Naturally, the opposite of the virtues, evil, is represented by a prostitute. Here, Origen's metaphor collapses. Clearly, what he has in mind when he says prostitute, is a feminine figure, the figure of danger he has already established. But the human soul is the feminine figure in his fornicating metaphor, the one who gives birth as a result of the embrace with either the Lord or the devil. Perhaps Origen has a male prostitute in mind, though it seems unlikely. This critique aside, Origen's message is painted in sharp distinction; either one is of

[34] Ibid., 124.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 125.
[37] Ibid.

'one spirit' with the Lord, or of 'one body' with evil. The binary presented by the ascetic Origen is plain to see.

The third, and longest section of the homily is also marked by a heavy inter-textual approach. Origen uses the Numbers text as a springboard into many different other texts, from epistolary texts, Kings and the Song of Songs. His point of connection is the matter of consecration to other idols and the eating of sacrificed food. Food is allegorised as words, whether the words of Greek philosophy (Origen's polemic is evident here), but also in words of injustice or impiety.[38] This clearly resonates with his earlier assertion: these 'words' would be sons of destruction. Even Solomon, in all his wisdom, was deceived by Moabite philosophy, that is, he ate of things sacrificed to idols. Origen again allegorises his many wives as different dogmas and philosophies, by which Solomon was seduced, bringing together lust and eating in the manner of the opening five verses of Num 25.[39]

In discussing the name 'Baalphegor'[40] Origen claims to have not found an adequate understanding of what the name means, aside from a very general 'form of baseness.' This ambiguity, he surmises, is the deliberate work of the narrator; a protective measure to ensure his readers remained 'unpolluted.'[41] Having allowed this broad meaning, Origen goes on to claim that anyone who performs any act of baseness has consecrated themselves to the demon of the Midianites. This forms the basis of his next discussion of sins and demons: every sin consecrates us to the relevant demon. Using 1 Peter 5, these demons, now 'evil spirits' seek out ways to lure us into sin in order to consecrate one to a demon, be it Baalphegor or some other.[42] Thankfully, a good angel guides and warns us. This is Origen's encouragement to his hearers who may have been disheartened by his preceding discussion.[43] But even more encouragement is given! Indeed, the very Son of God is available to us, defending, standing guard, drawing us to Him. So too the Holy Spirit, so that the whole of the Trinity is engaged in drawing us, in taking

[38] Ibid., 127.
[39] Ibid.
[40] This is the way Rufinus has translated what is now called 'Baal Peor'. Baalphegor is the form used in the Vulgate.
[41] Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*, 127.
[42] Ibid., 128.
[43] Ibid.

great care in leading us to Salvation.[44] The use of the language of 'invitation' here also reminds us, unwittingly it seems, of the opening verses in which the Israelites are invited by the Moabite women.

In the final section of the homily, Origen begins with the fact that the 'rulers' of Israel are called to account for the actions of those under them. Perhaps they had failed to teach, or warn, or rebuke, he questions, noting that this is their responsibility.[45] The sun bears light on their failure, and their culpability is exposed. It appears that Origen takes this action as fact, as he pays no attention at all to Moses' alteration of the divine command. Instead, he returns to the issue of angels. Perhaps they too can be numbered amongst the 'rulers' who are forced to stand before the sun. This is a part of Origen's exploration of the mystery of the text. The angels too are amongst those who are 'placed over you', glossing Heb 13:17.

Origen closes the homily with a brief discussion of Phinehas. His quoting of the text is a little inaccurate: 'When Phinehas saw…he took a lance in his hand, entered the place of prostitution and pierced both of them through their shameful places.'[46] Certainly, this translation is some way from the LXX,[47] but is not far from a reading of the Vulgate, of which Origen's translator Rufinus was familiar. The Douay-Rheims, translating from the Vulgate renders '…when Phinees [sic]…saw it,…taking a dagger, went in after the Israelite into the brothel house, and thrust them through together, to wit, the man and the woman in the genital parts.'[48] What is clear is the assumption that this was not a wedding ritual, but a continuation of the whoring evident in the opening verses. Interestingly, by choosing to read only this far, Origen stops part way through the divine announcement which proclaims the perpetuity of Phinehas' priestly line and the covenant of peace which come immediately after. Instead, all Origen says is that Phinehas has quelled God's wrath.[49] Origen seems none too interested in

[44] Ibid., 129.
[45] Ibid., 130.
[46] Ibid., 131.
[47] The LXX makes no mention of 'the place of prostitution', nor 'their shameful places', rendering more neutral options 'the chamber' and 'her womb' instead.
[48] The Latin is *genitalibus*, the feminine dative form.
[49] Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*.

exploring Phinehas' actions and rewards in this particular homily, and indeed, he does not pick the thread up in the rest of his homiletical work.

Origen closes with yet more allegory. The human hand no longer holds a physical sword, but rather, the sword of the spirit. Origen urges his hearers to not shy away from using the sword to put to death 'Israelite thought prostituting itself with Midianite whores.'[50] His tone is emphatic, and he urges his congregation to 'strike at the womb…the very seat of sin.'[51] This of course is a clear return to his earlier theme, forming somewhat of an *inclusio* to bring his homily to its end. The picture of feminine danger is again prominent, as is the highly sexualised, eroticised vocabulary.

As a whole, Origen's homily serves to give us an insight into the way such texts were appropriated in the early centuries of the church. There is a degree of inventiveness, as we have already witnessed in the historiographies, but as we might expect, the great emphasis is in the 'deeper' or 'hidden' meaning, which to our sensibilities, seem at times to be a little too loosely connected with the text at hand. What is evident in Origen's writing though, is a sense of desperation to inform or perhaps protect his congregation. This homily is, perhaps predictably, didactic, and seeks to enrich the spiritual life of his congregants. In some sense then, it is related to the efforts of Josephus and Philo, insofar as they too sought to teach a community about their tradition. What is evident is a very different target audience, and so, a very different approach to the task!

Targum Onqelos and Other Fragments

The Targumim are the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew bible. Targum Onqelos in the Aramaic version of the Torah, its name coming from a famous Babylonian convert to Judaism to whom the work is attributed.[52] This is disputed, and there is no clear consensus. Tradition holds that the content of the Targum was the revelation of God to Moses at Sinai, but this had been forgotten by the people, and so the text is rerecorded through Onqelos.

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[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid. The use of womb here is in distinction to the previous translation of 'their shameful places'.
[52] Stephen A Kaufman, "Targums," in *The New Interpreter's Dictonary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 472.

Given that this text is constructed for use in worship, translators aimed to remain as close to literal translation as possible. The scribes make no attempt at rewriting in the manner of the historiographers examined previously. However, as is often the case in translation projects, there are some slight differences, one of which is particularly of note. In Verse 4 of my translation God's command to Moses is quite direct: 'Take all the heads of the people and impale them before the sun for Yhwh.' The Targum modifies the command: 'Take all the leaders of the people and hold court, then execute whoever is subject to execution before the Lord in broad daylight.'[53] So, not only does the command change, but also the group of people to face execution.

This elaboration in Onqelos is found also in other partially extant Targumim. From *Fragment Targum V*; 'Take all the leaders of the people and set them up as a Sanhedrin before the Lord, and they shall impale everyone who is sentenced to be killed; and at sunset, their corpses shall be brought down and buried.'[54]

The Targum sources then show only minute variation from the scriptural text. The interesting thing is that it softens the divine command, and in so finds a way to soften Moses' disobedience from the Hebrew text.

Talmud

The Talmud is a document which came into being across the first seven centuries of the Common Era. Neusner states emphatically that it is the single most important document in the history of Judaism.[55] It is a unique document; a compendium of religious stories, wise sayings and stories, presented in the form of a searching conversation between various Rabbis. Their subjects often seem trivial, but this is exactly the point: the Talmud searches the mundane reality of day to day life with an eye to order, to reason, to a place beyond the normal non-meaning chaos that characterises human existence.

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[53] Bernard Grossfeld, *The Aramaic Bible / Vol.8, Leviticus and Numbers* (T. & T. Clark, 1988), 140.
[54] Michael L. Klein, *The Fragment-Targums of the Pentateuch : according to their extant sources*, 2 vols. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980), 163.
[55] Jacob Neusner, *Invitation to the Talmud : A Teaching Book*, Rev. and expanded ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 1.

What the Talmud is not is a commentary or mode of retelling Israel's story. What is found instead is reflection and explanation of differing minutiae germane to the story scattered throughout its pages under different thematic discussions. These explanations serve to fill out more of the details of the story, often quite explicit details, and provide a window into the rabbinical thought world; the gate keepers of the tradition.

So, as a way of entry, some selections from a chapter concerned with Rules and Regulations concerning the kinds of death prescribed in the scripture, and how they ought to be executed.

> He is considered an idolater who worships it with its proper worship; and even if he only bows himself to it, smokes incest or pours wine. He is also so considered if he bows himself to it, accepts it as a god, even without any other act….He who uncovers himself before Baal Peor and commits a nuisance (is guilty, for) this is the mode of worshipping him.[56]

What follows this Mishnaic tract[57] is a discussion around what constitutes 'proper' worship and how other nations worship their gods. Discussions range through other worship acts which might bring about capital punishment: arming, kissing, shoeing, bowing and so on. What we discover is that the devotees to Baal Peor have a unique way of worship:

> It happened to a female heathen who was very sick and vowed that if she recovered she would worship all the idols that were to be found. After her recovery she did so. When she reached Baal Peor she asked how it should be worshipped. And she was told that worshippers ate mangcorn, drank beer then uncovered themselves in its face. And she said; I would rather suffer the same sickness again than perform such a worship.[58]

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[56] Michael L. Rodkinson, *The Babylonian Talmud: Tract Sanhedrin* trans. Michael L. Rodkinson (Kila: Kessinger, 2004), 179.

[57] The Mishnah is the first component of the Talmud, being the first written compendium of Jewish Oral law. See Burton L. Visotzky, "Mishnah," in *The New Inerpreter's Bible Dictionary*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009). The second component is Gemara, the basis of Rabbinic Law. See Burton L. Visotzky, "Talmud," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009). Also, Burton L. Visotzky, "Rabbinic Literature," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009).

[58] Rodkinson, *The Babylonian Talmud: Tract Sanhedrin* 187.

A second story follows:

> It happened to Saphta Ben Als, who hired his ass to a certain female heathen. And when she reached the place of Baal Peor, she said to him: "Await me here, I will enter only for a while and come out." And when she came out, he also said to her: "Await me here, I will also do the same." And to her question: "Are you not a Jew?" he answered: "What do you care?" He then entered, uncovered himself and put the dirt on the nose of the idol. And the ministers of Peor praised him for this, saying that there was no man who worshipped Peor as properly as he did.[59]

This story is told in a way to defend the Jewish character, Saphta. He only does what he does as a way of disgracing Peor, but falls into the trap of disturbing 'proper' worship. What this story reveals to us is the very low view the Israelites hold for the worshippers of Peor.

In a later chapter concerned with Rules and Regulations concerning those to whom burning and those to whom slaying applies, we have a larger section which reflects upon the actions of Zimri, Cozbi and Phinehas. It is surmised that had Zimri separated himself from Cozbi before being murdered, Phinehas himself would be considered guilty. Further, had Zimri acted in self-defense and killed Phinehas, he would not have been punished.[60] The rabbis seem anxious about the impetuosity of Phinehas' behaviour.

The following section is reminiscent of some of the historiographical material we considered earlier. The tribe of Simeon go to Zimri and tell him that Moses is judging cases of capital punishment: he is to remain silent. Instead, Zimri gathers 24,000 friends and goes to Cozbi. 'I am a Princess, the daughter of a King, and my father commanded me not to listen to anyone but the greatest of Israel…I myself am a prince of a tribe in Israel, and I am greater than Moses, as I am from the second tribe, while he is from the third. He took her by the locks of the hair, and brought her to Moses, saying: Son of Amram, is this damsel allowed to me, or is she prohibited? And should you say she is prohibited, I would ask you, Who allowed you to the daughter of Jethro? Moses, however, had forgotten the traditional halakah, and he and all who accompanied him wept.'[61]

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[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 238.
[61] Ibid., 239.

Phinehas suffers no such forgetfulness: on seeing Zimri's act he recalled immediately the relevant halakah and went straight to Moses: 'didst thou not teach me…that zealous man might take revenge on him who has intercourse with the daughter of an idolater? To which Moses answered: Let him who reads the letter be the carrier- i.e., let him who gives the advice be the executor.'[62] However, the Talmud suggests, with reference to Proverbs, that the consultation with Moses did not take place: 'There is no wisdom, nor understanding, nor counsel against the Lord- i.e., in a case where there is a violation of the Holy Name the honor of the master must not be considered (and therefore Phinehas did it without the consent of his master Moses).[63]

Our final Talmud selection deals with the person of Balaam. In Numbers 22, Balaam appears to be a friend of Israel, and a devotee of Yhwh. Jewish tradition, as we have seen thus far, has not chosen to remember him quite so fondly. Indeed, this is discussed by the rabbis. Yes, he was indeed a prophet in the beginning, but soon thereafter, became a soothsayer, a term first used against him in Joshua 13. No longer is Balaam a prophet, but instead, one who practices divination, and so guilty of abomination.[64] This is clearly understood by his presence in Midian during the war – he had gone to collect his reward for the 24,000 Israelites killed on account of his advice.

The rabbis then wonder how old Balaam may have been. However, it is recalled that Psalm 4 suggests that men of blood and deceit live out half their days. So, it is assumed that Balaam was 32 or 33 when he died, killed by Phinehas, a detail absent from the biblical record.[65]

Rashi

Rashi is one of the towering figures of Judaism. The name by which he is most commonly known is an abbreviation of his full name: Rabbi Shelomo ben Yishaq, a French rabbi from the late 11th and early 12 century. Rashi wrote commentaries on close to the entire Tanakh as well as the Babylonian Talmud. Neusner comments that the commentaries are so lucid and deft that the texts themselves

[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., 327.
[65] Ibid.

should not be approached except through Rashi.[66] Rashi's shadow looms so large over this literature, that the Talmud is printed with Rashi's commentary alongside it, giving it essentially a canonical status equal to the text of the Talmud itself.

However, it is Rashi's commentary on Numbers which concerns us. His commentary displays a commitment to midrash, whose root, *darash*, means to seek out. Midrash is a form of rabbinic commentary which finds its genesis around the end of the 1st century and which developed over the following 1,000 years. Typically, such commentaries include oral laws and traditions of earlier scholars and rabbis, eventually including introductions and poetry on each weekly parashah. In the work of Rashi, this style of commentary reaches its peak.

As we would expect, Rashi's commentary leans heavily on the Talmud, with frequent references to passages which he found relevant to the scriptural text he was dealing with. However, Rashi was also creative in the way that he unpacked the text for his readers. For example, his commentary on verse 2 reads: 'When anyone's passions overpowered them and he said to her "Submit to me", she took out for him an image of Peor from her bosom, saying to him, "First prostrate yourself before this."'[67] On verse four, Rashi recalls a midrashic comment: 'the sun made known who were the sinners, for the cloud rolled itself up from in front of him (the sinner) so that the sun shone on him.'[68]

Rashi also seeks to smooth out the problem with Moses' response to Yhwh's command, saying that it was always the plan to kill only those who had transgressed, not the heads. He notes that traditionally the punishment for idolatry was stoning, not hanging, but with recourse to the Talmud, assures us that all who were stoned were also hanged.[69]

Rashi follows the Talmud's reading of the Simeonite tribe's meeting with Zimri and the resultant showdown with Moses. Moses' forgetfulness though, is said to be intentionally caused by God in order that Phinehas might come and claim what was meant for him. Phinehas' action is miraculous, striking exactly at the male

[66] Neusner, *Invitation to the Talmud : A Teaching Book*, 174.
[67] M. Silber, *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos and Rashi's Commentary: Torah, The Book of Bamidbar*, 5 vols., vol. 4 (CL: BN Publishing, 2007), 122.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.

and female parts, (that is, Rashi recognises the word for stomach as a euphemism) so that all could perceive he had not killed them without just cause.[70]

Rashi also explains the unusual announcement of the covenant of peace and that of perpetual priesthood. Aaron had already had this bestowed upon him, and so too his sons. But here, Phinehas, to this point un-anointed, attains the status of priest on account of his zeal.[71]

So too, an explanation is given for the late appearance of the genealogies of Zimri and Cozbi. He suggests that the genealogy of a bad man is given to further promote the genealogy of the good. Indeed, the aristocratic nature of Zimri only makes Phinehas' action more praiseworthy – he did not refrain from showing zeal against the profanation of the Holy name. The genealogy of Cozbi is given to reveal the hatred Midian bore against Israel, that a King – and the most important of the Kings, would abandon his daughter, a princess to prostitution.[72]

The enmity to be shown against the Midianites is now set as a duty. But Rashi returns here in closing to the very beginning of the story, making mention of the Moabites, suggesting that they are spared on account of Ruth.[73]

Rashbam

Rabbi Shelomo ben Meir was the grandson of Rashi, born in 1080 and living to 1174. Rashbam represented a move away from the traditional midrash of the rabbinic tradition, preferring instead a literary analysis known as *peshat*, what we might call a concern with plain meaning.[74] He thought midrash to be false to the biblical text, and at various points targets his esteemed grandfather's commentary, undermining both the work and the method.

Rashbam's commentary is terse, but the departures he makes from Rashi are interesting. In his comment on verse 3, Rashbam immediately makes mention of

[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., 123.
[72] Ibid., 124.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Visotzky, "Rabbinic Interpretation."

the plague that is not mentioned until verse 8.[75] However, a consistent theme through Rashbam is the reality that mention of God's anger is always coupled with a perceivable effect. God's anger is never simply an emotion, something always ensues.[76]

Rashbam is not interested in the supposed showdown between Zimri and Moses. Instead, as we would expect from one seeking a plain meaning, he sees Zimri and Cozbi going into the tent for purely sexual purposes.[77]

Further, Rashbam sees no euphemism in verse 8. Rashi suggests that the stabbing through the genitalia is an appropriate punishment for their transgression. For Rashbam though, it simply means stomach.[78]

Nachmanides

Nachmanides (or Ramban as he is often called, after his full name of Rabbi Moses ben Nachman) was a Spanish Rabbi who lived from 1194-1270. He was familiar with the works of Rashi and used them frequently, an indication of the immediate impact of Rashi's work. Nachmanides was a kabbalist,[79] his Torah commentary being the first to display the influence of that mystical stream of Jewish thought. Consequently, his commentary often critiques Rashi, and offers alternative interpretations. Nonetheless, his work is based upon careful philological work and study of the scriptures, alongside the Jewish tradition contained within the Mishnah and Talmud, the wisdom of which was unquestionable for Nachmanides. His work then is a departure from his Spanish roots, in particular the work of Ibn Ezra which he found to be constricting. Instead, it is a blend of various elements and traditions, based most profoundly in the practice of *peshat*, with a sympathetic view of midrashic tradition.[80]

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[75] Meir Samuel ben and Martin I. Lockshin, *Rashbam's Commentary on Leviticus and Numbers : an Annotated Translation*, Brown Judaic studies (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2001), 283.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., 284.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Kabbalah is a mystical movement within Judaism. It is concerned with the esoteric, 'inner meaning' of the Torah, or סוד, meaning 'mystery'. Therefore, it is fundamentally different in method to 'Peshat' or Midrash, though as is noted, is not in opposition to them.
[80] Barry Dov Walfish, "Nachmanides," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashvile: Aningdon, 2009).

In his reading of Numbers 25, Ramban's practice of *peshat* is immediately evident. While he notes that Rashi is quick to introduce the scheming of Balak and Balaam to his own interpretation, Ramban notes that this is alluded to some time after the events. In doing so, Ramban seeks not to indict the Moabite women, but rather 'their men and their leaders' *via* the Midianites and possibly, Balaam.[81] It is the Midianite men that beguile Israel, by means of immorality with their beguiling women! Interestingly, Ramban seems convinced that Balaam is set on bringing evil upon Israel, citing Deut. 23:5, a departure from the guiding principle of *peshat*. That reading relies far more on tradition than it does on the text. Ramban speaks plainly about sexual desire, which exists 'naturally' amongst young men and women.[82] He is clear though that this is most often used for evil purposes, and that the instigators of the plan that leads Israel to apostasy are deserving of severe punishment, here brilliantly introducing the words of Balaam in Num 24:14 to issue his own warning.

Later, while discussing the death report of Balaam in Num 31, Ramban returns to the ideas of Num 25:18. Nachmanides reasons that Israelites would never kill one who had prophesied,[83] a statement which appears to suggest that he has some regard for Balaam, as opposed to the negative view of him we see elsewhere. However, seeing as though those who were beguiled by the Midianites were liable to the death penalty, so too, it is reasoned, was Balaam, the architect of the 'evil design,'[84] the execution of Balaam being defended on the grounds of the command to harass the Midianites. What we see then is a somewhat unclear characterisation of Balaam throughout Nachmanides' discussion of him.

When discussing the scene involving Zimri and Cozbi and the issue of the plague, Ramban makes quite an interesting reading. He chooses to ignore God's direct command to Moses, instead preferring to assume that Moses' own given command is what God had intended. This was to be an act of divine mercy, so that the wrath might not 'sweep away the righteous with the wicked.'[85] As the instruction is given, Zimri appears. Perhaps he comes so brazenly on account of

[81] Nahmanides, *Comentary on the Torah*, trans. Charles Ber Chavel, 5 vols., vol. 4 (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1975), 291.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid., 298.
[84] Ibid., 299.
[85] Ibid., 294.

his high standing, assuming his people will support him. Or perhaps, Ramban suggests, the Talmudic story is correct.[86] In either case, Moses and the people are moved to weep, at which point Phinehas responds, halting the plague, and in the process, staying the impending execution of the guilty men at the hands of the judges.

Ramban differs from Rashi in his understanding of verses 11-13. Ramban sees the content of verse 11 as a private communication from Yhwh to Moses, with verses 12-13 being the content of the proclamation to the people. Rashi suggests that verse 11 is also a part of the announcement, with the purpose of ensuring that Phinehas not be criticised for his murdering of a prince.[87] The great reward for Phinehas, 'my covenant of peace', is deserved in Ramban's mind, on account of the fact that he did not hold back from killing even a prince and princess.

The Samaritan Chronicle

The Samaritan Chronicle is an Arabic work redacted around 1300 CE. While not being on par with the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Samaritans do hold it highly, and believe it contains a true and authentic history of the period which it covers. The work is sometimes also referred to as *The Book of Joshua, The Son of Nun*. It begins by announcing its intention: to chronicle the events of Israel from the time Moses invested Joshua with the Caliphate over his people. The chronicle ends with Constantine emperor in Rome. The work is in a way related to the works of Philo and Josephus, in that it represents a rewriting of the bible. But in this case, it rewrites in accordance with a Samaritan view of history.

In the early chapters of the Chronicle we see a departure from the events as described within the biblical account. Chapter 2 of the Chronicle anticipates the war on Midian, and confirms the eventual ascension of Joshua to national leadership, but then returns in chapter 3, to the story of Balaam and Balak. Their exchange follows the biblical script, including the story of the talking donkey. However, Balaam's advice to the King regarding the use of women to ensnare the Israelites again finds its way into this document. Its relaying here follows much of the pattern we have discovered elsewhere; beautiful and fair women, ornaments

[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid., 296.

for worship, the prominence of the king's daughter. There are some variations though. The princess is to go directly to the tabernacle and identify the chief, to which she is to say "Wilt thou not receive me, or eat of my food and drink and offer service to my god? For after this I will be thine, and with thee will do whatsoever thou desirest.' Balaam is sure that once the chief is polluted, not one of the tribe will survive. Twenty-four thousand girls are sent on the Sabbath day. The Princess mistakes Zimri for Moses, on account of the deference being shown to him. Zimri submits to her suggestions, and immediately, the men of the tribe take a woman for themselves, invoking the anger of God, who in the wink of an eye, destroys four thousand[88] of the men and the women they are with. At this point, Phinehas emerges and thrusts a lance through Zimri and Cozbi[89], an action which removes and wards off the divine anger. The Chronicle notes that as a result of his actions, Phinehas is assured of noble fame and excellent remembrance, and a covenant to the end of the ages.

Chapter 4 tells the story of the war against Midian. This version has Moses sending Joshua as the leader of the company, which is unsurprising given that the alternative title of the work bears his name. Phinehas too is prominent, sounding the trumpets to bring down the walls. What is interesting about this report though is the capture of Balaam. Evidently, he had returned to congratulate the King. He was found engaged in worship, speaking unintelligibly because of the confusion caused by his detainment and the aberration of his mental faculties. Then, even though Joshua had ordered that he be kept alive to bring before Moses, Simeonites, that is, the kinsfolk of Zimri, put Balaam to death because of 'what was in [their] hearts concerning his deed', an excuse accepted by Joshua. Perhaps in this way, the Samaritans look to reconcile the tribe of Simeon with the rest of Israel, and so make amends for the action of Zimri.

Jean Calvin

While Calvin is perhaps best remembered for his *Institutes of Christian Religion*, his commentaries, across the entirety of the canon, remain an indispensable resource for understanding the theological landscape of the reformation period.

[88] Crane notes that this may represent a scribal error – a common one as it turns out, Josephus uses fourteen thousand, and Paul, in 1 Cor 10:8 suggests twenty-three thousand, as opposed to the twenty-four thousand of the MT. Given the mention of twenty-four thousand girls earlier, it seems this may represent an omission by the writer.

[89] In *The Samaritan Chronicle* the names of Zimri and Cozbi are never given.

His commentaries were deliberately less dense than his other writings, (making them more accessible to the layperson, and so furthering the doctrinal cry of *sola scriptura*), and in a similar vein to the homilies of Origen these reveal Calvin's pastoral persona. They are written, at times in quite a dialogical fashion, as if Calvin was imagining others sitting with him while he wrote, addressing their concerns and questions. This is evident in his treatment of Numbers 25.

Calvin's writing shows the concern for historical context which was common amongst early Protestant scholarship. Calvin sought to understand and explain ancient law through appeal to context and intention of the original authors. Being legally trained, he also showed a concern for the rhetorical dimension of the scriptures, with an emphasis on contextual, rather than atomistic concerns.

Calvin's commentary on Numbers falls into a larger work which is a harmony of the final four books of the Pentateuch. While the immediately preceding material is the Balaam pericope, what follows is a short section on Deuteronomy 4.[90] The decision to arrange the commentary in a harmony shows a concern for order and structure, but also reveals an anxiety about the canonical shape of the text, an issue which would gain the almost exclusive attention of scholars in the centuries after Calvin's commentary. Calvin regards Moses as the author of the text, a position which had been long held, but would radically change in the coming centuries.[91]

Calvin imagines the Israelites to be living in comfortable luxury in Shittim, a state they find no easier to bear than the adversity they have faced in the wilderness! Their comfort incites them to lasciviousness and the indulgence of filthy lusts.[92] Lust, whoredom and idolatry follow in quick succession, the cause being the counsel of Balaam, who understood the blessing of God to be an invincible safeguard, but was able to devise a plan to both deny such protection, and to incite God's anger against them.[93] Quickly, Calvin moves to application: 'the fall from

[90] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 242. The passages are linked by a reference to Baal Peor in the Deuteronomy passage.
[91] See the second part of this History.
[92] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, 3, 233.
[93] Ibid.

one sin to another is so easy, let us hence learn to be more watchful, lest Satan should entangle us in his snares.'[94] This seems to be the key deception in the plan; that the women did not immediately invite the Israelites to worship, but rather, invited them to eat with them. Presence at the feast in honour of false gods represents an indirect renunciation[95] to the true God, and from there, the slide is far easier.

Calvin considers the expression 'bound to Baal Peor' in verse 3 to be an amplification of the crime. It appears to him that the people only 'pretended to worship', enticed by the wiles of the women.[96] Nonetheless, the result is the same. Again, Calvin moves to application: '…when we turn aside from pure religion, we in a manner connect ourselves with idols, so as to coalesce in one body with them, and conspire to renounce the true God.'[97]

Calvin's treatment of verses 4 and 5 display some of his concern for 'harmony'. Rather than see Moses altering the divine command, he sees Moses recruiting Judges for the sake of executing justice. Indeed, Calvin goes so far as to suggest that Moses' re-telling of the command serves to express it more clearly.[98] The two punishments used are reflective of social importance. The leaders are hanged, presumably with the assistance of the judges. Their harsher punishment is justified on the basis of their high repute, their example being more harmful on account of others' imitation.[99] Predictably, a warning for people held in esteem follows. The second manner of death, being slain by pestilence,[100] is reserved for the 'lower orders',[101] though it remains unclear how the judges were involved in the administration of this punishment!

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[94] Ibid., 234.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid., 235.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Despite making reference to the pestilence, Calvin explores it no further here. It seems strange that this is the case, seeing as though he argues that it seems hardly probable that a great multitude were hanged. Instead, the plague is responsible for the greater part of the killing, but this does not seem to line up with his idea that Judges were recruited for the execution of the punishment. Instead, the punishment seems to have come directly from God.
[101] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, 3, 235.

There is no mincing of words in regards to the actions of Zimri and Cozbi: Calvin describes their actions as 'foul and detestable above the others', calling Zimri an 'abandoned man' and Cozbi a 'harlot'.[102] This is really only the beginning of his judgement on the scene, which is subsequently described as an atrocity and as an insult on God and men.[103] What is interesting about Calvin's reading of the scene is that he sees the gathering at the tent as an anticipatory move from the people who are trembling at the approaching calamity.[104] This is a little unusual, given that so many have already died on account of the pestilence he discussed previously. It seems more likely that the lament at the entry to the tent of meeting is an act of contrition in light of the widespread disaster, rather than an attempt to hold it off.

What follows is a reflection upon the action of Phinehas, who is contrasted against the rest of the gathering who remain passive in the face of this atrocity. Calvin does not dismiss them out of hand, commenting that their tears, of genuine grief, are praiseworthy.[105] Their inactivity serves to further distinguish Phinehas. Calvin's legal background manifests itself as he anticipates his reader's likely objection to Phinehas' violent action[106]: Phinehas, he declares, had the Holy Spirit as his guide, and acted under a special inspiration of God, the proof of which is God's own approval which follows.[107] And while at times God's people are called to unusual acts, Calvin warns his readers that they must not act rashly, in order to imitate Phinehas, but rather, be convinced of the command of God.[108]

God's speech to Moses makes it clear that He was the author of death[109] of the slain couple, an idea that Calvin explores for a little while. He then turns to the reference to this event in Psalm 106, in which Phinehas' actions are referred to as a prayer (Ps 106:30). In the psalm, the prayer rather than the shedding of the

[102] Ibid., 236. Calvin does not use their names here. Notice also the change of characterisation of this relationship: in vss 1-5, it is the sons of Israel that are the subjects of the verb 'to whore'. However, Calvin has quickly reversed the subject of the verb. No longer are the 'sons of Israel' the whores, but the female figure.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid.
[106] This too represents the dialogical aspect of Calvin's work noted above.
[107] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, 3. Calvin's bold declarations give a clear insight to the ideological conviction he brings to his reading. It seems strange to suggest that the Holy Spirit might lead an individual to such a dramatically violent action. This issue will be explored further in Chapter II.3.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid., 239.

blood brings atonement. However, as Calvin's translator points out in a footnote,[110] Calvin's reading of this verse in his Psalms commentary is at odds with this, where he points out that פלל, translated 'to pray', is also able to be rendered 'to execute justice', which he suggests is more in line with the context. Calvin then argues that the announcement of the priesthood, which some would argue was already his on account of his lineage, stands in line with a pattern of repeated promises, including to pronouncements of blessing made to Abraham.[111]

In discussing the naming of Zimri and Cozbi, Calvin does an interesting thing. He thinks it fair that the author of the sin be subject to 'perpetual infamy',[112] indeed, so great is the disgrace that the whole Simeonite tribe is burdened by it! Again, the matter of high birth is raised as a way of highlighting the greater disgrace which comes upon those in position.[113] However, the name of Cozbi never appears in Calvin's writing. She is described as 'the Midianitish woman' and 'the harlot',[114] but never by her name. Indeed, even when her name appears again in the exhortation to vex the Midianites, Calvin again resists using Cozbi's name in his comments.

In discussing the command to smite Midian, Calvin reminds his readers that often, God forbids His people taking vengeance.[115] However, this battle is different. It is a battle against 'obnoxious enemies', the guilt of Balaam laid upon the whole of the people.[116] He concludes with a strange double-negative: 'Let it be sufficient for us to know that war was justly declared against the Midianites, because it was not their fault that Israel was not ruined by their iniquitous impiety.'[117]

To this point in the history of interpretation, the various historiographers, commentators and homilists have assumed the authorship of Moses regarding the text of Numbers 25. As was noted in the section on Calvin, it would not be long before that assumption would crumble. What we have seen is a broad set of creative methods in reading and reconstructing the text, even while the texts were

[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid., 240.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid., 241.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.

written in different times and places, and for differing reasons; religious and otherwise. At times, the solutions to the textual problems have shared common ground, and at others, there is significant divergence in the author's results.

Chapter II.2

Introduction

The following section takes us from the seventeenth century through to the twenty-first. This period includes the rise of the historical critical method which was to dominate biblical studies for over 200 years. Indeed, one could argue that it is still the dominant method in biblical studies. The chapter examines significant commentators across that time span. At points, there are relatively large gaps, while at others, I had to be selective. As a general rule, I limit myself to full length commentaries, though others are mentioned in passing. As with the first section, there is a mixture of both Jewish and Christian authors. However, it would not be correct to call some of them specifically Jewish or Christian, nor to assume Jewish or Christian audiences for them. As with the first section, these commentaries are also written with different audiences in mind, including the non-religious who read the scriptures for reasons other than religious edification. And again, similarly to the first section, there are a variety of solutions to some of the textual problems.

What is painfully clear to this point is the lack of female voices in this history. Sadly, there have been no early female voices, and the commentaries by Sakenfeld,[1] and more recently, Nowell[2] are both short in length and so do not examine the text comprehensively enough to warrant inclusion in this section. However, the third chapter will include women's voices, addressing this glaring imbalance.[3]

Early Critical Controversies

In the seventeenth century, Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza released a major work, *Theological-Political Treatise*, a book that created quite a deal of alarm on its publication. Spinoza must have foreseen this, as the book was published anonymously. Spinoza was no stranger to controversy, having been expelled from the Jewish community of Amsterdam some fourteen years earlier for his

[1] Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Journeying with God : A Commentary on the Book of Numbers*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995).
[2] Irene Nowell, *Numbers*, The New Collegeville Bible Commentary Old Testament (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011).
[3] It should also be noted that while female voices are absent in this particular part of the thesis, they are far more prominent in the ensuing sections.

'monstrous deeds' and 'abominable heresies'.[4] In addressing scripture in the *Treatise,* Spinoza argues that it was impossible for Moses to have written all, even most, of the Torah. Indeed, all the books of the Tanakh could hardly be thought to have been written by the individuals whose names they bear, but rather, came from the hand of someone much later, perhaps someone such as Ezra.[5] Spinoza was by no means alone in declaring such things, but is representative of a growing movement away from the traditional understanding of the scripture's provenance.[6]

French physician Jean Astruc (1684-1766) divided the biblical text on the basis of the names of god, e.g., Elohim and Yahweh. This led to a suggestion that two sources were used for the book of Genesis. Such views were developed and expanded by other scholars, culminating in the definitive statement of the hypothesis by Julius Wellhausen.[7] The hypothesis asserts that there are four complete and distinct sources operational in the Pentateuch, designated by the *sigla* J, E, D and P.[8] The four individual sources, or strata, came from differing times and places, determined by the biases and interests displayed within the four posited sources. To say that the hypothesis was universally adopted amongst scholars would be to overstate the case; it too was subject to revision and alteration. However, the basic premise of Wellhausen's work dominated study of the Pentateuch for the next century, and continues to exert influence,[9] though now in its revised form.[10] Confidence in the dating of sources, an inability to tease sources apart, and the constant fragmentation of the sources in question sees the classic formulation, to some extent, in tatters.[11]

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[4] Steven Nadler, "Baruch Spinoza," http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/spinoza/. Accessed 5th May, 2012.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Spinoza's interest was not to determine the authorship, but rather to reiterate that the bible was a 'natural' book, and so should be studied in an appropriate fashion, as opposed to the reverential, idolatrous fashion that characterised biblical scholarship of the time.
[7] Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel, wth a Reprint of the Article "Israel" from the Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Meridian Books (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1965). This was originally published in German in 1878.
[8] Representing: Jahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomic and Priestly.
[9] See, for example, Thomas B. Dozeman and Konrad Schmid, *A Farewell to the Yahwist? The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006).
[10] Again, Wellhausen's project was not to determine the authorship of certain texts, but was part of a larger problem: the development of Israelite religion. (sentence not clear) See the opening chapter of, Ernest W. Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century : The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
[11] Pauline Viviano, "Documentary Hypothesis," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

The foregoing overview leads us into the following phase of our historical survey,[12] in which some prominent commentators' work, dominated by the concerns of source criticism will be considered. While source criticism always has a larger picture in view, we will restrict ourselves to the confines of Numbers 25, while reserving the right to follow the movement of the commentators.

C.F Keil and Franz Delitzsch

Keil and Delitzsch published a commentary series on the entire Old Testament in 1861. The series therefore came before Wellhausen's publication of *Prolegomena*. Delitzsch in particular was sympathetic to Jewish people, and his commentaries are punctuated by references to rabbinic sources. Given the anti-Semitism which was a part of broader European society of the time this openness to Jewish thinking distinguished their work together. However, their work is not Jewish but thoroughly Christian in its motivation, which is clearly evident in their Preface to the series.[13] Moreover, their work was not a purely academic one, but one which they hoped would have religious significance for their readers.

Keil and Delitzsch read Numbers as the natural sequel to Leviticus. Leviticus is read as a continuation of the giving of the law that commences at Exodus 25. In this, we see that they stand in opposition to the emerging source theory that formed the context of their work which views Leviticus as a part of the P strata which comes later than the narrative sections into which it is inserted. This suspicion of the source theory is demonstrated in their commentary on chapter 25, in which a footnote strongly refutes the 'violent hypothesis'[14] of a scholar named Knobel, who had suggested a mixing of two accounts through the chapter, specifically verses 1-5 and 6-18. Knobel had thought the second section to be Jehovistic, and the opening verses to be Elohistic. His work is judged to be based on 'empty assumptions' rather than proof.[15]

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[12] For a comprehensive history, see Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century : The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen*.
[13] Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume 1: The Pentateuch*, 10 vols., vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), xii.
[14] Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, "The Fourth Book of Moses (Numbers)," in *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), 790.
[15] Ibid.

The commentary on chapter 25 commences in this way: 'The Lord had defended His people from Balaam's curse.'[16] Of course, there is no reference given for this, as the text in no way intimates that Balaam ever attempted to curse Israel; indeed, the opposite is the case. They go on to say that Balaam is 'casually' mentioned in Num 31:16 as giving the advice which was taken up by the people of Moab. They are careful to differentiate the Moabite women from the Midianite Cozbi, but are equally prudent in linking her to the presence of Midianite Princes in the earlier story of Num 22. It is this involvement by the young royals of Midian that lies behind the later judgement upon them.[17]

Keil and Delitzsch spend some time on the use of the word זנה, which they suggest refers to carnal and spiritual whoredom.[18] They follow the events of the opening verses closely; friendship leads to the invitation to the sacrificial meals in honour of Chemosh, the celebrations of which include the prostitution of women and virgins.[19]

What follows from there is quite a lengthy discussion about the possible mode of execution that may have been used. Keil and Delitzsch bring forward their discussion of the plague to this point, so it is seen as a part of the display of God's wrath which needs to be turned away. They reject certain understandings of the crucifixion which is hinted at as a mode of execution, but settle on a reading in which the offenders are put to death, and then impaled upon a cross in the sun.[20] In doing so, they harmonise other execution passages: Lev. 20:14, Deut. 21:22 and 2 Sam. 21:6, 9. They also see this as punishment intended for the perpetrators of the offence, rather than the 'heads of the people' who are seemingly the objects of the verbs. However, due to matters taking a 'different turn,'[21] none of the prescribed events takes place.

The different turn is the appearance of the prince of Simeon and the princess of Midian[22] before the gathered, weeping assembly. Keil and Delitzsch see no cultic

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 791.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Keil and Delitzsch are willing to offer this short biography of the couple, drawn from verse 4, but do not go so far as to mention their names.

activity taking place, rather, the two have come solely to commit adultery in *his* tent.[23] An interesting insight follows:

> This shameless wickedness, in which the depth of the corruption that had infiltrated into the congregation came to light, inflamed the zeal of *Phinehas*, the son of Eleazer the High Priest, to such an extent, that he seized a spear, and rushing into the tent of the adulterer, pierced both of them through in the very act.[24]

Phinehas' action then is not related solely to the actions of the renegade couple, but rather, expose to him the depth of the failure of all of Israel. The two lovers become representative of all of the transgressors, so that symbolically, Phinehas is executing all those who had failed. The sign of his success is the immediate restraining of the plague, his act of high priestly intercession averting the destruction of the whole congregation.[25] His action, a display of 'divine zeal' (קנאתי is 'my zeal', not 'zeal for me')[26], in which the daring sinners are put to death, establishes Phinehas as the eternal possessor of the priesthood.[27]

Interestingly, Keil and Delitzsch note that both members of the couple are named, but they themselves only name Cozbi. They also make the link between her father and the report of his death in the war with Midian in Num. 31. The name of Zimri remains unspoken. The war with Midian is described with a reference to Baumgarten[28]: 'in order that the practical zeal of Phinehas against sin, by which expiation had been made for the guilt, might be adopted for all the nation.'[29]

George Buchanan Gray

Gray, an Oxford Professor, published his Numbers commentary in 1903.[30] He opens the preface with a mention of the commentary of Keil, which had been published in English some thirty-five years previously.

> Keil's interpretation started from a standpoint which was at the time professedly, and recognised to be, conservative, and which

[23] Keil and Delitzsch, "The Fourth Book of Moses (Numbers)," 791.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 792.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Baumgarten was a 19th Century commentator also.
[29] Keil and Delitzsch, "The Fourth Book of Moses (Numbers)," 792ff.
[30] Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*.

> the advance of scholarship in the interval has increasingly shown to be untenable. It is unnecessary to say more to indicate the need for a new English commentary.[31]

As we have already seen, the second half of the nineteenth century was a time of great upheaval in the discipline, energised by the work of Graf and Wellhausen. Gray notes the work of other commentators which have come in the interim: the work of Dillman[32] and Strack[33], noting that even in the fifteen years between Dillman's work and his own, standpoints had changed and the body of knowledge increased.[34] Keil's commentary had well and truly been left behind. Gray's comments, while showing a respect for the work of Keil, also indicate that a new point of departure for critics had arrived. As with Keil's work, Gray's too would eventually become out-of-date. However, some ninety years later, Timothy Ashley, in his commentary on Numbers speaks of Gray as '"the" commentator with whom one agrees or disagrees.'[35]

Gray's introductory comments to Num. 25 clearly establish the new paradigm within which he is operating. He breaks the chapter into four sections, the final three (vss. 6-18) being closely related to each other.[36] That division is self-evident. His change of focus becomes evident when he discusses the contributions of each of the relevant sources, with discussion of JE, which accounts for vss. 1-5, and P (though not entirely Pg), which makes up the remaining verses.[37] That Gray assumes this, and bases his comments on these divisions, coupled with the comments of his Preface, it seems clear that scholars who may have been sympathetic to Keil's resistance to the source theory were now firmly in the minority.

In terms of source criticism, what is most striking in Gray is his differentiation of the P source. He finds three distinct elements of P. Firstly, Pg, which is the fundamental work (the g signifying 'groundwork'), which he describes as the

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[31] Ibid., vii.
[32] August Dillman, "Die Bucher Numeri, Deuteronomium and Josua," in *Kurzgefasstes Exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament* (1886).
[33] H.L. Strack, *Die Bucher Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus und Numeri*, Kurzgefasster Kommentar zu den Heilgen Schriften Alten and Neuen Testamentes sowie zu den Apokryphen (Nordlingen: C.H. Beck, 1894).
[34] Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, vii.
[35] Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, x.
[36] Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, 380.
[37] Ibid.

'priestly history of sacred institutions.'[38] Ps represents the material which is later in origin, perhaps as late as 250 BCE, and so considered 'secondary', and the third marker is Px, which is material not necessarily later than Pg, but not considered to be a part of the original work. Pg is thought to be the work of one writer, the other material coming from an indeterminate number of hands.[39] These markers give an indication of how far the hypothesis had come in a relatively short period, and point the way forward to a theory developed by Noth (see below).

Verses 1-5 make up the first section in Gray's analysis, being a composite of J and E. The distinction comes as a result of two indicators: the lack of clarity regarding the method of execution, and the apparent weaving of traditions in verses 2-5. Gray suggests that J gives no location, nor any details about the Moabite god, whereas E is quite specific on those details, the location being Shittim and the god, Baal-Peor.[40]

Gray reads the participation in the feast as the sequel to the physical intimacy, engagement in the feast being an act of honouring the Moabite god(s).[41] He points out that worshipping Chemosh on his territory would have been normal practice for the Israelites in the early period, though it is condemned here because it appears that the land had now become Yhwh's by conquest.[42]

Like Keil, Gray too is interested in who is executed and the mode of execution. He reads the Hebrew as stating explicitly that it is the chiefs of the people who are to be put to death,[43] but suggests that the fusion of sources has confused the use of the pronoun, which may have originally pointed to the offenders. He also discusses the various possibilities for the execution, but unlike Keil, he does not take a stand on either of these issues.

Gray then moves to a discussion of the actions of Phinehas, which he has assigned to P. He presumes that there is a missing introduction to this story,

[38] Ibid., xxxiii.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., 381.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid., 382.
[43] Ibid., 383.

'suppressed by the editor in favour of v.1-5'.[44] He suggests that this introduction may have involved the conversation between Balaam and the Midianites which has been discussed elsewhere. He questions this though, on account of his dating of the sources. The midrash concerning Balaam may not have been as early as Pg.

The assumption of the missing introduction leads Gray to question the nature of Zimri and Cozbi's offence.[45] Perhaps it was an aggravation of the offence of vss. 1-5, the offence which had caused the plague, or perhaps some new act.[46] In this case, he concludes that the aggravation of the previous offence seems most plausible.[47] The aggravation he suggests is that in vss. 1-5, the consorting must have taken place in the women's homes, whereas here we have a bringing home, an act which defiles the camp.[48] Phinehas' response is read in this light: the act is a dishonour to Yhwh, the act of zeal so great that it also appeases the wrath incurred from the previous offence.[49] Gray notes that the expression 'covenant of an everlasting priesthood', limited to the family of Phinehas, suggests a dating between Ezekiel and Ezra, so designating it Pg.[50] On account of this, Gray discusses the connection of the Zadokite lineage to Phinehas through Ezra and the work of the Chronicler, and suggests that this in effect legitimates the Zadokite line, by establishing it with an ancient originating story, a linkage which is not evident in the Deuteronomic texts.[51]

Gray moves quickly to the end of his comments, noting the etymologies of the names of Zimri and Cozbi, and noting their royal positions.[52] He makes no comment regarding the significance of those positions. In discussing the command to attack the Midianites, he again makes reference to Balaam as the architect of the crafty plan, and also how the allusion to the Midianites ties this command to the P material of vss.6-15, while the reference to Baal Peor relates the command to the JE story of vss. 1-5.

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[44] Ibid., 384.
[45] Following the text, Gray does not mention their names at this point.
[46] Interestingly, at this point Gray moves forward, making mention of the plague before it appears in the text.
[47] Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, 384.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., 385.
[50] Ibid., 386.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid., 386ff.

Gray's work then, shows a more critical stance than the work of Keil, or the work of those before him. His commentary lacks the personal involvement that was evident elsewhere. There is no emotional language, no moral judgment. The explicit religious commitment of Keil and Calvin seems absent from the work of Gray, this work showing a critical distance which was not part of the religiously motivated work of his predecessors.

Martin Noth

In 1948, German scholar Martin Noth released *Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch* (A History of Pentateuchal Traditions).[53] This work examined the pre-literary history of the Pentateuchal traditions, rather than the literary phase, in order to determine the basic themes which undergird the Pentateuchal traditions.[54] Noth, and his contemporary and compatriot Gerhard Von Rad, showed a great concern for the totality of the Pentateuch, but they differed in significant respect: Von Rad felt that the Yahwist was the most prominent voice in the Pentateuch, whereas Noth felt that the material was largely complete before the Yahwist commenced work.[55] Another significant factor in Noth's work is his exclusion of Deuteronomy; indeed, the history of Pentateuchal traditions could well be named 'A History of Tetrateuchal Traditions.'

In terms of the composition of the Pentateuch, Noth theorised a single narrative, which may or may not have been a written work. He called this work G (for *Grundlage*, or in English, 'foundation'). Noth dated G to the pre-monarchic period, and he believed that it was here that the truly decisive stages of the formation of the Pentateuch occurred.[56] J and E came after G, and were written works, both drawing from G, but adding material of their own. Eventually, they were combined, J remaining the dominant voice.[57] Finally, JE is united with P, P providing the framework for the entire narrative. Much material has been added to this to create the final form, some added to P and some to the completed Pentateuch. Noth distinguished this material by using the *sigla* Ps, which referred

[53] Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972).
[54] Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century : The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen*, 75.
[55] Ibid., 75ff.
[56] Ibid., 79.
[57] R. N. Whybray, *Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 19.

only to that material added to P; it was not used to designate later passages in the style of P.[58]

In 1966, Noth's Commentary on Numbers appeared in German, the English translation released two years later.[59] Numbers was not a book that Noth felt entirely comfortable with, in that he felt it lacked unity or pattern, that it is often stilted in its flow by legal material and seems to only marginally take in some of the great themes of the Pentateuch.[60] What he sees as significant is the emergence of the conquest theme in Numbers,[61] which foreshadows the deuteronomistic history, his work on which is the great contribution of his career.

Noth's view of Num 25 is that it contains elements of traditions from varied places and times, woven together in such a way as to make it near impossible to disentangle.[62] Perhaps not surprisingly, he suggests that the opening five verses of this narrative may have formed a part of the old Pentateuchal narrative-tradition. Even so, like Gray he notes the lack of harmony amongst them, citing the late mention of 'Baal of Peor' as an indicator.[63] However, he is not as confident as Gray in attributing the various strands to particular strata. As he comments; 'One might attribute this section to J, but one must also make the point that it is scarcely self-contained.'[64]

In terms of the literary context of the story, Noth notes the jarring effect of the Israelite apostasy juxtaposed with the elaborate blessings of the previous chapters, all the more so because it is the god of the king who had attempted to commission the curse who receives Israel's worship.[65] Noth makes the observation that the relationships between Moab and Israel had no cultic background, but do have cultic consequences.[66] He is concerned with the word צמד, translated 'to yoke oneself to', used only here and in Ps 106 which also discusses this scene, though

[58] Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century : The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen*, 78.
[59] Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*.
[60] Ibid., 1ff.
[61] Ibid., 12.
[62] Ibid., 195.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., 196.
[66] Ibid.

he concludes that it is no longer possible to ascertain what this may have meant, either literally or figuratively.[67]

In discussing the command to punish the chiefs, Noth, similar to other commentators, is interested in the mode of punishment ordered. The problem is the hiphil form of יקא, which in Qal can mean 'be put out of joint' but it is less clear in hiphil. What seems plain is that what is intended is a very cruel and painful mode of punishment.[68] He is also interested in the expression 'in face of the sun', particularly as it is coupled with 'for Yhwh', though the particular meaning or significance is lost to us. All we can safely assume is that the act is propitiatory.[69]

The fact that Moses appears to change the command of Yhwh leads Noth to suggest that vs 5 may be the work of a later writer who wanted to make sure that the guilty persons were indeed punished. In effect, this becomes an 'additional measure',[70] textually necessary because of the absence of any report that the first command was carried out.

In his introduction to the chapter, Noth suggests that the appearance of Phinehas in vs 6 indicates that this part of the text as deriving from a late period in which Aaronite succession was established.[71] However, he is again reluctant to assign these verses to P, seeing as though they seem to contain elements of older traditions, and a unique vocabulary which makes such dating very difficult.[72] He notes that the links between vss. 1-5 and what follows are loose, and require one to do a certain amount of 'read[ing] between the lines.'[73] For example, we are supposed to assume that the lament at the tent of meeting has to do with the apostasy at Baal Peor; we are to assume that the plague of vss. 8-9 is in some way linked to the divine punishment of 4-5; the 'Midianite woman' appears to be familiar, and so we are left to assume she is in some way linked to the Moabite women of the opening verses. None of these things are explained explicitly, they

[67] Ibid., 197.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid., 198.
[71] Ibid., 195.
[72] Ibid., 196.
[73] Ibid., 198.

are left to the reader to put together. What is interesting about Noth's reading of this scene is that he sees the Israelite man as taking advantage of the national situation,[74] as if suggesting that this was an opportune time for his nefarious action. He reads the ambiguous *qubba* as some sort of inner room, perhaps even a 'wedding room',[75] and so clearly understands this as a marriage, rather than an act of prostitution or divination. Indeed, what exactly is to be considered nefarious about his actions is again left to the reader to deduce, though as Noth suggests, we are left to make that decision in the context of the events of vss. 1-5.[76]

Noth very quickly closes his reading of Num 25. The announcement of the rewarding of Phinehas amounts to the whole point of the story, legitimising the descendants of Phinehas in the face of possible opposition. The mentioning of the names of the couple involved appears little more than an act of defamation against their respective clans. And the final command to war with Midian appears to make them responsible for the events of vss. 1-3, absolving the Israelites of blame.[77]

Noth's comments on Num 25 seems in some way to parallel his own feelings on the book of Numbers as a whole. It seems that he has too quickly rushed over some of the more significant details, while at points labouring things that seem to be of little consequence. This is the prerogative of the commentator, no doubt, but the effect is that his reading of Num 25 is imbalanced.

Philip Budd

Between the appearance of Noth's work and the 1984 publication of Budd's commentary, three significant, shorter commentaries appeared; those of Sturdy,[78] Snaith[79] and Wenham.[80] These three have proven to be useful, often cited works, including by Budd in his own work. However, they lack the sustained critical

[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., 199.
[78] John Sturdy, *Numbers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).
[79] Norman Henry Snaith, *Leviticus and Numbers*, New Century Bible (London: Nelson, 1967).
[80] Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed., Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Downers' Grove Inter-Varsity Press, 1981).

rigour of Budd's fuller commentary, so are only mentioned here, rather than being a focus of attention.[81]

Quite early in the Introduction to the commentary, after a discussion of the contents of his work, Budd claims that 'the book [of Numbers] is by no means as disordered and incoherent as is sometimes claimed.'[82] Whilst he does not specifically cite Noth at this point, it is hard to imagine that Noth's comments regarding the confused nature of the text are far from his mind. Instead, he suggests, the book falls into three reasonably clear sections, though there may be some disagreement around where those divisions lie.[83]

In his discussion on sources, Budd concerns himself only with Priestly and Yahwistic material. He lacks confidence in Noth's Pg hypothesis, while not dismissing it outright: 'Difficulties do not of course negate the validity and appropriateness of an enquiry…'[84] he comments. However, in the end he thinks that the idea that P is some form of reinterpretation, or retelling of some original source, namely Pg, is probably unnecessary. Instead, he sees the work of P as being analogous with the work of the Chronicler, who clearly utilises material from Samuel and Kings, as well as other sources, but for whom there is no need to posit a 'base narrative.'[85]

Budd places Num 25 as the final scene of the second division, which he titles '*The Journey—Its Setbacks and Success*, and which he takes to commence at Num 9:15.[86] In regards to the sources, Budd follows the usual line of assigning vss. 1-5 to JE and 6-18 to P, though he notes that while this division is reasonably straightforward, further analysis poses many problems.[87] In regards to the first section, Budd rehearses the various positions concerning parallel threads. He is

[81] This is in no way a criticism of these works, but rather a reflection of the aims and scopes of the series in which they appear.
[82] Budd, *Numbers*, xx.
[83] Ibid. Many commentators follow a tri-partite division, though as Budd notes, there is no consensus on the divisions. An alternative view is put forward by Denis Olson in Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New : The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch*. His later commentary follows the same pattern. Olson, *Numbers*.
[84] Budd, *Numbers*, xxii.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., xvii.
[87] Ibid., 275.

unconvinced of the presence of E,[88] even less so by the theories of Noth.[89] Instead, he posits a literary base, truncated here by the Yahwist.[90] What may be in view is a recollection of a popular Northern cult, Baal Peor, attested in Hos 9:10, the shortening evidenced by the lack of reporting of the executions commanded within the text.[91]

Like Noth, Budd is interested in the term צמד, also noting that the rarity of its use points to some specialised cultic usage which is now lost to us.[92] Likewise, the mode of execution garners his attention, and he lists the same options as Noth, while adding the possibility, supported by Robertson Smith, that the victims may have been thrown from a cliff.[93]

Turning to vss. 6-15, Budd follows the commonly accepted line that this is a Priestly supplement to the JE account. He goes so far as to suggest that this work may well be from the hand(s) of the author(s) of Numbers.[94] Like Noth, he sees this second section as requiring many assumptions on the part of the reader. For example, there is no mention of weeping or plague in the opening stanza, but they are assumed by the author.[95]

At this point Budd refers to the Baal Peor tradition of Ps 106, which he describes as a bridge between the two sections of Num 25.[96] As we have seen elsewhere, Ps 106 mentions Phinehas, a detail missing from Hosea 9:10. Dating the Psalm to the exilic or early post-exilic period means that there is a strong chance it was known by the author of Num 25, and adds to the assumptions they make in the composition of the text.[97] Budd questions whether the truncation of the tradition may mean that Phinehas was a part of the Yahwistic tradition, or whether this represents a legitimising move for those represented by Phinehas,[98] though he

[88] Ibid., 276.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid., 281.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid., 279.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid., 277.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid., 279. suggests that Phinehas is linked in some way to a returning group around the time of Ezra. It appears that their credentials as priests had been questioned. This story, linking Phinehas to Aaron justifies their claim to legitimacy. The actions of Phinehas in this episode, displaying

suggests that this seems unlikely, given the restrained nature of much of the psalm.[99] Instead, it seems reasonable to attribute this story's expansion to the priestly author, for whom it is important that Phinehas be a son of Aaron. In a similar vein, the introduction of Midian into the story provides the framework for the ensuing war on Midian.

Budd finishes his remarks on this chapter, and on the second major division of his commentary, with a theological assessment: 'There are always ways in which that good [that is, god's] purpose can work its way through the morass of human inadequacy, and this must be judged one of the author's major theological contributions to the OT understanding of God.'[100] This section, *Setbacks and Successes* is ambiguous in this respect. In speaking in broad, general terms, Budd evades the difficulty of the critical, theological questions. Is the apostasy and resulting plague a necessary setback for the coming success? Does Phinehas' violent action in some vile way turn defeat into victory? Budd is right in his assessment that the story to this point acknowledges failure, and that there are consequences for that failure.[101] Yet finishing this section in the manner that he does, allows one to wonder if this is a failure redeemed, an unfortunate, perhaps even inconvenient story, but necessary for the ongoing consequences which spring from it.

Jacob Milgrom

Jacob Milgrom is perhaps best known for his work on Leviticus, including a three volume commentary in the Anchor Bible Series. As an expert on Torah, he has contributed as much as any other figure in recent times to our understanding of the seminal part of the Hebrew bible. His commentary on Numbers[102] is a part of the Jewish Publication Societies Torah series and is almost certainly the definitive commentary on the book. Milgrom announces his intention:

> This commentary aims to be critical, unapologetic, and objective. At the same time, it offers reliable support to those who believe

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such zeal in the face of inter-marriage and around the issue of racial exclusion also buttresses the ideology of the returning group.

[99] Ibid., 277.

[100] Ibid., 283.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-midbar] : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*.

> that this book and the Torah at large were divinely revealed. The two generations of Israel's founders who walk through its pages alternately obeyed and resisted the covenantal demands of Sinai. Their encounters with God, devoutly interpreted and dutifully recorded by subsequent generations, manifest occasional ambiguities and discrepancies. It could not be otherwise. These uncertainties represent the flawed human perception of the infinite faces of the divine. They were entered into the books of the Torah because they were all regarded as equally authentic and sacred.[103]

Milgrom makes something clear: that his is a Jewish commentary, concerned with matters of Jewish history, and seemingly written for a Jewish audience. Nonetheless, it is a sign of Milgrom's rare quality that this commentary transcends that audience to become the magisterial work that it is. This is a thoroughly Jewish commentary, of great value to anyone interested in the text.

Milgrom commences his comments on Num 25 by likening it to the golden calf episode of Ex 32, noting similar thematic material: worship of other gods, death of guilty parties to assuage god's wrath and the designation of the line of Phinehas/Levites for work in the sanctuary.[104] Further, he sees the Numbers episode as the fulfilment for the events at the base of Sinai, noting the divine utterance, 'A day will come when I will punish them for their sins.' (Ex. 32:34, NEB). Milgrom is emphatic: '[The editor] clearly had Baal-Peor in mind.'[105] Like many others, Milgrom also notes the traditional view that Balaam was involved in the plotting of the events, though he also says that this was a part of Balaam's plan to destroy Israel. Here we have an instance of tradition being promoted over the text, and so the Jewishness of the commentary becomes evident.

Milgrom's textual engagement is more rigorous than the previous commentaries we have considered, concerning himself with all manner of details overlooked by others. While it would be superfluous to rehearse the breadth of Milgrom's observations, some do warrant our attention. For instance, on the word לזנות, Milgrom notes that this is the only instance where the verb, in its literal sense (to whore), takes a masculine subject. This suggests Israel's religious defection as a

[103] Ibid., xiii.
[104] Ibid., 211.
[105] Ibid.

result of cohabitation and intermarriage with the Moabites.[106] This is a departure from material we have previously considered, where the view has been that the events of the first five verses did not consist of marriage, but purely of sexual relations germane to the worship of Baal Peor. Milgrom sees this as a fulfilment of a prediction found in Exodus, 'for they will lust after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and invite you, and you will eat of their sacrifices. And when you take wives from among their daughters for your sons, their daughters will lust after their gods and will cause your sons to lust after their gods' (Ex 34: 15b-16). If Milgrom's view is correct-- that what has happened is intermarriage-- then it is hard to argue that Num 25 is *not* a fulfilment story; that is, it fulfils the predictions of the Ex 32 text. He ends the section by noting that the suggestion that what is in view is cultic prostitution belongs to later tradition[107] without backing away from his own comments.

When discussing the form צמד, a word which also garnered the attention of the other commentators, Milgrom notes that the covenantal form 'strike a covenant' is absent. The term is used twice in Num 25, and in the version of the tradition found in Ps 106, both allowing a sexual interpretation of the joining with Baal-Peor. These are the only uses of the term in the scriptures.[108] The Hosea tradition uses the term 'dedicated'[109], rather than 'attached', though as Hos 9:10 finishes, a sexualised interpretation of the text remains feasible.

Milgrom points out that Baal-Peor had been unknown to the Patriarchs, not rising in importance until the second half of the second millennium. This is used as a way of pointing out that Israel was unprepared for this confrontation.[110] In discussing the fallout of the failure, he draws heavily on tradition to suggest that innocent and guilty leaders were to be put to death.[111] Similarly, Milgrom draws on a wide range of sources in discussing the mode of execution. In regards to the expression ליהוה, Milgrom suggests that the public impalement must have been carried out in the hope that it may terminate the plague.[112] However, as Milgrom

[106] Ibid., 212.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.
[109] NRSV: *consecrated*
[110] Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-midbar] : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, 213.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid.

notes, it seems more likely that Phinehas' actions in the coming verses meant an abortion of any other act of execution, noting that והנה, which commences verse six, suggests a simultaneous action.[113]

The intention of the couple is also of interest to Milgrom. He seems persuaded that this is most likely a marriage arrangement, with the man bringing his wife to meet his family. Though, typical of this commentary, Milgrom explores other options, including the possibility that this could well be an act of cultic prostitution, perhaps even suggested by the woman for the sake of bringing the plague to an end. Whichever interpretation is chosen, what is evident is that the actions are perceived as an escalation in Israel's sin, and each ends with an inevitable conclusion: war with Midian.[114]

What follows is a demonstration of Milgrom's commitment to being unapologetic.[115] Milgrom states that there could hardly be a more heinous crime than the deliberate murder of a princess by a high ranking official of another nation.[116] The language used is important. What was apparently a cultic matter is moved by Milgrom to a legal concern. Phinehas' actions are legitimised in the text as being a Priestly act, making atonement for the people by force. Milgrom's comments seem to resist this idea. Phinehas is no hero, but a murderer.

In his reading of the following verses, Milgrom notes a series of incidents that he interprets as a critique of Moses. He reads with tradition, citing the Talmud and Josephus in considering Moses' complete lack of response in the face of the arrival of the couple in the midst of the assembled people.[117] He considers the penitential weeping at the tent as a subtle condemnation of Moses' leadership, and finally, when someone else, namely Phinehas, intervenes, Moses' passivity is contrasted with the zealous action of the assassin.[118] Milgrom demonstrates in these observations a willingness to stand against a traditional view of Moses which often uncritically elevates him as the great hero of Israelite history. This is

[113] Ibid., 214.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid., xiii.
[116] Ibid., 214.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.

not to say that he isn't that, but is a more balanced view of Moses' actions within the text.

Milgrom assumes the tent that the couple enter, to be a marriage canopy. He rejects the view that the canopy is a place for divination.[119] In his view, their great crime is the flaunting of their marriage in the face of Moses and the assembly.[120] Milgrom notes the play on קבה, meaning both 'tent' and 'belly', but also considers other options for the point of Phinehas' penetration. In the end, he opts for 'through the genitals',[121] on the basis of his euphemistic reading of Hos 9:10.

Milgrom then discovers the rabbinic reception of Phinehas, noting that they were uneasy. He cites Epstein who questions if Phinehas was motivated by selfish motives. After all, he had just committed murder.[122] He then suggests that the uneasiness may already be present in the bible, noting the absence of Phinehas' קנא in the Ps 106 recollection.[123] However, this reading relies on dating the Psalm after Num 25, which is not the consensus.

Milgrom commences a new section at verse 10, which is the traditional division between *parashat Balak* and *parashat Pinchas*. Introductory remarks to the section point out that the covenant made with Phinehas matches the one made with David. Together, they control the civil and spiritual lives of their people.[124] Again, Milgrom refers to the murder of the Midianite Princess, citing it as a reason for Midian's ongoing enmity with Israel which will come to a head by the end of the chapter.[125]

In discussing the zeal, or as the NJPS translates קנא, 'passion', Milgrom notes that in Arabic and Syriac, this means 'become intensely red', giving a visual element

[119] For an alternate view, see Reif, "What Enraged Phinehas : A Study of Numbers 25:8."
[120] Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-midbar] : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, 215.
[121] Ibid.
[122] B.H. Epstein, *Pentateuch and Five Megillot: Torah Temimah*, 5 vols. (Tel Aviv: Am Olam, 1955-56). Cited in Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-midbar] : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, 215.
[123] Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-midbar] : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, 215.
[124] Ibid., 216.
[125] Ibid.

to the anger of god already mentioned in the text.[126] That anger had threatened to utterly wipe out Israel, as god's anger is destructive, making no moral distinctions.[127] Instead, the destruction makes way for a pact of friendship, the announcement of which served, as tradition goes, to protect Phinehas from retribution from Zimri's clan.[128]

This friendship pact mentions priesthood, often assumed to mean the lineage of the High Priesthood, though that is not specifically mentioned. Milgrom rejects it, deciding instead that the pact refers to an authority to function as a priest in the sanctuary, rather than the office of High Priest. In this way, the line of Abiathar is banished from the Temple precinct, reflecting the victory of Phinehas' descendant, Zadok.[129]

Interestingly, at the moment of the revelation of the couples' names, Milgrom does not use them. Indeed, Cozbi's name is not found at all in his comments. He notes that they were both of high rank, constituting an implicit praise for Phinehas (following Ramban), but he skips over the meanings of their names and naming. This indifference to the couples' names is surprising, given the well established view that names are important interpretive devices, and the theologically loaded meanings of the names involved in this instance.

Moving quickly to the end of the chapter, Milgrom explains the conflation of Moabite and Midianite women as reflective of a period of confederation between the two peoples.[130] He notes that the repetition of 'because of the affair' suggests past and future hostility, and so blames the ensuing war on the machinations of the Midianites.[131]

This ends Milgrom's textual analysis of Num 25. But his commentaries feature a series of Excurses in which he explores issues that have arisen throughout the text. It is in the excurses that Milgrom's brilliance is most evident, including *Excursus 61: The Apostasy of Baal-Peor*.

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[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid., 217.
[130] Ibid., 218.
[131] Ibid.

Milgrom differs from other commentators in that he sees no division at the conclusion of verse 5. Indeed, he says 'the grounds for maintaining this chapter as a conflation of sources are patently insufficient', showing none of the inconsistencies or 'bulges' one would normally look for when formulating such positions.[132] Instead, Milgrom reads the chapter as a unity. The problem that poses for him is the inconsistency that other commentators see in the opening five verses. Clearly, Moses does alter the divine decree. However, as he points out, before god's or Moses' command is undertaken, Phinehas intervenes, perhaps suggesting that the extent of the plague was so overwhelming, that mourning at the tent of meeting was the only action of which they were presently capable![133]

Milgrom then turns his attention to Phinehas and his actions. What is noticeable is a shift in Milgrom's attitude to Phinehas. While previously he had seemed to be quite adamant in his language about Phinehas' actions, here he looks to defend Phinehas. Phinehas had not acted on his own impulse, but was following god's command. His actions amount to an attempt to fulfil the command to impale the leaders, confirmed by the establishment of the lineage of the murdered couple after the event.[134] The use of כפר underlines the fact. *Kipper* averts the retribution, ensuring no more victims are required.[135] Milgrom goes on; 'had they (or other leaders; v. 4a) been slain earlier, many of those who died in the plague could have been saved.'[136] However, Milgrom does not appear to change his mind on Moses. The expression 'in his becoming impassioned with my passion,' (Num 25:11) used of Phinehas, stands as a tacit rebuke of Moses.[137]

Finally, Milgrom turns to the nature or purpose of the Baal-Peor cult. He makes a strange move at this point. He sees the sexual act within the tent by the 'named couple' as an integral part of the cult of Baal-Peor, not one for the purpose of sexual gratification.[138] Given his earlier claim that this was most likely a marriage arrangement, it is hard to understand where this shift originates. This is

[132] Ibid., 476.
[133] Ibid., 477.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid., 478.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid., 479.

particularly telling because he goes on to dismiss the notion that this was a fertility cult, requiring sexual union for the impregnation of the earth with rain seed. No evidence exists for the sacred prostitution imagined by such a theory.[139] Instead, following the reading of Ps 106, he suggests this could be a funerary cult, and so engagement in the rites by Israel may have represented an attempt to terminate the plague which afflicted them.[140] However, as he points out, Baal is a fertility god, not a god of plague, and it also assumes that the plague breaks out and drives the people to Baal-Peor, which is not supported by the text.[141]

Milgrom finishes with a summary:

> During their stay at the plains of Moab, many Israelites – including a chieftain – were seduced by Moabite and Midianite women into engaging in sacrificial feats of the god Baal-peor and into intermarrying with them. Precisely because this was the first such Israelite encounter with the culture of Canaan and because the devastating plague was attributed to divine wrath, Baal-peor came to be etched in the collective memory as a nadir in Israel's history.[142]

His summary draws many of his discussions together, while leaving some matters unresolved, most notably, the person of Phinehas. Perhaps we might conclude by affirming his stated intention; Milgrom has displayed keen critical awareness and been unapologetic in his approach, all the while writing an authentically Jewish commentary.

Baruch Levine

Baruch Levine's Numbers commentary comes in two volumes, the first volume,[143] released only three years after Milgrom's work covering the opening twenty chapters of Numbers, and the second volume,[144] a 2000 release, dealing with the remaining material. The commentary is a part of the Anchor Bible series, defined as an international and inter-faith project. Levine, like Milgrom, is a Jewish scholar. In fact, he is an ordained Rabbi.[145] However, their respective

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[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid., 480.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993).
[144] Levine, *Numbers 21-36 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*.
[145] It is worth noting that Levine is the author of the JPS Torah Leviticus commentary, a companion to Milgrom's Numbers commentary. As we already noted, Milgrom is the author of the Anchor Bible Leviticus commentary. Tellingly, in a brief discussion of the modern

commentaries differ in significant respects. Most prominent amongst these is Levine's insistence on the division of JE and P, which we saw was far less defined in Milgrom's work. So strong is Levine's conviction about the two sources, he treats each independently, at length, in his introduction. His division of Num 25 takes the turn we might expect, attributing vss. 1-5 to JE and 6-18 to P, though we shall come to that shortly.

In discussing the material comprising JE, Levine notes that the events at Baal Peor constitute the beginning of a chronic pattern in biblical historiography:[146] backsliding due to the lure of paganism. As he writes: 'Israel often forgot its debt and promise to God and lapsed into the very kind of behaviour that brought defeat and suffering upon the people in the past.'[147] This is the story of the book of Judges and the long succession of failed Kings. The call to restored relationship with God is declared through the voice of the prophets. This is Israel's story. Levine's summary of the P material also sees paganism at the centre in the actions of the 'leading offenders',[148] set against the zeal of Phinehas. Against the view of Milgrom, Levine is convinced that the reward for Phinehas is the office of the High Priesthood, which traces back to Aaron, stands at the third generation.[149] With Milgrom, he sees the text as introducing the Midianites as enemies to be attacked and destroyed.[150] Levine also notes that there is no mention of Midianites in the JE tradition, the Priestly re-telling introducing them, and ultimately, commanding war against them.[151]

Turning to the commentary on the text,[152] we again see Levine's commitment to the sources, as he deals with the JE section separately from the P section.

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interpretation of Numbers, Levine makes no mention of Milgrom's commentary, speaking of Gray's commentary as the most instructive work to have appeared. He mentions that Gray was 'fully liberated from theological restraints', a veiled criticism of the largely evangelical commentaries that had appeared in the ninety years since, and perhaps even including Milgrom's JPS edition. See Levine, *Numbers 1-20 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 88.

[146] The terminology is indicative of Levine's positioning. This may be a story about history, but it is not history.

[147] Levine, *Numbers 1-20 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 63.

[148] Ibid., 69.

[149] Ibid., 78.

[150] Ibid.

[151] Ibid., 94.

[152] Levine's commentary has strong links to Milgrom's in terms of its layout. A comprehensive textual engagement is followed by a series of 'Comments' (similar to Milgrom's 'Excurses') germane to the text just dealt with.

Dividing the text is in itself not unique, as we have seen. However, the difference between Levine's choice and that of Milgrom is again instructive. Milgrom's division comes at vs. 10, the traditional division for Torah reading, and so reflects the Jewish nature of his work.

Levine establishes that the text of Num 25 is a continuation from Num 22:1, the Balaam tradition being inserted between them and being of entirely different sources.[153] The use of the verb ישב suggests an extended stay, which Levine suggests is evident from Num 21:28, after the defeat of the Amorites. The picture then is not one of encampment, which implies temporary residence, but rather, settlement. Levine concludes that the story reflects a tradition of the Transjordanian Israelite community[154] which also seeks to make sense of Hosea's appropriation of the tradition.

Levine makes an interesting observation around the important word זנה, pointing out that when used to discuss actual sexual activity, the verb form typically lacks an object.[155] When used metaphorically, the syntax differs from the present construction, using the form אחרי, 'to whore after'. However, Levine points out that the same form, זנה אל is found in Ezekiel, metaphorically describing the improper relations of Judah with Egypt and Assyria. Perhaps then, what is in view is not actual harlotry, but rather a betrayal which is signified in this figurative way.[156] The effect of this is to absolve the Moabite women of any blame. As Levine points out, there is no evidence here that they tried to seduce the Israelite men. The language used is derisive, but not accusatory. Instead, the slide into paganism is the fault of the men who chose to inter-marry with them, confirming the fear expressed in Ex 34. The participation in the rites of Baal Peor is as predicted; a result of their marriage with the women, rather than a cunningly devised plan.

The word צמד is explored at some length. Levine calls it the 'key word' in characterising the apostasy of Baal Peor, noting its presence in Ps 106:28.[157] Typically, apostasy is characterised as serving other gods, or bowing down before

[153] Levine, *Numbers 21-36 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 282.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid., 283.
[157] Ibid.

them, yet צמד is entirely different, meaning 'to bind, hitch'.[158] Interestingly, he notes that the word is used in magical incantations, suggesting that the sense may be that they become in some sense, addicted to the worship of Baal Peor, such that they could not free themselves of it.[159]

In discussing the commands which finish this section, Levine harmonises the two accounts. He thinks the first should be read loosely; that it is unlikely that the entirety of Israel's leadership could be put to death. Rather, all those involved in pagan worship were subject to execution.[160] The formula ליהוה suggests sacrifice, in this case, the sacrificial offering of impaled leaders for the sake of assuaging divine wrath. Given Levine's view on the division of the sources, this series of executions stands as the last act in JE's account.

At this point Levine begins his discussion of the Priestly version. He makes no mention of the הנה particle which opens the section, instead he focuses on the change in vocabulary used to describe 'the people'.[161] Of course, such shifts are significant indicators, and as he points out, כל עדת בני ישראל ('the entire congregation of the sons of Israel')is a 'distinctly priestly locution.'[162] However, the הנה as a marker of transition is completely ignored, perhaps for the very reason that its presence suggests continuity rather than division.

The fact that 'the Midianite woman' now appears in the text is evidence for Levine of priestly enmeshing.[163] Midianites had been absent to this point. That one appears now, and is identified with use of the definite article, makes her appearance very pointed, to say the least. Further evidence of the priestly expansion is seen in the plague of vs. 9, also unmentioned in JE.

Levine questions what the nature of the Israelite man's offence must have been to warrant such a response. It seems that it is the proximity to the gathered assembly that makes the act so reprehensible.[164] Following Gray, he suggests that it may be

[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid., 284.
[160] Ibid., 285.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid., 286.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid.

the presentation of a wife to his kinsmen. However, he notes that הקריב often describes the offering of a sacrifice.[165] This cultic element leads him to conclude that what is in view is yet another act of pagan worship, which he thinks is justified in the continuation of the narrative.[166]

Levine reconstructs the following verses quite differently to the other commentators that we have considered. He does not conclude that Phinehas storms the couple's tent. Rather, he considers the verb בא to be directional. The stabbing then, takes place in front of, or in the proximity of the tent in question.[167] He follows Reif's understanding[168] of the term קבתה, translating it as '*qubbah*-tent', so that the stabbing happens 'at her *qubbah*-tent',[169] rather than 'in her belly'. The offending act then is not a sexual act, but rather an act of sacrifice or celebration.[170] There are numerous problems with this theory. The *qubbah* is explicitly described as belonging to 'her'. Levine suggests that given her lofty social position, the daughter of a prince, perhaps a would-be King, her family may have had its own tent.[171] However, this doesn't explain why the tent is so closely associated with the gathered Israelite people in their own sacral precincts. Surely, if what is in view is an act of lament caused by engagement with foreign women, there would have been an attempt to distance themselves from such problems. Secondly, why would the man bring the woman to meet his kinsfolk at 'her' tent? Thirdly, Levine argues that the notion that they were stabbed through her belly or womb reflects an idea that harlotry or prostitution was at the heart of the offence, an idea he rejects.[172] What Levine fails to consider is that this could be an act of celebration – the celebration and consummation of a marriage, which would also harmonise with his view of the JE tradition. What Phinehas may be reacting against is the taking of a foreign wife, the act which seems to lead on to apostasy.

[165] Ibid.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Ibid., 287.
[168] Reif, "What Enraged Phinehas : A Study of Numbers 25:8."
[169] Levine, *Numbers 21-36 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 281.
[170] Ibid., 288.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Ibid., 287.

Levine describes vss. 10-15 as an aetiology, announcing the Aaronide mandate over the chief priesthood.[173] This is achieved through Phinehas' display of zeal, which Levine notes is coupled with love in Song of Songs.[174] God's zeal though, is a dangerous force, with the potential to destroy the nations (Zech 1:14-15), as well as Israel (Ex 32:10). Phinehas' actions are all the more timely! The announcement takes a slightly different turn in Levine's translation, the crucial terminology of which he translates 'my covenant of fellowship'[175] This is based primarily on the assertion that עולם modifies both subjects, covenant and priesthood, the latter form, כהנה also possible referring to the 'fellowship of priests'.[176] This translation avoids the difficulty of associating a covenant of peace with such a violent action, particularly as the following verse interprets Phinehas' action as human sacrifice; one which tuns back the wrath of God. Phinehas' actions therefore, are the actions of a priest making expiation for the people.

Levine playfully suggests that the revelation of the offending couple's names reveals a priestly concern for detail.[177] He reads the family lines a little differently by comparison to the other interpreters. Levine maintains that it is Zimri who is the chieftain, not his father, on the basis that the formula, X. son of Y. is bound, so that what follows pertains to the first name only.[178] This view is not found amongst the other commentaries, who view Zimri as the son of the chief, the prince to Cozbi's princess. Levine exposes the symbolic meaning of Cozbi's name as 'deceitful', but points out her position as the daughter of the 'head' of the house.[179] He emphasises that it would be wrong to assume that the priestly writers were simply projecting Israelite social structures on Midian. Rather, comparable units and terminology were most likely common to her neighbours.[180]

Levine finishes his textual comments with the assertion that Num 25 attempts to establish Midianite culpability for the ensuing war. צרר implies military

[173] Ibid., 288.
[174] Ibid., 289.
[175] Ibid., 281.
[176] Ibid., 290.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid.

aggression, but it is in response to the deception of the Midianites, who are referred to as צררים, 'aggressors'.[181] Here, the priestly writers conflate Midianite and Moabite women, condemning them for their seduction of the Israelite men, concluding their revision of the JE tradition.[182]

The first of Levine's 'Comments' on Numbers 25 seeks to establish the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the JE account. According to his thinking, and this has been mentioned already, the Hosean reference to Baal Peor provides a significant clue to the provenance of the tradition. Couple with the report in Deuteronomy 2:14, and the sense that the JE material seems to end the wilderness material at Num 21:12, Levine reads the material that follows as the story of the new generation.[183] Consequently, he reads the content of Num 25:1-5 as belonging to the same circles that produced Hosea 9 and Deuteronomy: that is, Northern Kingdom writers retrojecting Israelite failure into the wilderness period as a model for what was happening to them.[184]

His second comment is titled 'The Real Sin of Baal Peor', and takes up his earlier argument that what is in view in vss. 1-5 is not sexual harlotry, but rather, inter-marriage or other attachment to the Moabite women.[185] He reads this as instructive for establishing the source of the text also. Just as passages in Kings criticise Solomon for his foreign wives, a similar theme is evident here.[186]

Levine then goes on to suggest that the interpretation of זנה has been overly sexualised by earlier interpreters. The Niphal, נצמד has also been over-read as he sees it. In neither the JE nor the priestly version of the story is their indication that the rites of worship involved sexual activity.[187] Like Milgrom, he asserts that the evidence for sacred prostitution, often linked with this episode, is almost entirely absent in the West Semitic sphere in biblical times.[188] This is borne out by a review of the other inner-biblical references to the scene, which give no

[181] Ibid., 291.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid., 292.
[184] Ibid., 293.
[185] Ibid., 294.
[186] Ibid., 295. So also, the cycle of stories concerning Phoenecian Princess, Jezebel.
[187] Ibid., 296. This too builds on his de-sexualisation of the scene at the tent.
[188] Ibid.

indication of orgiastic rites. It also helps to explain why the virgins were spared during the war on Midian. They were not guilty of any crime.[189]

Levine closes this comment with an observation that Jewish and Christian interpretation has been loaded with sexual implication. We have certainly witnessed this in our own survey. His lengthy examination of the issue is a way of counter-balancing the argument, though, he notes, modern scholarship still favours the sexual interpretation.[190]

Levine's third comment examines the selectivity within the Aaronide Priesthood. He notes that this is a theme which runs through Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers.[191] Num 25 represents a crucial moment in the theme's development. As Eleazer is the favoured son of Aaron (Num 3:32), and becomes his successor (Num 20:22-29), so too Phinehas emerges as his father's successor.[192] Levine notes how the Zadokite line, by no means Levitical, is grafted to the Aaronide line through the book of Ezra. He cites Ezekiel 44, an exilic or post-exilic source as having no knowledge of an Aaronide priesthood.[193] Instead, this is a later idea, belonging to the priestly writers who appropriate the ancient Baal Peor tradition as a vehicle for their own ideological benefit.

Finally, Levine turns his attention to the cruel reality that this text appears to regard human sacrifice as efficacious for assuaging divine wrath. Clearly, the opening five verses are understood as failure on the part of Israel, a violation punishable by death.[194] The death of the offenders commanded by Moses appears to be judicial, a punishment in line with Israel's covenant responsibilities,[195] notwithstanding the problem of the expression 'for YHWH'. The same cannot be said for the action of Phinehas though, the result of which is said to stay the plague and achieve atonement, and warrants divine praise. Other laws can be found within the Torah which legislate the execution of citizens found worshipping foreign Gods. Deuteronomy 13 and 17 contain such laws, with

[189] Ibid., 297.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Ibid., 298.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid., 299.
[194] Ibid., 302.
[195] Ibid.

offenders to be stoned to death. As Levine suggests, these laws seem to suggest that when it comes to matters of cultic purity, it is possible for a person to take matters into their own hands,[196] though one must wonder about the historical veracity of this ever taking place. In regards to the intention of the text, Levine surmises that the story presents a unique challenge: their religion was unique, and so they dare not tolerate the worship of other gods.[197]

In sum, Levine makes significant departures from what might be considered an orthodox reading of the text. His willingness to explore alternative interpretive options opens up the text to very different worlds of understanding, though at times his ideas seem speculative, or even naively hopeful.

What then, has this history of commentary writing given us as readers? What answers have been given? Certainly, the critical work of figures like Astruc opened the texts of the Pentateuch open, and the courage of the early critical scholars who literally risked their life for their willingness to ask difficult questions and give difficult answers has enabled scholarship to move forward in a way that Calvin and his predecessors could have scarcely imagined. But rather than finding answers, or perhaps better, consensus, what has emerged is a diversity of theories. Astruc's theories were developed and widened in scope; so too Wellhausen, and so on, and so on. The turn to history saw a chase of the author(s), who prove to be elusive.

But not all bible readers are concerned with a quest for the author. The final section of this history of interpretation turns to such readings.

[196] Ibid., 303.
[197] Ibid.

Chapter II.3

The history of interpretation thus far has considered what may be considered traditional scholarly work; the historiographical reconstructions of the Hellenic Greeks and the Samaritan Chronicle, the homilies of Origen, the halakhic commentary of the Talmud, rabbinical commentary and the rise of the so called 'historical' critic. The following chapter examines works that depart from what we might consider to be 'traditional'. It is made up of two sections, the first considering creative approaches to the text, and the second considering a violent appropriation of the text.

A. A Creative Turn

Ellen Frankel

Frankel's book bears a striking title, *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah*, one which hints at its major concern. Inside the book, before the Contents page is a poem by Merle Feld entitled *We All Stood Together*. The poem is the story of an unnamed woman who stood next to her brother at Sinai. He had a journal, and kept a record of his experience there. But she, as always was holding a baby; hers, or a friends, and so wasn't able to write down her own experience. Across time the data slips away, leaving nothing but a feeling.

> *But feelings are just sounds*
> *the vowel barking of a mute*

Frankel opens her Acknowledgments by announcing her intention: 'to point toward the many named and unnamed women (and men) whose teachings and experiences have not yet been joined to our collective legacy as a people.'[1] Clearly, her book is written with a Jewish audience in mind, as the list of people acknowledged well attests! Her purpose it seems is to rehabilitate the verses of the unnamed woman at Sinai, and many of those like her.

Frankel's book is intensely creative. It takes the form of a conversation between eighteen imagined partners. Biblical characters, such as Dinah and Leah are re-imagined and they have voices. Miriam is present, and so too groups called 'The

[1] Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam : A Woman's Commentary on the Torah* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1996), ix.

Rabbis' and 'Our Daughters'. The book is structured around the *parashot*, each one discussed amongst various members of the 'cast'. The conversational nature of the work, complete with interjection and argument, is in some way reminiscent of the Talmud, and one wonders if this is the model adopted.

Num 25 is a part of two *parashot, Balak* and *Pinkhas*, the division being at verse 10. In dealing with the opening ten verses, the daughters ask how the Torah can justify such fanaticism, to which Dinah adds that the Jewish people have learnt to be wary of those who act in the name of God. And yet here, in the Torah, the grandson of Aaron 'impulsively murders' a couple in a fit of rage, spearing them through the belly.[2]

The Rabbis enter the conversation, explaining that they don't condone Phinehas' actions, nor teach people to act in such a fashion. However, there is little room to move, on account of the reward of God for the display of zeal. A key point is made: 'Because we are committed to revering every jot and tittle of the Torah as the word of God, we can only redeem such a text by reinterpreting it or neutralizing it.'[3] The last word comes from Miriam, who retorts, 'We could also show our reverence for the Torah by attributing the Torah's excesses and inequities to human fallibility. In this way, we redeem God.'[4]

The briefness of the material is symptomatic of the immense scope of such a project. We see that the opening five verses, involving Moabite women, are ignored in favour of the scene involving Phinehas, which is understandable in any case. It is interesting that the conversation revolves around Phinehas' actions, and not the couple with him at the centre of the scene. The rabbi's response seems to echo the poem; the men working with reference to what is written down, the female characters engaged in a different sort of paradigm.

The conversation about *parashat Pinkhas* begins with two questions from the daughters: Why is the *pagan* woman identified? and 'Who is Cozbi and why are we given her lineage?[5] The responses begin by establishing the importance of the

[2] Ibid., 233.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 234.

people involved, but also that the murder of the princess results in the outbreak of war.[6] Unsatisfied, the daughters again speak, asking why she is named while so many other women remain nameless. The Rabbis enter, and point out the symbolic meaning of the name; 'to deceive or lie', and relate a tradition that has her ask her father to 'devour' the people for her.[7] They point out that her Arabic name was *Shevilanai*, meaning 'womb opening', or euphemistically, whore. A character called Lilith refers to this as 'vulgar misogynist fantasies', though Leah contributes the Akkadian meaning of Cozbi's name; 'voluptuous' or 'well developed'. A group called 'The Mothers' end the discussion: 'Sometimes it's better to remain nameless in the Bible.'[8]

Philip Davies

Yours Faithfully is a collection of 'virtual letters' inspired by a variety of texts across the canon of the scriptures. Davies admits that some in the collection are not always faithful to historical reality, or even plausibility, while others are based on implied views of the supposed writers.[9] He discusses difficulties in defining the function of letters, being such a diverse *genre*, drawing upon images of 'letter' within the scriptures to illustrate his point. He concludes: 'Letters in the ancient world, including the bible, may be real or imaginary; they may communicate between the living, dead or divine, represent verbatim outpourings or artificially constructed and edited works of literary art.'[10]

Letter 10 is a letter from Salu, the father of Zimri, to Zur, the father of Cozbi, 'written' in response to the tragedy that had come upon their respective families. It is impossible for us to guess at the 'implied views' of these two men, given that they are not visible in the text of Num 25 at all. They are simply noted as the fathers of the couple at the centre of the events that transpire near the tent of meeting. Davies, in distinction to Levine, acknowledges that Salu is indeed the head of the house, using similar terminology to define Zur's position in the

[6] Ibid., 235.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Philip R. Davies, *Yours Faithfully : Virtual Letters from the Bible*, BibleWorld (London: Equinox, 2004), vii.
[10] Ibid., ix.

salutation of the letter.[11] The opening paragraph speaks of danger, and the loss of hope for his house, and hints at a coming storm for Zur's people.[12]

He then quickly turns to the death of Cozbi, a father's voice heard in the words 'The Light that Cozbi brought us is no more. And Zimri too has been taken from us.'[13] Davies situates the murder in the context of a celebration of the union of these two lost children, a feast at which Zipporah, the wife of Moses was telling tales of the union of Israel and Midian as one flesh.[14] This suggestion makes Phinehas' emergence all the more dramatic, because Phinehas is a relative of Zipporah. The merry crowd doesn't notice his entrance, alerted only by the hideous cry that emanated from the lovers' tent. Phinehas, with the strength of a mad man, had thrust a spear through their embracing bodies, and made off into the night.[15]

Davies makes even more of this scene, having Salu say that this was not a quick death, but rather a slow, protracted, torturous death. Even Zipporah, the Bride of Blood, could not hold back the angel of death.[16] Salu sees this as a personal failure, having broken the trust placed in him by Zur in the presentation of his daughter as a wife. Salu reports that Phinehas had wanted to camp in Moab with the other Israelite men and 'find joy' like many of the others, but had been forbidden by his father.[17]

What follows is an incredible reconstruction. Salu reports that the praise of Phinehas comes from the high priest, an act of loyalty to their god.[18] But the sense is that Salu was not a witness to this proclamation; it is prefaced with the telling 'It is said that…',[19] suggesting rumour, reported news, rather than Salu's own experience. Perhaps we might assume that Salu may have missed the proclamation as he was processing the grief that comes with a parent losing a child, especially in such gruesome circumstances. However, Davies plays with

[11] Ibid., 61.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 62.
[17] Ibid.
[18] This differs from the biblical text in which the commendation of Phinehas is of divine origin.
[19] Davies, *Yours Faithfully : Virtual Letters from the Bible.*

the chronology of the events. At the time of his writing, an 'illness' still besets the Israelites,[20] certainly a reference to the 'plague', even though the divine command to 'Harass the Midianites and defeat them' is already whispered from the sanctuary.[21] Salu warns Zur in no uncertain terms, telling him the high priest plans to kill all the women who have known a man, as well as all the men. Only the virgin women are to be spared from the sword and from burning.[22] Davies has moved to the reporting of Num 31 for this warning, adding an incredible richness to his reconstruction here.

A fascinating aspect of Davies' work is the way he sets the house of Aaron against that of Moses. Zipporah, a Midianite, is a prominent character in the reporting of the letter, and seems close to Salu and his family, presumably because of the presence of Cozbi. She reports an enormous argument between Aaron and Moses about the foreign wives of 'the leader'.[23] This is drawn from Num 12. The tension has simmered, leaving the Aaronides 'spoiling for a fight'.[24] Salu fears what may be around the corner.

The letter ends in a remarkable fashion. Firstly, Salu prays that the 'Lord of Peor' may protect you.[25] Given the ideological thrust of the biblical narrative, this comment glows with irony. Salu then hopes that Phinehas' name may become a byword for shame in Israel.[26] Cleary, Davies' reconstruction does not include the announcement of the covenant of peace.

What Davies' creativity gives us is a sense of the familial tragedy that lies at the centre of the story. It provides a glimpse into the heartache and fear of a bereaved father, anxious for the future of his lost daughter-in-laws' family. While his work is highly speculative, what it does is cut against the 'too simple' ideology of the text as we have received it. With recourse to other cogent texts, it is a brilliant recovery of one of the lost voices of the text, and offers to us an insight of what may have been going on within the camp.

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[20] Ibid., 63.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 62.
[24] Ibid., 63.
[25] Ibid., 64.
[26] Ibid.

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

This book is a joint effort sponsored by the Women of Reform Judaism. It is written jointly by many contributors, gathering together teachings of Jewish women in the present day. While covering the entirety of the Torah, it focuses on women in the text, and on texts particularly relevant to women's lives.[27] The commentary takes a variety of forms: there is a central commentary, written by a noted scholar, which is followed by a short, narrowly focussed essay by a second person, designed either to supplement or challenge the view of the commentarial work. An expert in rabbinic literature discusses a selection of past interpretations, a scholar of contemporary life reflects on what the *parashah* may mean for the Jewish community today, and finally, there is a section of poetry or other creative writing inspired by the reading to close each section. Consequently, this is a large volume which speaks with many voices, gathering together some of the great thinkers of contemporary biblical studies and beyond.

The commentary is structured around the succession of weekly *parashot*, though these are divided into what might be considered logical pericopes. Consequently, within *parashat Balak* is a section headed *Apostasy at Baal Peor*, which takes in the opening nine verses of Num 25.

The commentary begins with a simple summary of the three segments: vss. 1-5; 6-9 and 10-19.[28] It also notes that the Baal Peor tradition is preserved elsewhere within the canon, but points out that only in this instance are foreign women indicted for enticing the Israelite men to sin.[29] This theme places the text within the strand of biblical ideology that prohibits marriage with foreign women, and also makes it clear that the Israelites involved in the apostasy were all men.[30] Fox points out that this position is challenged within the canon, making reference to Ruth[31] who is an important counter-voice here, as she too is a Moabite.

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[27] Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, *The Torah : A Women's Commentary* (New York: Women of Reform Judaism URJ Press, 2008), xxxi.
[28] The summary covers the whole of Num 25, even though the division of the *parashot* at verse nine means that the chapter is dealt with in 2 distinct sections.
[29] Nili Sacher Fox, "Central Commentary: *Parashat Balak*," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism URJ Press, 2008), 952.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid. Fox suggests that Ruth is in some way redeemed in the text by her decision to break with her family and to adopt Israelite culture.

When Phinehas appears in verse 6, Fox makes what is, given the nature of the commentary, an unexpected comment. She says '…the emphasis in this portion of the account is on the brave, redeeming act of Phinehas, the priest who preserves the community's sanctity.'[32] Fox is unwilling, it seems, to condemn the action of the male priest, or even to relativise it; her adjectives are all positive and reflect well on his actions. Given that other commentaries, ones which were not explicitly looking to the interests of women have found space to question Phinehas, it seems odd that this one passes over it without mention. Also, Fox makes no mention of the fact that the couple are stabbed through the belly, and that the MT specifically says 'her' belly.

These points are taken up by Hilary Lipka in her contribution.[33] For Lipka, the fact that they are stabbed in the belly is evidence that the issue which enrages Phinehas is inter-marriage, not idolatry. The command has been to kill only Israelites? Why then is Cozbi put to death as well?[34] In her view, this fits with the reading of Fox which places this text in the strand of tradition that outlaws such marriages, and she also cites Ruth as a counter-voice to this ideological strand.[35]

The *Post-Biblical Commentary* sections recite material already considered in an earlier part of this history,[36] and the *Contemporary Reflection* section deals with the Balaam story, as does the section called *Voices*, so we shall move onto *parashat Pinchas.*

Almost immediately, Eskenazi sets her interpretation against that of Lipka, referring to the previous scene as an incidence of idolatry.[37] However, it is also possible to see a concern for some of the things ignored in the commentary of Fox. Namely, the reward of Phinehas who has acted violently without recourse to

[32] Ibid., 953.
[33] Hilary Lipka, "Another View: *Parashat Balak*," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss (New York: Women of Refom Judaism URJ Press, 2008).
[34] Ibid., 954.
[35] Ibid.
[36] See Chapter II.1
[37] Eskenazi, "Central Commentary: *Parashat Pinchas*," 963. This difference is acknowledged, and the reader is referred back to the earlier essay. Clearly, differing voices are welcome within this volume, which is a strength, not a weakness.

due process, and the disproportionate amount of blame heaped upon women for the people's downfall.[38]

Eskenazi makes note of the varying traditions regarding foreign women in the canon, noting the instances of the times that foreign women have ensured Israelite survival (the daughter of the Pharaoh, Zipporah and Rahab, amongst others), but also the instances where Israelites are warned against them, particularly the verses from Ex 34 we have already considered. Interestingly, she notes that the danger is most acute in times of transition; when boundaries, social, political and otherwise – are not clearly established.[39]

She notes the etymology of Cozbi's name from the verb כזב, and that she comes from a prominent family. That her name appears twice, and Zimri's just once, and that the affair is named after her, it is clear that she is blamed as the 'dominant symbol of this sinful event.'[40] Eskenazi makes an interesting observation around the use of the term 'their sister'. The same phrase is used of Miriam in the following census. Juxtaposing them, Eskenazi sees Cozbi, the foreign sister being interpreted as the source of death, while Miriam, the Israelite sister, becomes the mother of life.

Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, who passed away before this book was published, looks at Phinehas' actions in a different way in her response to Eskanazi.[41] By focussing on the word 'jealousy', she reads Phinehas' actions as an act of righteous indignation. Phinehas acts with violence to hold back violence, and his action is effective.[42] Nonetheless, she believes that the *parashah* is pointing to a new world, a world where violence against humanity is replaced by the sacrificial system, hence the covenant of peace.[43] She notes that in time, the rabbis became uncomfortable with zealotry, modelled as it was on Phinehas' actions, and so came to frame this sort of individualistic, violent response as a thing of the past – an action never to be repeated.[44]

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 964.
[40] Ibid., 965.
[41] Frymer-Kensky, "Another View: *Parashat Pinchas*."
[42] Ibid., 982.
[43] She is adamant that שלום here is peace, not 'friendship'.
[44] Frymer-Kensky, "Another View: *Parashat Pinchas*," 982.

B. A Violent Turn

The Bible, of all books, is the most dangerous one, the one that has been endowed with the power to kill.[45]

Literalism is therefore no homage to the Bible but a betrayal of the text itself. The first and greatest illusion of literalism is that it is being faithful to the text.[46]

These two quotes serve as an introduction to the final portion of this history of interpretation. This portion takes seriously the notion that interpretation does not only take place in books and journals, nor only in churches or synagogues. Scriptures are not the possession of only the academy, the church, the synagogue or the mosque. Nor are scriptures only read by mild-mannered folk, trying to make the world a better place by the practice of their religion. Indeed, as Mieke Bal reminds us, the bible, or we might more broadly say, scripture, has been appropriated for all manner of violent activity. More than ten years have passed since the tragic events unfolded on the day now known as 9/11, the day in which religious violence, or scripturally motivated violence sprung into the world's consciousness. But the Islamic terrorists that piloted those planes into New York's twin towers did not invent religious violence. Certainly, violence is certainly older than religion. But at the deepest levels of the religious imagination, a strain of violence is to be found.[47]

The scriptures are punctuated by violence. The Bible's first family has a brother who killed a brother. A few chapters later, God destroys the earth he created; animals and plants consumed by teeming waves of water. Jealous older brothers leave their younger, more favoured brother for dead. The Angel of the Lord flies across Egypt, murdering the first-born of every family not marked by a violent sign; the blood of an innocent animal smeared across a door protecting a family from infanticide. An army of unsuspecting, 'orders following' soldiers are drowned as they follow their King's orders. Whole nations are wiped out as Israel follow a chilling divine mandate: Show them no mercy. These examples are

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[45] Mieke Bal, *Anti-Covenant : Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, Bible and Literature Series (Decatur: Almond Press, 1989), 14.
[46] Stephen A. Geller, "The Prophetic Roots of Religious Violence in Western Religion," in *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage*, ed. David A. Bernat and Jonathan Klawans, *Recent Research in Biblical Studies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 55.
[47] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 3rd edn, 2003), p 6, cited in David A. Bernat and Jonathan Klawans, eds., *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage*, Recent Research in Biblical Studies (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 1.

purely representative and are drawn from a small part of the scriptures. It seems that virtually no part of the scriptures are too far removed from violence: the prophetic corpus is replete fantasies of violence; the psalms both describe God's mighty acts of violence and pleads for them again; Jesus often has words of violence on his tongue, as do the epistle, and Revelation ends the bible with a fantasy of violent fulfilment. Violence is to be found at virtually every other turn.

Speaking of the Old Testament narrative, it is widely held now that the events described are not historically reliable accounts, but rather, as ideological constructions from a much later time.[48] As Collins suggests, the modern view of Israel and her relationships with her surrounding neighbours is more compatible with modern sensibilities than was once imagined.[49] Nonetheless, a moral issue remains. Perhaps these violent acts are purely fantasy – almost certainly that is the case. Perhaps the divine commands to genocide only exist in the realm of ideological imagination – we would hope so. But that does not change the fact that these violent fantasies and dangerous ideological imaginings are now part of the scriptural account. As James Barr so brilliantly sums up the situation: 'the problem is not whether the narratives are fact or fiction, the problem is that, whether fact or fiction, the ritual destruction is commended.'[50]

It is this word, *commended*, which concerns us, because in Num 25, Phinehas is commended for his act of violence. It seems Davies is uncomfortable with the idea that the commendation is of divine origin, placing the commendation in the mouth of a more likely source, Phinehas' own father.[51] It is easy to understand his reticence! But the text of Numbers is clear: Moses' oracle gives divine legitimation to Phinehas' act of violence. It is almost certainly this legitimation that has led to Phinehas becoming a role model for other acts of zealotry.

The two quotes from the opening of this section highlight an important fact. Scriptures are not only read: they are performed, enacted, they shape behaviour. As Geller says elsewhere in his paper, '…the warlike language of the bible, even if it is metaphorical, creates the danger of arousing in minds ignorant of the true

[48] John J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 1 (2003), 10.
[49] Ibid.
[50] James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 209.
[51] See the previous which deals with Davies' work.

poetic and literary nature of the motifs actual emotions of intolerance and deeds of violence.'[52] Geller is speaking of prophetic imagery of violence, but his observation is equally true of narrative portions such as Num 25.

Phinehas' name appears in 1 Maccabees, cited as the source of inspiration for Mattathias, a leading figure in the first century revolt against the tyrannical rule of Antiochus Epiphanes.

> When he had finished speaking these words, a Jew came forward in sight of all to offer sacrifice on the altar in Modein, according to the King's command. When Mattathias saw it, he burned with zeal and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and killed him on the altar. At the same time he killed the king's officer who was forcing them to sacrifice, and he tore down the altar. Thus, he burned with zeal for the law, just as did Phinehas, son of Salu. Then Mattathias cried out in the town with a loud voice, saying: "Let every one who is zealous for the law and supports the law come out with me!" (1 Macc 2:23-27)

The similarities with the text of Num 25 are striking. A Jewish person engages in cultic practices involving other gods. Secondly, the use of the word 'zeal' reminds us of the divine commendation of Phinehas. Indeed, zeal is even more prominent in this text than in Numbers. Thirdly, the execution has a cultic influence, noting the fact that the Jew was killed 'on the altar'. This resonates with the description of Phinehas' actions as 'making atonement'. However, Collins points out that it is not congruous to make a direct comparison. After all, Phinehas acted instinctively and was the aggressor; Mattathias was a victim of extraordinary persecution and so could be considered to be acting in self defence.[53] The point is not to argue the legitimacy of using direct violence as a form of self defence, but rather to note that the 'zeal' of Phinehas, which manifested itself as violence, was the inspiration for subsequent acts of violence.

[52] Geller, "The Prophetic Roots of Religious Violence in Western Religion," 48.
[53] Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence," 12.

The Phinehas Priesthood

More recently, Phinehas' name has reappeared, linked again to acts of zeal: 'As the Kamikaze is to the Japanese; As the Shiite is to Islam; As the Zionist is to the Jew; So the Phinehas Priest is to Christendom.'[54]

The Phinehas Priesthood is a vigilante group inspired by the actions of Phinehas. According to Beal, it is a privileged title in the white Christian supremacist movement,[55] the militant 'priests' carrying out acts of violence against people who they deem to be acting against god's law. Almost inevitably, this results in atrocities against non-whites, non-straight, pro-choice individuals or groups. 'Phinehas Priest' is more than a title; it is a biblical-theological justification for militant violence against social behaviours that are thought to be transgressions from biblical law.[56] However, trying to describe the nature of any organisation, or membership, is impossible due to the discrepancies between the writing of the two most prominent (and evidently, self-appointed) spokesmen, Richard Hoskins and Robert Balaicius.

Hoskins' book, *Vigilantes of Christendom* recounts European history from the view point of the Christian Identity movement, which grows out of a belief that the Nordic or Aryan race are the genuine descendents of the lost tribes of Israel, and so are the rightful inheritors of the covenant with Abraham.[57] Reading history through the lens of Lev 25, Hoskins identifies three groups who have vied for the land that rightfully belongs to the Aryan people; organised religion (specifying specifically, the Catholic Church); the King (rulers or government); and usury bankers (international finance). Across the span of history, these groups have disinherited God's people of their land.[58] However, all this was possible because

[54] Richard K. Hoskins, *Vigilantes of Christendom: The History of the Phineas Priesthood* (Lynchburg: The Virginia Publishing Company, 1990), vii.
[55] Timothy K. Beal, "The White Supremacist Bible and the Phineas Priesthood," in *Sanctified Agression: Legacies of Biblical and Post Biblical Vocabularies of Violence*, ed. Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood, *Bible in the Twenty-First Century* (London: T and T Clark, 2003), 121.
[56] Ibid., 122.
[57] Danny W. Davis, *The Phinehas Priesthood: Violent Vanguard of the Christian Identity Movement*, ed. James J. F. Forest, PSI Guides to Terrorists, Insurgents, and Armed Groups (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 60.
[58] Ibid., 61.

of the people's failure to uphold the law. Punishment, using Lev 26, could include attacks from foreign army, and also disease or illness.[59]

Balaicius, commenting on the events of Num 25 summarises the position:

> The Judges (governors, police) were apparently not doing their job, so God moved in the heart of Phinehas (a Priest) to incite him to act in a way in which he was not "licensed" to act: it was not within Phinehas' official capacity to take another Israelite's life; yet God had given him special permission (though no one else was aware of it) – and thereafter gave him special authority and immunity.[60]

To this point, Hoskins and Balaicius agree. However, what differentiates them is who can be identified as a Phinehas priest. For Hoskins, it is one's actions that determine if one is a priest or not.[61] One's membership is not conferred, but rather, earned by committing 'Phinehas acts', described as any act of violence against non-whites.[62] For Balaicius, the biological link (indicating a literal reading of the 'everlasting covenant') to Phinehas is important. However, Balaicius is aware that establishing such a link is impossible because of the burning of the Temple records in 70CE and the dissemination of the people of Israel and Judah between their defeats in the 8th and 6th centuries BCE. Instead, the true Phinehas priest understands themselves through a different means:

> A true Phinehas will know in his heart/spirit (confirmed by the Holy Spirit) whether he is a Phinehas or not. This may sound like a weak answer; but there is more: a true Phinehas will know without a doubt that he is a Phinehas—and he will act without hesitation or fear: for he will be eaten up and controlled by the zeal and righteousness of YaHWeH—but he will not act callously as a terrorist or in a random, uncontrolled fashion. Finally, and most important to knowing who true Phinehas is: a true Phinehas will not be harmed by anyone—including any "government"—for his actions which are sanctioned by God.[63]

Balaicius' words echo Calvin's warning, though it seems unfair to Calvin to make this comparison too closely. Calvin's words have an air of pastoral grace and restraint about them. One suspects that Calvin could scarcely imagine the

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[59] Ibid.
[60] Robert Balaicius, *The War Between the Children of Light and the Powers of Darkness*, (Mountain City: Sacred Truth Ministries, 1997), 191 in ibid.
[61] Ibid., 62.
[62] Anti-Defamation League, "The Order and Phineas Priesthood," http://www.adl.org/backgrounders/an_phineas.asp. Accessed 2nd June, 2012.
[63] Balaicius, 1997, pp. 178-179, in Davis, *The Phinehas Priesthood: Violent Vanguard of the Christian Identity Movement*, 62.

possibility of such action. Balaicius' words imitate these concerns, but have whispers of hate behind them.

Despite these differences, there is much also which is common. Both Hoskins and Balaicius rely on a reading of Num 25 that places race, not religion, at the centre of the drama. Hoskins' version of the text has elided the details in the text that show concern for religious intermixing.[64] By moving immediately to the Ps 106 version of the story, and noting the expression 'it was reckoned to him as righteousness', Hoskins reads the text as ordaining such acts of racial violence, presenting Phinehas as a model to follow. As Beal points out, the reading is anachronistic, importing modern ideas of 'race'; painting Israel as 'white' and Midian as 'black'.[65]

This is not to suggest that religion is not an issue for the Phinehas priests. For Hoskins, racial identity is religious identity. By tracing his lineage through Northern Europe to the northern Israelite tribes, contemporary white people become the heirs of Adam, created by God. The other races find their genesis with some other god.[66] Amongst the Christian identity movement, Jews are thought to descend from Satan; non-whites are considered 'sub-human' or 'mud people'.[67] Mixing races is mixing gods, sullying the perfection of God's creation.[68]

Such a view means that maintaining God's law is 'white man's burden',[69] and so guarding the holiness of white man, created in the image of his god, also encumbers the Phinehas priesthood with other issues. These have included homo-sexuality and abortion.[70] Beal points out that these issues, in particular the issue of abortion, are not 'add-on agenda items' for such individuals, but form part of the religious obligations of white people.[71]

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[64] Beal, "The White Supremacist Bible and the Phineas Priesthood," 125. Beal provides Hoskins' version of the story.
[65] Ibid., 126.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Anti-Defamation League, "The Order and Phineas Priesthood".
[68] Beal, "The White Supremacist Bible and the Phineas Priesthood," 127.
[69] Ibid.
[70] For examples of such engagement see ibid. and Chapters 4 and 5 of Davis, *The Phinehas Priesthood: Violent Vanguard of the Christian Identity Movement*.
[71] Beal, "The White Supremacist Bible and the Phineas Priesthood," 128.

The Phinehas Priesthood then gives warrant to the quotes of Bal and Geller which head this exploration. The culture of white supremacy which gives birth to the Phinehas priesthood is a textual culture, using the bible as its primary source.[72] The literal reading of scripture has inspired violent acts of bigotry, hidden under a veil (self-)righteousness. With Geller, we affirm that such reading practices are a betrayal of the text. Nonetheless, it is impossible to escape the reality that such interpretive acts continue. The Norwegian terrorist, Anders Behring Breivik, while not claiming to be a Phinehas, described himself as a Christian[73] and certainly regarded his actions to be inspired by righteous zeal. After his brutal attacks in Norway, his facebook page and contributions to Christian Fundamentalist websites revealed his beliefs as a 'cultural christian', by which he understands Christendom as a vehicle for the preservation of European self-identity. In his view, Christian Europe must oppose the ongoing 'Islamisation' and multi-culturalism, revealing himself as both xenophobic and paranoid.[74] He is not alone.

Beal's call to focus on cultural histories of the Bible,[75] rather than more traditional aspects of biblical studies which focus on the history of the text instead of the use of the text across history, is a timely one. Such a move may well set the future direction of the discipline, and enable biblical, or more broadly, scriptural studies, to contribute more widely to public debate around significant social issues.

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This history establishes the groundwork for the third part of the thesis. It is clear that the history of interpretation of Numbers 25 has been marked by a diversity of approach and by a creativity which is almost demanded from the text itself. The

[72] Ibid., 130.
[73] Breivik's 1500 page manifesto, published online before the attack included the following paragraph: "If you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and God then you are a religious Christian. Myself and many more like me do not necessarily have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and God. We do however believe in Christianity as a cultural, social, identity and moral platform. This makes us Christian." Cited in Nicola Menzie, "Just How Christian is Anders Behring Breivik?," http://www.christiantoday.com/article/just.how.christian.is.anders.behring.breivik/28334.htm. Accessed 7th July, 2012.
[74] Matthew Schmalz, "Anders Behring Breivik: Christian Terrorist? Right-wing Extremist? Madman?," http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/on-faith/post/christian-terrorist-madman-how-do-we-understand-anders-behring-breivik/2011/07/25/gIQA7c6XYI_blog.html. Accessed 7th July, 2012.
[75] Beal, "The White Supremacist Bible and the Phineas Priesthood," 131.

history itself is a type of mosaic. At different points in time and in different places, the text has been viewed in a variety of ways. No single view[ing] dominates. Instead, our understanding of the text is enriched through the work of each of the interpreters covered here, and the many others who stand behind their readings.

Section III

[Re]Reading Again

(Or, Reading Left to Right)

Chapter III.1

Narrative Analysis

Introduction

In 1981, literary critic Robert Alter published *The Art of Biblical Narrative*[1] which was influential in biblical studies. The book was a sign that there was a monumental shift occurring, that the focus of biblical studies was changing. Alter's opening chapter gives expression to this, noting the appearance of the groundbreaking journal *Semeia* and the emerging work of Jan Fokkelman and Shimon Bar-Efrat, amongst others.[2] David Jobling[3] goes so far as to call the emergent change a 'paradigm shift' from a historicist perspective,[4] termed diachronic, which had long dominated the field, to a literary, synchronic approach. Peter Miscall claims that Alter's book marks the beginning of a new stage in the work on Hebrew narrative.[5] Alter's reading method moved away from the arguments of source material and historical origin towards an appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of the text, an appreciation of the artistry of the 'final form' of the text, rather than a concern for the textual production. This is not to say that Alter rejected the composite nature of the text. Rather, Alter advocated looking beyond the occasionally disjunctive nature of the text, arguing that the presence of apparent discontinuity, of contesting accounts and the other 'textual problems' were a sign of the redactor's skill and a willingness to present the same material from a variety of perspectives.

Alter's attention to the final form of the text was not a new move in biblical studies. Before the rise of historical criticism and the proposal of the documentary hypothesis, final form readings were the only readings practiced! But the strength of the historical critical enterprise, through its component fields of source criticism, redaction criticism, form criticism and so on had dominated the field for over a century. However, change was beginning to take place. James Muilenburg, a leading form-critic and a respected elder in the biblical studies community had called upon the academy to move its attention away from the

[1] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.
[2] Ibid., 16.
[3] Jobling has served as General Editor of *Semeia*.
[4] See Chapter I.2
[5] Peter Miscall, "Introduction to the Narrative Literature," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 540.

atomistic nature of its endeavours towards readings that held the final text as definitive.[6] Alter's work heeds that call. Alter, firstly a literary critic, produced a work which would not revolutionize the field, but act as a signal that a change was taking place.

Since Alter's work appeared, the analytical method of reading biblical narrative has expanded considerably. Several works appeared in the fashion of his work; that is, outlining a method of narrative analysis. Most notable amongst these are the works of Shimeon Bar-Efrat[7] and more recently, Yairah Amit.[8] Other works appeared which drew on this method though for differing purposes; namely, to reveal the ideological nature of the text,[9] something which did not attract Alter. Indeed, Alter dismissed such a strategy. Nonetheless, narrative analysis of the Old Testament narrative is now employed across a large section of the field, a result in which Alter's work played no small part.[10]

In regards to the method used in the following analysis, I choose to isolate the various components of the narrator's craft.[11] This is in line with the approach taken by the figures surveyed. The narrator's role in fashioning the story is also enormously significant, something which has been taken up by contemporary interpreters. The role and function of the narrator is also a component which is necessarily explored. As would be expected, some of the components demand a greater share of space. This is by no means a suggestion that they are more important or hold greater weight in general, but that in this particular narrative they bear a greater share of attention. Of course, dissecting a text in this fashion is somewhat artificial: the narrative is always greater than the sum of its constituent

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[6] James Muilenburg, "Form Critism and Beyond," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88, no. 1 (1969). This paper's first incarnation was as a Society for Biblical Literature Presidential address.
[7] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*.
[8] Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*.
[9] Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative : Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, The Indiana Literary Biblical Series (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). It should be noted that these authors had quite a famous disagreement on reading outcomes. See, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "Tipping the Balance: Sternberg's Reader and the Rape of Dinah " in *Journal of Biblical Literature* (Society of Biblical Literature, 1991).
[10] These concepts of interpretation are used in feminist studies, Marxist studies, postcolonial studies, queer theory; these are practices most often labelled 'postmodern'.
[11] It is worth noting that poetics or narratology provide these categories, but they are not in-depth reading or interpretive acts in themselves. Rather, they are tools to be used by the interpreter in opening up the text. See Miscall, "Introduction to the Narrative Literature," 541.

parts. However, it is anticipated that an understanding of those parts will lend a greater understanding to their interaction in the completed form as the narrative.

Following Gunn and Fewell's lead, this is not purely a 'poetics' based reading, but also explores the ideology which is promoted by the narrative. In this we recognize that the narrative form, particularly as it is used within the Old Testament is not just an aesthetic object, but a conduit of ideology.[12] Ideology is as much a part of the text as any of the other components which are essentially put to its service. This examination takes place most thoroughly in the discussion of spatiality, and plot, though is certainly not confined to these sections.

Beginning and Ending – Establishing Parameters

Beginning

While it is possible to read Numbers 25 as a self-contained unit, it is also true that we cannot wrench it from its literary context within the narrative of the Pentateuch. The opening words 'While Israel was staying at Shittim' suggest that we have entered into a world, and as such, a story has already begun. The Israelites have already arrived and are now staying at Shittim, but we read nothing of the journey to this point.

To find the immediate context of our story, we turn back to the commencement of chapter 22. Here we read, 'The Israelites set out, and camped in the plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho.' (Num 22:1, NRSV) The ensuing three chapters tell the story of Balaam, the Mesopotamian diviner and Balak, the Moabite King.[13] Israel disappears from view during these scenes, completely ignorant to the intrigue concerning them, but reappears after this literary digression in Num 25:1 in what seems to be a simple continuation of the narrative. That these two places, the 'plains of Moab' and 'Shittim' are the same location appears to be confirmed by the travelogue found in Num 33. The Israelites had arrived there following military victories over the Amorite King Sihon (Num 21:32) and King Og of Bashan (Num 21:35). Camped on the banks of the Jordan, the Promised Land was fixed in their sights.

[12] Indeed, it is a conduit of several layers of ideology!
[13] The particulars of this story need not concern us here, though they will be dealt with elsewhere.

Not only does the opening verse alert us to the location of the events, it also introduces some of the major inter-locking themes which will dominate the story. Sex, in particular sex with foreign women, plays an important role in this chapter and in verse 1 it is thrust upon us, 'While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people defiled themselves by committing fornication with the daughters of Moab.' The second theme is hidden in the first; the imperative of separation from foreigners, especially their women. The danger, failure and consequence are confirmed in verses 2 and 3; 'They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed to their gods. So the sons of Israel were bound to Baal of Peor and the anger of Yhwh burnt within Israel.'

Immediately we become aware that the narrative has transitioned to a new place, completely detached from the chapters that come before.[14] The transition acts as exposition, a beginning of something new, and in three short verses, the main themes of the new story are introduced.

Ending

The final verse of our story is a directive given to Moses by Yhwh. While the opening three verses have outlined the major theme, namely, the danger of sexual encounters with foreign women, the final verse brings this episode to a close, and yet also propels it forward to a new stage of the ongoing narrative. Interestingly, the 'women of Moab' (vs. 1) and the Midianites have merged to be one and the same at the end of this unit.[15] Moses is castigated by Yhwh for being deceived by the Midianites, and is instructed to 'be hostile to the Midianites' and 'destroy them' in response to their trickery. This gives justification to the war on Midian which ensues in Num 31.

Immediately following the events of chapter 25, the narrative is interrupted by a census. This is the second census in the book of Numbers, and represents a key moment in the overall narrative of the Torah.[16] The census counts those Israelites 'able to go to war' (Num 26:2). This is the same command given in Num 1:3, but recognizes that Israel is now represented by a new generation (hence the title of

[14] Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, 35.
[15] The closeness of the Moabites and Midianites is a feature of Numbers 22 also. See 'Historical Chapter: The Moabite/Midianite Problem' in Chapter I.2.
[16] Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New : The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch*.

Olson's commentary) who now take vengeance upon Midian and will subsequently, under Joshua's leadership, lay siege to the land of Canaan, which was promised to Abraham (Genesis 12). So the ending of our story also represents a new beginning, a new phase in the unfolding drama.

Spatiality

The manipulation of space within biblical narrative has become an area of interest in recent times. Victor Matthews recently wrote an article in which he discussed differing dynamics of space and used them as a device to understand Bethel in the Genesis narrative.[17] Matthews suggests that it is the reiterative use of Bethel[18] as a 'space' that develops its significance as a sacred site for Israel. The concepts that he proposes in that article are very fruitful in conversation with Numbers 25.

Matthews identifies three categories of space. 1st space is a concrete location that can be mapped; it is a physical reality. This leaves room for breadth; for example, a space as large as Australia could be considered 1st space. Conversely, it can also be quite specific; for example, Jesse's bedroom. 2nd space is 'imagined space'; that is, ideas about 1st spaces. It is in this sphere that places take on significance, where space becomes sacred, politicized, culturally relative, historically specific; in short, where space becomes a construct.[19] 3rd space relates to both of these concepts. 3rd space is 'lived space'; that is, it is the full range of human activity that takes place within any 1st space, which serves to make it as broad or specific as its 1st space designation. Of course, it is in so small part these very activities, these events which construct the 2nd space significance of a space, so that 2nd and 3rd spaces are very closely related.

These designations are not of Matthews' own devising. Rather, they are a part of the nomenclature of modern geography.[20] Nonetheless, the model as outlined by Matthews has great potential for application within the study of biblical narrative. As a way of approaching Num 25, we will examine the use of each 1st space

[17] Matthews, "Back to Bethel: Geographical Reiteration in Biblical Narrative."
[18] 'Bethel' translates as 'The House of God', or perhaps less formally, 'God's house'.
[19] Matthews, *More than Meets the Ear : Discovering the Hidden Contexts of Old Testament Conversations*, 131ff. In regards to Bethel, we ask if it is the space itself which is sacred, in and of itself, or is it the historically reckoned experiences of the Patriarchs, which occurred in that space?
[20] See, Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). Also, Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*.

separately. Given that narrative is a combination of elements, we should note some overlap or connection between and amongst them.

Shittim

Verse 1 places the Israelites in Shittim. It is a simple noun which means 'acacia trees'. Num 22:1 records that the Israelites had camped 'in the plains of Moab'. Given that chapter 25 is a continuation of that narrative and that no other movement is noted we are left to assume that this is the same place, which appears to be confirmed in Num 33:49, the conclusion of the wilderness travelogue which places the final camp '…as far as Abel-Shittim in the plains of Moab'. This is the 1st space setting of the story.

Shittim has no real second space significance, though it is surrounded by places that do. The Jordan river holds enormous significance as does Jericho, across the Jordan's banks. Shittim though, is a generic name; perhaps a name chosen for this very reason, as if to say, this could be any place.

In regards to 3rd space, Shittim is also hard to quantify. We know that the Israelites are camped there; indeed, there is a sense in the verb ישב that they have settled there, perhaps for quite some time.[21] However, besides their camping there, we have no knowledge of what the Israelites were 'doing' at Shittim, which is the substance of 3rd space. Again, the choice of Shittim seems deliberate; a non-descript space name.

The Tent of Meeting

The tent of meeting was a tent pitched within the Israelite camp site. Its location within the camp is contested within the biblical account. Even within the book of Numbers there is disagreement. Num 11: 26 suggests that it stood outside the camp while Num 2: 2 places it as the central point of the camp, around which

[21] Levine, *Numbers 21-36 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 282.

everything else has its orientation.[22] In regards to 1st space, this placement within the camp is not so crucial. The tent itself is the 1st space.[23]

Other designations of space create an argument for the positioning of the tent of meeting. Given that the tent is the cultic centre of the Israelite people and that the cult plays a central role in the communal life there is reason to think of the tent taking a central place within the camp. The difficulty for the Israelites as they wander through the wilderness is that they are without their own space. They find themselves in a space where there is no holy space, a space where there is no differentiation, an expanse of insignificant space. The tent of meeting becomes a portable holy place, a means of creating significance, of orienting the community. The holy place becomes the *axis mundi*: the centre around which the world revolves,[24] even for the brief time of settlement in one place. This theology is born from the later view that

> …the land of Israel is found at the centre of the world…. Jerusalem is at the centre of the land of Israel, the Temple is at the centre of Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies is at the centre of the Temple, the Ark is at the centre of the Holy of Holies; and the foundation stone is in front of the Ark, which spot is the foundation of the world.[25]

If the holy place is the *axis mundi*, then it is reasonable to posit the tent in the centre of the camp, giving a physical expression to its cultural import. Of course, in describing the place as holy we have moved into 2nd space language. Perceiving place as important moves us here. It is at this point that the relationship between 2nd and 3rd space becomes obvious. It is the third space activity that marks the space as sacred. The tent is the place where Moses meets with Yhwh, the place where sacrifices are made and in our chapter, the place where the nation gathers in mourning. The significance of this 'living' is what marks the tent and its precinct as sacred.

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[22] These differences are traditionally justified by the source hypothesis. The E material, considered older, places the tent outside, the J material places it centrally. The choice for J is ideologically driven, as will be apparent in the proceeding discussion.

[23] Of course, the surrounds of the tent are also significant given the cultic nature of the tent; they are a part of the 1st space. But again, the location of the sacral precinct is not the issue. That it is the space of the sacral precinct is what defines 1st space.

[24] David Clines, "Sacred Space, Holy Spaces and Suchlike," in *On the Way to the Postmodern*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 543.

[25] *Midrash Tan□uma, Kedoshim 10* in ibid., 547.

All of this is instructive when we consider the events which take place within our chapter. The Israelite man and Midianite woman come to what appears to be a family tent within view of the tent of meeting where the congregation are gathered, which is to say, not too far from the tent of meeting. Phinehas, a Priest and guard of the precinct immediately responds, emerging out of the congregation, spear in hand which he promptly uses to execute the couple. This too, happens in sight of the tent of meeting. That what the couple was doing was sacrilegious is implied by the Priest's response. That it was done within view of the holy tent, a place so imbued with 2nd space *gravitas* seems to have made their actions all the more reprehensible.

The language around Phinehas' actions is also striking in light of their location. Verse 13 records Yhwh as saying that Phinehas had 'made atonement' for the people of Israel. Atonement is one of the primary responsibilities of the Priesthood; the act by which right relations are held between Yhwh, the holy god, and Israel, the hopelessly unholy people. Leviticus 4-7 outlines the sacrifices necessary for the expiation of sin and guilt. Each of them requires the death of an animal and the sprinkling of its blood. In Num 25 the murder of Zimri and Cozbi is painted as such a sacrifice, their human blood being the blood of the sacrifice to make atonement between Israel and Yhwh. Their sacrifice, or perhaps, Israel's sacrifice, takes place within view of the tent of meeting, a space pregnant with cultic significance.

While the location of this 'sacrifice' gives Phinehas' actions cultic significance it creates a problem for what we might consider acceptable behaviour within a sacred site. Phinehas' actions are for all intents and purposes, murder, and an extremely violent and malicious murder at that. Surely that must be a violation of sacred space, an act of defilement (Lev 21:11) within the sacred grounds? And yet Phinehas is not sanctioned, but rewarded with an everlasting covenant on account of his 'zeal'. And the location of the announcement is in the shadows of the tent of meeting; the holiest of places in the Israelite world.

The 2nd space dynamic of the tent of meeting adds weight to all of the events which take place there; the (perceived) transgression of Zimri and Cozbi, the

violent atonement made by Phinehas and the announcement of the everlasting covenant.

Zimri's Tent

Verse 6 tells us that an un-named Israelite man brings a Midianite woman to his tent to meet his family. The family tent is 1st space. A number of positions are held as to what is taking place. Some scholars[26] see the woman as a cultic figure; a diviner related to the local cult, engaged by the man to attempt to bring an end to the plague afflicting Israel at this time. If not a diviner, she has sometimes been painted as a cultic prostitute attached to the local cult. An alternate view is that the woman is being introduced to her husband's family. No matter which view we take, having been brought into a family tent with the apparent intention of some form of introduction, this appears to be a private meeting. The 3rd space domain allows us a wide range of possibilities.

What is most pressing in this location is again, 2nd space. In our minds we have some ideas, no matter how idealized, about the significance of the family home. These ideas may be even more powerful given the roaming nature of the Israelite people. This is the place where the family belongs, where it is together, where its bonds are strengthened, where joys and pains are shared amongst one's loved ones. If we take the view that this is a marriage celebration then we may have some perception that this is to be a place of great joy and celebration. If it is a marriage ritual, as it may appear[27], a consummation of the new relationship, then it is a private place, closed to outsiders. Yet in a moment that sense of joy and celebration is shattered by the invasion of Phinehas, and a place of joy is transformed into a mourning parlour.

Even if we take the view that this is a cultic event, the significance of the family home is not lessened. Phinehas' actions still represent a violation of other people's space; indeed, his actions cut across all three notions of space that we have considered. Phinehas enters another person's 1st space, shattering the 2nd space sense of that place, disturbing whatever 3rd space events were taking place.

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[26] Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic; Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*. Levine, *Numbers 21-36 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*; Reif, "What Enraged Phinehas : A Study of Numbers 25:8."

[27] That Phinehas can pierce both of them with a single spear suggests they were locked in a sexual embrace.

Peor

Our story commences in a non-descript place, Shittim. Soon another name is mentioned, Peor, a place related to Shittim. The women of Moab are worshippers of Baal of Peor, the local manifestation of the Baal deity at Peor. We read of Peor in Num 23:28. It is a place where the Moabite King Balak takes Mesopotamian diviner (and Yahwist) Balaam to see the horde of Israelites who have encircled his land. Balaam has Balak build seven altars and offer sacrifices upon them, a ram and a bull. Unfortunately for Balak, Yhwh seems unmoved by the offering and his sacrifices are for nought. Balaam proceeds to bless, instead of cursing as requested, the Israelites. It appears from Num 23 that Peor is a mountain. It records that the two 'go up' to Peor[28] to look out. This mountain is the 1st space of Peor.

If this is a cultic site, then Peor has significant 2nd space meaning for the Moabites. This is their sacred site, their equivalent of the Israelite tent of meeting. For the Israelites, Peor will also come to have significant meaning, though its connotations will all be negative. Matthews suggests that Bethel becomes significant because it continually reappears in the biblical narrative; the scene of multiple crucial events that shaped the lives of the patriarchs. Peor too is repeatedly mentioned,[29] though the event mentioned is singular; the great example of Israelite apostasy and failure. The events of this chapter are etched into Israelite memory, a nadir in their history, and Peor, and Israel's behaviour (3rd space) there (1st space) marks it for all time.

Having examined the various spaces and considering how they function within the narrative, we can see what a powerful tool it can be for the narrator. By placing the major events of the narrative within view of the tent of meeting, their significance is heightened. Zimri and Cozbi's acts are 'within view' of the tent, indicating that this is somehow of significance. Phinehas' actions are at once more shocking because of the location but then the praise from Yhwh makes them all the more heroic. The location of the praise, against the backdrop of the holiest of spaces serves to legitimize his elevation to covenant partner and ensures the primacy of the priesthood within Israel.

[28] See 1 Kings 18, where Elijah confronts 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.
[29] Hos 9, Ps. 106, 1 Cor 10

Manipulation of Time

At the commencement of his discussion of the use of time in his work on biblical narrative, Shimon Bar-Efrat says this: 'A narrative cannot exist without time, to which it has a twofold relationship: it unfolds within time, and time passes within it.'[30] The manipulation of time by the narrator, the speed at which things take place within the 'real time' reading experience plays a large role in the way we understand the story as it is told to us.

Our story commences with 'While…' There has already been a beginning; we are thrown into the story world without warning or preparation. But we are looking back in time; these events (Israel's relations with the women of Moab) have already taken place in the story world, so we are in a dynamic place, a place between events, a place of looking back and anticipating what is to come.

As a result of what has happened, Yhwh speaks to Moses, and immediately it seems, Moses passes his instructions on to Israel's leaders. We have no clue as to how much time has elapsed between the events at Beth-Peor and the conversation between Yhwh and Moses. It appears we are still looking back, still in a place of uncertainty. As readers, we might expect to next read something of the outcome of those instructions. Instead, we are jolted to attention at the commencement of vs. 6 with the word והנה, which brings us into present time. This has traditionally been translated 'Behold!' (AV) and is intended to make the narrative vivid, to enable the reader to enter into the surprise of the narrator.[31] Immediately a chain of events take place in quick succession; the man and woman appear (vs. 6), Phinehas rises and grabs his spear (vs. 7), he enters the tent and kills them both (vs. 8), the plague which has killed twenty-four thousand people stops (vs. 9). All of this happens in four quick, shocking verses. The plague is puzzling. There has been no previous mention of it. We are left to wonder about this. Is the source of the plague divine punishment for the events of the opening three verses? If so, how long has this plague been afflicting this people? These questions are let unanswered.

[30] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 141.
[31] 'הנה' in BDB, 243.

With no mention of the effect of these scenes on the people, no time to dwell on the aftermath of this extreme brutality, Yhwh again speaks to Moses (vs. 10). The time taken to speak has the impression of slowing things down; there has been no time for talking through the frenzy of the previous verses. These words of Yhwh relate to time, as Moses is to announce that Phinehas' actions are to be rewarded with an everlasting Priesthood (vs. 13). That is, what Phinehas did in moments takes on significance for all time.

The narrator then digresses to name the unfortunate couple, Zimri and Cozbi (vs. 14). After this ('Then…') Yhwh speaks again to Moses, issuing a demand for retaliation against the people of Midian (vss. 16-17).

This analysis of the manipulation of time reveals something of the art of the narrator. We are left unsure of the total time which has elapsed from the start of the story to its finish. There appears to be a chronological integrity to the story. Apart from the analeptic naming of Zimri and Cozbi, along with the revelation of their social status, the story moves in sequence. However, the way time is used does serve a purpose. After the opening verses in which we are looking back, unsure of how fast time is moving, the rapid nature of verses 6 to 9 with the immediacy of their events shocks us after the use of הנה. Then immediately the narrative slows again as we take stock of what has happened, and as the significance of Phinehas' action is declared. By the time the story concludes however, it is clear that the passage of time has come to an end and yet anticipates something new, something else, something 'other'.

The Narrator

The Hebrew bible commences with an account of creation which is followed by an essentially unbroken narrative thread which runs to the end of 2 Kings and the final destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian marauders. The material which comprises that narrative is diverse and comes from the hands of many writers and yet the text posits a single narrator with first hand knowledge across that entire historical span.[32] The only exceptions to this are the points within the Pentateuch where Moses narrates the events in the first person, primarily in Deuteronomy. It is from the narrator's 'voice' that we hear this story, it is the narrator's perspective

[32] Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 55.

which shapes and reveals the scene to us,[33] the narrator's knowledge which is drawn upon in the telling of the story. The narrator is the sole means by which we understand the reality which exists within the narrative. As Gunn and Fewell state, the narrator 'control[s] the presentation which is enacted by the characters.'[34] It is the extent of this knowledge which separates the narrator from the historical author and which demands examination in the study of narrative literature.

Yairah Amit suggests that the relationship between the reader and the narrator is a contract which demands that the reader believes what the narrator tells.[35] This view is another way of understanding the narrator's 'omniscience', the term used by Alter[36] and adopted by Bar-Efrat and others. This omniscience is seen in and through the narrator's knowledge; the narrator can move through time and space, they know the inner thoughts of characters, they are silently present during moments of great intimacy and most tellingly, they know what God knows and what God thinks. In fact, this 'divine' knowledge has the effect of making the narrator even more powerful than God, of placing the narrator above God,[37] because the God we meet in the story is the God painted by the narrator. The cost of this 'knowledge' is that the narrator becomes faceless, completely emptied of individual identity as opposed to, for example, the prophet who is the visible instrument for the proclamation of God's word.[38]

The question raised by the narrator's knowledge is the issue of reliability. The narrator tells the story. There is no dialogue between the narrator and the reader, no place to interject or to question with any hope of response. Amit's words regarding the 'contract' between narrator and reader are seemingly re-enforced. Some writers have claimed that the narrator is 'perfectly reliable',[39] which is essentially a by-product of the narrator's omniscience. Sternberg echoes Alter, claiming that the narrator is 'absolutely and straightforwardly reliable.'[40]

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[33] Ibid., 53.
[34] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 13ff.
[35] Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, 94.
[36] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 157.
[37] Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, 94.
[38] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 157.
[39] Ibid., 184. This view sees the narrator as infallible.
[40] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative : Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, 51.

Certainly, the reader depends on the narrator so a strong sense of reliability is necessary. Nonetheless, this does not need to mean the reader accept blindly what is told. Gunn and Fewell nuance this view by suggesting that the narrator does not *deliberately* give misleading information. They regard the narrator as reliable, in that the narrator will not make mistakes or deceive us knowingly, but this does not mean that the narrator is beyond error.[41] Sternberg's position, his absolute insistence upon the omniscience of the narrator is a dogmatic attempt to take any control away from the reader. As Bal points out, in seeking to isolate the ideology of the text, Sternberg's ultimately uncritical stance in relation to the narrator through which he the reader is forcibly submissive to the narrator becomes in itself an ideological act.[42] In this way, Sternberg can create the narrator himself;[43] a narrator which becomes off limits to critique. Therefore there is a sense in which the reader must always have their eyes open, acutely observant of what is going on before them, aware that things are perhaps not as necessarily 'straightforward' as they appear.

While the role of the narrator is crucial, their relationship to the story or their place in relation to the events described is complicated. Bar-Efrat claims that the narrator is 'inside' the story, a structural element, an integral part of the work created.[44] This view has oppositions. Most often, the narrator stands outside the events, describing them, showing them but never 'in' them. The effect is to place the narrator 'outside' the story, their divine knowledge placing them effectively 'above' the story. Miscall puts it best when he describes the narrator as a 'disembodied presence' outside or above the story.[45] This is not totally divorced from Bar-Efrat's view if we think of his contention being about the 'text', which the narrator does inhabit, and the story, which the narrator possibly does not.

The narrator is revealed in the text in various ways. Uses of 'And Moses said' and other similar constructions remind us we are being told a story rather than watching for ourselves. Little is revealed about the narrator in this way. However, in editorial comment throughout the narrative we begin to see how the

[41] Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 53.
[42] Bal and Jobling, *On Storytelling : Essays in Narratology*.
[43] He in fact becomes as omniscient the narrator, as his interpretation becomes equally non-contestable.
[44] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 13.
[45] Miscall, "Introduction to the Narrative Literature," 544.

narrator influences the way we read the story. Editorial comment is that part of the text which relays no events within the story, but gives opinion or comment to what has happened. These comments provide an interpretive lens for the reader to understand what has happened. A common way of doing this is seen in the opening three verses of our text. The first two verses give an account of what is happening. The third gives a comment, '…the anger of Yhwh burnt against Israel.'[46] This is a function of the narrator's omniscience. By entering into the private world of a character, by revealing what is otherwise 'unknowable'[47] the narrator steps out from their shadow of invisibility and allow themselves to be seen. Readers, left to their own devices, may not have understood the gravity of Israel's actions. By linking the Sons of Israel's actions to Yhwh's emotional response, the narrator ensures that the reader knows that it is a deplorable thing which they have done. It is also in this way that the perceptive reader can begin to understand the ideology which lurks behind the text. In our text, verse 3 creates the ideological framework which will undergird the ensuing drama and the subsequent comments from Yhwh which close the chapter.

Plot

Narrative Plot

The 'plot' of the narrative is the shaping of the events which make up its story. As Amit argues, '[t]he plot is a selection and organization of events in a particular order of time; it is a purposeful structure built around the conflict between the personae, or it may be the internal conflict of one character.'[48] Various theories, from the time of Aristotle onwards have been developed around the shaping of plot, however, most of these borrow from Aristole's notion of 'beginning, middle and end'.[49]

While this scheme is not relevant for all biblical narrative(s), Numbers 25 can be manipulated into this structure. The exposition (or 'beginning') involves the events of the first five verses, introducing a theme of sin and punishment. The sin

[46] Bar-Efrat notes that information regarding God's feelings is rarely given, and so it is of great importance when it is mentioned.
[47] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 183. Alter points out that the narrator leads us to know characters as we 'normally' know people. That is, character is revealed through speech and actions. In this way the narrator remains unobtrusive and invites us to make choices. This invitation is snatched away by this more forceful mode of communication in which the narrator 'thinks' for us.
[48] Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, 46ff.
[49] Or to borrow musical terminology, exposition, development and recapitulation!

is not generic. It is indeed quite specific; it is the sin of sexual liaisons with foreign women coupled with the resulting alien cultic observances which were forbidden for the people of Israel. The punishment is death, and a very violent death at that.

The development (Aristotle's 'middle') comes from vss. 6 to 9, with the appearance of Zimri and Cozbi and the emergence of Phinehas as a zealot. This transition is marked by the term והנה, which for Berlin is a poetic marker.[50] This term shifts the perspective of the narrative, indicating something new is taking place which demands our attention. Our eyes are moved, no longer looking back but fixed on something that is happening 'now'. There is conflict between Phinehas and Zimri. Zimri's actions are clearly at odds with what Phinehas deems to be acceptable. Given the reluctance of any other character to intervene and the lack of any negative evaluation of what occurs we are left to assume that Phinehas has not overreacted.

The resolution (the 'end') comes with Yhwh's words to Moses (vss. 11-13) which congratulate Phinehas' actions and reward him in no uncertain terms. However, vs. 17 adds what we may call a coda,[51] revealing something of the broader story. Yhwh's instructions to go to battle with the Midianites uncovers another conflict at play beneath the surface of the story, which is the Midianite attempt at self-preservation through the cultic weakening of Israel. Ideologically, this takes the story back to Numbers 22 and King Balak's[52] attempted engagement of Balaam and reminds us that our story lies within the context of a broader narrative.[53] In this way the story both resolves (Phinehas is rewarded for his deeds) and is left unresolved, or in suspension, as we await the coming war.

Plot[t]ing Ideology

The word 'plot' can also suggest a plan, often under-handed or secretive to achieve something sinister.[54] This definition of plot can help in the analysis of the development of ideology through the narrative.

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[50] Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 62-63.
[51] Continuing to draw on musical terms.
[52] Though Balak is described as Moabite, we see in the opening and closing verses of our chapter the collapsing of Moab and Midian into an ideological unit. See Chapter I.2.
[53] These verses also anticipate the next phase of the narrative, war with Midian (Num 31).
[54] These negative traits though are not necessarily to be assumed.

Ideology is often thought of in purely negative terms. As Gunn and Fewell note, ideology is often thought to belong to extremists and fundamentalists; moderates are fortunately unburdened by such obsessions![55] This is to suggest that a popular conception of ideology may well be that it is sinister. However, ideology is far more pervasive than that. Ideology is a fundamental aspect of society[56] and belongs not just to extreme groups, but to each individual. Ideology is essentially the philosophical framework and operating assumptions that an individual uses to create the reality in which they live. Therefore, ideology is an element of the text and so is rightly examined in an analysis of it.

As every individual has an ideology, or more accurately, ideologies, so too then, each text has an ideology.[57] Some texts are more blatantly ideological than others. Law codes for example would have a more transparent ideology; we would expect the operating philosophical framework to reasonably obvious. In narrative texts, the ideology, while still present, would be less apparent, perhaps even intentionally so. In this sense, it may be possible that in narrative texts, ideology may 'under-handed' in that it may be sought underneath the surface of the textual world.[58] The question which must be raised is 'Whose ideology are we reading?' The narrator's? The writer's? The redactors'? The characters'? Berlin suggests that in biblical narratives, the narrator's ideology is primary. It is the narrator who creates the framework in which the story is told, and while other ideologies may be present, they are ultimately sub-ordinate to that of the narrator.[59] Of course, the issue which presents itself at this point is that the narrator is an abstraction, a literary construct. On this matter though, what is of concern is the uncovering of the ideology within the text rather than the identity of the narrator (or for that matter, the author).

In looking for ideology in a text, for that which is 'under-handed', we are essentially looking for things which are unwritten; for unspoken attitudes, for ambiguity, for things implicit which may point us towards something else. We do

[55] Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 190.
[56] Ibid.
[57] As texts undergo processes of redaction they come under the influence of successive ideologies. This becomes a complex issue for the reader.
[58] Under the hand of the writer as she writes, and reader as she reads.
[59] Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 58.

so knowing that we inevitably bring our own ideology to bear upon the text,[60] which taints our ability to see clearly, and knowing that our results will be at best, imperfect. Ideology permeates the text and its influence has already been apparent as we have discussed other components of the analysis. Each character, the narrative plot and the use of time is both formed ideologically and fulfils an ideological function.

The first ideological bias which presents itself is racially based. It is an ideology of separation. In the opening two verses we read of the sexual relations between Israel and the Moabites which results in Yahweh's rage against Israel (vs. 3). The appearance of 'the Midianite woman' in vs. 6, accompanied by Phinehas' violent response in vs. 8 continues this theme. The final verses, in which the two peoples, Moab and Midian, are merged into one unit and in which Yhwh commands their destruction confirms this ideology of separation.[61] There however seems to be more than just race in the equation here. The Moabite women invite the men to engage in cultic acts, and when Cozbi appears it is a Priest, that is, a cultic figure, who responds. So while ethnic purity is of concern, it is clearly coupled with cultic separation.

Also of note throughout the chapter is the vilification of women. The 'daughters of Moab' and Cozbi are the only women who are 'visible' throughout the story and both are portrayed negatively. We must read this against the hero of the story, Phinehas, a male Priest. The Priesthood in Israel was exclusively male and its mandate was the maintenance of national purity, which has emerged as a major theme of our story. It is no surprise then to discover that our hero stands out against that element which so threatens Israel: foreign women. Phinehas' actions, which act as 'atonement' for the Israelites (vs. 13), and through which has him granted an everlasting Priesthood marks another significant ideological agenda; the pre-eminence of the Priesthood. This is not just a male centred text, it is a Priest-centred text. Phinehas' actions are not justified by his male-ness, but by his Priesthood, which is now ensured (or better, insured, with a premium paid in Midianite blood), for all time.

[60] Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 193ff.
[61] The ideological temperature is raised: no longer separation, but destruction.

While Phinehas emerges as the hero, the culprit, if there is a singular culprit, appears to be Cozbi. Zimri, her Israelite partner is not mentioned in Yhwh's summation of events. Yet Cozbi is not bound by Israelite law, which is to say she is guilty of nothing other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Her naming is a sign of the honour that belongs to Phinehas in her slaying, but also the shame that belongs to Zimri. It appears that to befriend a foreign woman is a shameful thing, but to kill one is an act of no small merit.

Characters

In *The Art of Biblical Narrative* Alter outlines a scale of reliability which is used to make sense of the way in which the narrator presents a character.[62] The scale moves from appearances, gestures, costumes and so on, which are reported by the narrator about the character. These types of information lead us to infer certain things about the character in question. Yairah Amit (following Adele Berlin) calls this 'indirect characterization'[63]. That is, there is no confirmation of our inferences through other parties, whether by the narrator or by other characters within the story. We have no grounds for our suspicions regarding the motivations of character's actions or significance of certain features or traits other than what is observed.

Alter's next step on the scale brings in an element of speech; speech by the character and speech about the character. This allows us to 'weigh the claims', resolving in our minds what is being said and how it confirms or denies what we may have already decided. The next step is inner monologue. This is less ambiguous than direct speech and so more reliable. A character may attempt to deceive in conversation with another character, but the inner workings of their mind should reveal their intentions clearly. The final step on the scale is a statement by the narrator, who is the most reliable source in the telling of the story in Alter's schema. Amit differs slightly here. For her, 'direct characterization' covers not only the word of the narrator, but also the word of other characters within the story.[64]

[62] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 116ff.
[63] Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, 74.
[64] Ibid.

This concentration on characters represents a major step away from structuralism's near dismissal of characters as 'actants'. In structuralist theory, an 'actant' was simply an element, a literary abstract in service to the form of the text. Narrative criticism recognizes the dynamic role that characters play in the text, and the way in which their actions shape the story and the story world.

Moses

Moses is unique amongst the human characters of this drama as he is the only character to be involved in direct speech. His first appearance (vs. 4) consists of him receiving an order from Yhwh. Strangely, Moses seems to subtly change this order as he passes it onto the judges for fulfilment (vs. 5). Yhwh's command seems to indicate that leaders[65] are to be put to death, while Moses commands the Judges of Israel to put to death men under their charge, ignoring the violent request for impalement before the sun. The narrator has been careful to show the distinction between the order from Yhwh and the order given by Moses.

As perspective changes in verse 6, Moses, along with the entire congregation of Israel witnesses an Israelite man bringing his Midianite companion into the camp. Moses' singling out amongst the crowd is deliberate. While Phinehas is decisive, Moses, the supposed leader of this people, is passive. It is a moment in which Moses' leadership of Israel is weakened, as the Aaronite Priest acts independently and puts the Israelite man and Midianite woman to death in a particularly savage display of religious 'zeal' (v 8).

It is left to Moses to announce that Yhwh has bestowed upon Phinehas an everlasting covenant. Additionally, Moses is forced to congratulate Phinehas for his display of zeal amongst the people, which has saved the people of Israel from annihilation at the hand of their own god. In this, we see that Moses' indecision has been interpreted as failure against the 'heroic' act of Phinehas which is both rewarded and lauded.

The drama ends with another set of directions from Yhwh to Moses. Moses is commanded to commit Israel to battle with the Midianites on account of their deceitfulness in the matter of Peor. This again sounds like a critique of Moses'

[65] כל־ראשי העם ('all the heads of the people'). This can refer to the bodily head, but in this construction, particularly in plural form, more commonly refers to a familial head.

leadership. Moses, leader and representative of Israel, has been fooled by the Midianites. This completes a series of events in which Moses leadership is seen to be increasingly impotent; from failure to execute instructions, to passivity in the face of apparent threat, to the rise of a new, heroic, covenant partner and finally, to the realization that he has been fooled by the Midianites. Of course, this apparent demise is not stated by the narrator. This bare statement of events with little elaboration on issues relating to characters, physical or otherwise, is a feature of Hebrew narrative. The sparseness of the prose allows the reader to come to their own decisions, though they must always be aware that the basis for these decisions may be tenuous.

Phinehas

That Phinehas is intended to emerge from this text as an Israelite hero is almost immediately apparent. Only the great individuals of the Hebrew Bible were in covenantal relationship with Yhwh: Noah, Abraham and the Patriarchs, and David. Each of these figures were 'chosen' for a particular purpose, though aside from Noah, who is described as a righteous man (Gen 6:9), none were chosen for any particular reason. Phinehas then stands apart from these great figures in that Yhwh's choice of him is directly related to his actions.

If we consider Alter's schema, we see that our information regarding Phinehas falls, in the most part, within the first segment of his scheme, that which Amit labels indirect. Phinehas does a lot of things, but these are merely reported with no judgement offered by the narrator or the other characters. We are left to make our own determinations about him.

Phinehas, upon seeing the Israelite man with his Midianite woman, dramatically rises out of the congregation (vs. 7). Grabbing[66] a spear, his intentions are made clear and the outcome of this encounter never appears to be in doubt. He violently skewers the two 'offenders' in a brutal display of physical strength and religious 'zeal'. Given that this is all we read of Phinehas in this story, what do we gather about him? He is a dramatic man, a violent man, an impulsive man. He is a man

[66] 'לקח' in BDB, 524. The verb here is the same verb used in vs. 4 (*Take* all the heads…) which suggests something of the violence which can be associated with this word. The word is also used euphemistically (an Arabic cognate means 'to impregnate'), adding a sexual charge to this already loaded text.

prepared to take action, and yet we do not *really* know against what he is taking action. After all, what Zimri and Cozbi are doing is left unstated, we are again left to our own intuition.

Through the conversation Yhwh has with Moses (vs. 11-13) we are made aware of the result of his actions; the granting of the everlasting Priesthood, Yhwh's covenant of peace (בריתי שלום) Thus, (we are told) Phinehas' actions are justified by the highest authority, Yhwh. This of course moves into the latter part of Alter's scheme, in which commendation by the narrator and Yhwh are marks of ultimate reliability. Our suspicions, which we have been perhaps coerced towards, are confirmed and Phinehas is canonized as a hero.

Zimri

Zimri enters the scene in vs. 6, though he is un-named. He is identified as 'a man from the sons of Israel', but immediately he stands out from his people. While the 'entire congregation' are gathered together he has been absent and now appears with a female Midianite companion. This is all we know of him. Before we can think who this man and woman are they are brutally murdered by Phinehas (vs. 8). It is not until vs. 14, after Yhwh has spoken to Moses that his identity is revealed, 'Zimri, son of Salu, chief of an ancestral home of Midian.' Why the narrator retains this information for so long is puzzling. Not only is Zimri an Israelite, but from a chiefly line. His actions (which we are left to presume), set against the backdrop of national mourning appear all the more shocking given the prominent situation of his family.[68]. There is a sense in which the gravity of the national failure is distilled in the failure of this, a significant national figure.

Cozbi

The narrator's treatment of Cozbi throughout the narrative runs hand in hand with that of Zimri. She appears in vs. 6, identified as a 'Midianite woman.' Immediately she is cast as an outsider; as a Midianite, she is ethnically separate from the Israelites, as a woman she lacks the social privileges afforded to men. The weakness of Cozbi's situation is further highlighted in vs. 6. The narrator

[68] It is significant to note how little information is given. The reader is left to make assumptions based on the outcome. At no point is it stated why Zimri is bringing Cozbi to the tent. At no point is it stated what they were doing in the tent. We are led to assume that they were locked in a sexual embrace by the information they end up on the same spear.
[70] Miscall, "Introduction to the Narrative Literature," 552.

reports that she is 'brought in'. That is, she seems not to be a companion, a fellow subject, but an object, seemingly under the authority of the 'Israelite man'.

When Cozbi is murdered, we are informed that the spear goes through both her and Zimri. But the narrator emphasizes that the spear penetrates Cozbi's stomach. While the death of both Cozbi and Zimri are to be assumed from the stabbing, this additional information adds a vivid visual element to the story.

The revelation that Cozbi comes from a prominent Midianite family adds further intrigue to the story. We would not imagine the Moabite women from the opening verses were aristocratic in the same way that we would not expect men from leading Israelite families to be involved in this drama. The revelation of her name and family situation shocks us, not only because it links two prominent families but also because it is rare for a woman to be named in the Hebrew bible.

This aspect is reinforced by Yhwh's last command to Moses in which the events of Baal Peor is thematically linked with the 'matter of Cozbi'. Her naming here is also linked with a reference to her family's prominence in Midian.

Yhwh

The place of Yhwh as a *character* within biblical narrative is often ignored by readers. Peter Miscall points to the power of Christianity and Judaism behind this omission; that Yhwh is in a sense untouchable, above and outside the story.[70] The reality though is far different. Yhwh functions as a character within the text, and at times is a highly complex character full of inconsistency. Gunn and Fewell find understanding Yhwh as one of the great challenges of the Hebrew Bible.[71] This is because the canonical shaping of the bible insists upon a single character, albeit an ambiguous, mysterious and elusive character,[72] where it is easier to see many characters. We are reminded of course, that the character Yhwh within the text is a literary construct. Yhwh is a tool of the narrator (as well as of the reader). The ultimate authority ascribed to Yhwh (by both the narrator and the confessional reader) makes those things spoken by Yhwh unquestionable, actions infallible. The shift in reading posture, which engages with these issues at a

[71] Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 89.
[72] Ibid.

critical level has revealed the inconsistencies in the narrator's portrayal of Yhwh. The biblical Yhwh is, we presume with hope, vastly different to the Yhwh of the cosmos to whom the Judeo-Christian tradition offer their worship.

In regards to method, Miscall goes on to say; '[a] character portrayal of God takes into account all divine actions and statements, as well as whatever is said of or to God by another, including the narrator. This data is then evaluated as with any human character.'[73] This is to say Yhwh no longer stands above or beyond the text.

If we consider the role of Yhwh within the present text, we see a fairly unpleasant picture. In the first scene Yhwh is enraged (Yhwh's anger is said 'to burn') by the actions of Israel (vs. 3) and immediately issues an order of execution by impalement for her leaders. The impalement is to take place 'before the sun', as a method for dealing with Yhwh's anger. While we may understand Yhwh's anger (presuming here a knowledge of the nature of Yhwh's relationship with Israel), the brutality of the punishment is shocking. The isolation of the leaders for punishment, some of whom may have not been involved in the apostasy also seems if not excessive, at best, unfair.

From vss. 11 to 13 we read of Yhwh's commendation of Phinehas for his 'zealous' actions. Indeed, it is claimed that Phinehas has displayed Yhwh's own zeal (vs. 11). This of course serves to legitimize Phinehas' brutality as Yhwh's own response to the situation. Moses' apparent failure to execute the earlier orders is forgotten and Phinehas is granted 'my' covenant of peace, an extraordinary thing considering the violence of his action.

The final verses return to the violence of the opening, with Yhwh ordering Moses to lead Israel into battle against the Midianites. This is to be a divinely ordered war of revenge.[74] This vengeance is ordered because Midian has tricked Moses (and by extension, Israel). Midian has done nothing against Yhwh, indeed, their actions are best described as self preservation in the face of Israelite domination. Unfortunately, their efforts will prove to be in vain.

[73] Miscall, "Introduction to the Narrative Literature," 552.
[74] See pg 45, n 65.

In this text then, Yhwh is portrayed as a jealous, violent, vindictive character keen on the death of all those who stand against him. This role suits the theme of the text which posits Israel against foreign nations. Yhwh's anger and endorsement of Phinehas can be read as tools used by the narrator to promote this ideology.

Chapter III.2

Feminist Interpretation

A. A Short Survey of Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics

In 1985, Carolyn Osiek commenced a chapter with the following words;

> Literature on feminist method is growing at such a pace that it has rather quickly become an extended field of inquiry in itself….[1]

In the more than twenty years since those words were written, the field of feminist method has continued to expand. Within biblical studies the influence of the feminist reading strategy is now firmly entrenched and further, has been put to use within a variety of new approaches. For example, books are now written from Feminist-Postcolonial perspectives[2], Feminist-Psychoanalytic perspectives[3] and so on. In a sense, the emergence of feminist methodology as a legitimate form of inquiry paved the way for other advocacy related strategies through the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. None of this has been easy though. Feminist reading has been accused of harbouring a subjective 'interest' and by extension, cheapening the quality of its work. This criticism fails to recognise that impartiality is of course an illusion; that there is no 'disinterested reading', no uninfected scholarship.[4]

As one would expect, with an emerging field of inquiry, much time was spent clarifying approaches, methods and strategies.[5] Osiek's chapter identified five hermeneutical alternatives. Firstly, focusing on texts that portray women positively to counter texts which were 'devastatingly negative'; secondly, rejecting the bible and its authority altogether; thirdly, looking more broadly to

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[1] Carolyn Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarboro Collins (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 93.
[2] Dube Shomanah, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*.
[3] Ilona N. Rashkow, *The Phallacy of Genesis : A Feminist-Psychoanalytic Approach*, 1st ed., Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster/J. Knox, 1993).
[4] Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, *Far More Precious Than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women*, 1st ed., Gender and the Biblical Tradition (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991). It also fails to comprehend that the text under review is itself 'interested'.
[5] Athalya Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible : Approaches, Methods and Strategies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997). See also, Phyllis Trible, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies: Emerging Trends in Biblical Thought," *Christian Century* 99, no. 4 (1982), 116-18.

biblical texts which may lend themselves to a liberation perspective; fourthly, utilising a culturally comparative approach; and finally, stepping back from a focus on women and concentrating on the broader issues of biblical anthropology.[6] An article by Phyllis Trible[7] identified three strategies. The first is the documentation of the case against women in the scriptures. The second, and related approach is to recover alternative voices within the scripture. The third method is the retelling of biblical stories *in memoriam.*[8] In 1984, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza[9] outlined four hermeneutical options. She suggests the *hermeneutics of suspicion, hermeneutics of proclamation, hermeneutics of remembrance* and the *hermeneutics of creative actualization.*[10] By 1992, her taxonomy of approaches had expanded to nine: recovering lost biblical traditions about women (which includes the layers of andro-centric interpretation which obscure them); dealing with issues of incorrect translation which has un-necessarily made women marginal figures; imaginative identification, by which women are 'imagined' into stories where they may be present, if not explicitly mentioned; the recovery of works written by women; a focus on biblical history; a sociorhetorical, reconstructive approach which seeks to place women at the centre of early Christian struggle; a concentration on ideological inscription of andro-centric texts; shifting attention to women as reading subjects; and finally, insisting on the articulation of the context of reading.[11] The lack of consensus suggests something of the enormity of the task facing feminist interpretation, a problem which does not appear to be getting any easier as feminist strategy is woven together with other interpretive programs. More recently, Susanne Scholz[12] has outlined a three-cornered organization of methods. The three methods she identifies are historical, literary and cultural criticism. These three areas have shaped the scholarly study of the bible, and so link feminist criticism to the broader history of interpretation of the scriptures.

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[6] Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives," 96-97.
[7] Trible, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies: Emerging Trends in Biblical Thought."
[8] Ibid.
[9] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation,* 10th anniversary ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
[10] Ibid., 15.
[11] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 21-39.
[12] Susanne Scholz, *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible,* Introductions in Feminist Theology (London: T & T Clark, 2007). See chapters 1 and 2 of Scholz's book for a history of feminist biblical criticism.

The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Each writer considered above acknowledges that a multi-valent approach is necessary. That is, there is no one fixed feminist approach. This must be the case for the simple reason that across the canon of the Old Testament and in the history of its interpretation, women are presented in a variety of ways. This variety demands a multi-faceted approach to reading. It is also true that women are largely absent, or perhaps more accurately, silent, or perhaps precisely, silenced in much of the biblical material. It is this silenc(e)[ing] which lies behind the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', an approach which explores oppressive values and practices inscribed within the biblical text. The silencing of women's voices is one such example; it is an indication that the recorded social history has been distorted. Others include the presentation of women as the possession of men, the legislation which controls a woman's body, a woman's lack of rights in the making of vows, and so on. Thus the 'pedigree' of a woman is inextricably linked to the pedigree of the men that possess her.[13] This strategy has similarities to Trible's strategy which she calls 'The case against women'.[14]

The absence of women in the text also gives rise to a approach that Schüssler Fiorenza calls 'imaginative identification.'[15] This is the practice of imagining women being present (though they are not mentioned, nor their voices heard,) where the text does not explicitly deny their presence. In this way, a move is made to 'fill in the gaps' that are left in the text. For example, an expression such as 'the assembly', or 'congregation' which are used to describe the gathering of all of Israel allow the presence of women. The simple use of the collective term 'Israel', as is used in verse 1 is also an example of this expression. These terms do not rule out the presence of women, (though as a group their experience is marginalized in those circumstances) and so using this strategy, the interpreter has freedom to imagine the women of Israel amongst the assembly and to attempt to capture their experience of the events described. More tellingly, the phrase 'Sons of Israel'[16] is used in this generic, universalizing sense, which at once says something of the gendered nature of the text we are reading, at the same time minimizing the presence and experience of women within the congregation.

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[13] Darr, *Far More Precious Than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women*, 41.
[14] Trible, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies: Emerging Trends in Biblical Thought," 116.
[15] Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*, 26.
[16] Verse 6 refers to כל־עדת בני־ישראל (the entire congregation of the sons of Israel).

Having dealt with the silencing of women's voices, of their perceived absence from the biblical material, the hermeneutics of suspicion must also deal with the way women are constructed when they do appear. Often, women are set as 'types', that is, an individual woman is portrayed as representative of a particular type of women. The way that women are characterized, the way in which they are named, the roles that they play within the scenes in which they appear are all areas of examination using this particular method.

At this point we can also move not just to the portrayal of individuals, but to the larger issue of the construction and use of gender within the text. The text is the product of a particular society, which is a way of saying that it is not universal. As such, interpreters need to be able to 'decode' the text, understanding the bias and interestedness of the text as we have received it. This code will presumably include the gendering of certain attributes and characteristics as male or female, positive or negative, good or evil and so on. This approach takes a positivist view of language, which is to say, the text itself is the controlling element of the interpretation. Language is pictured as a self-contained closed system which signifies reality.[17] Under the hermeneutics of suspicion, this system is presumed to be androcentric; that evil is gendered as female and that goodness is described in male terms. Such an approach makes the male-centred-ness of the text apparent, which is in itself a positive thing. However, it does so without providing the tools to read against the patriarchal bias. An alternative approach is to shift the emphasis to the reader, which is to see language in? less positivistic terms and to use it as an interpretive tool. Recognizing that language is itself a social construct allows readers to utilize a more multi-valent approach in their reading, making the imagination of the individual reader the controlling element. It is here where generic terminology can be interpreted in a variety of ways, from traditional to modern day stances;[18] it is here that we can read against the bias, in doing so deconstructing the façade of the text and rebuilding it in a new way.

[17] Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*, 42.
[18] Ibid., 43.

Turning to the Text

The opening verse of Numbers 25 introduce us to two different groups; Israel, referred to almost immediately following as העם, 'the people' (both names being inclusive along gender lines), and 'the daughters of Moab', (clearly a gender limiting construction.) 'The people'[19] begin to fornicate with 'the daughters of Moab'. In the second verse, 'the people' are invited to engage in cultic meals and sacrifices by 'the daughters of Moab,' the result of which is laid bare in verse 3, where Israel is said to have been 'bound'[20] to Baal of Peor. In fact, the Samaritan Pentateuch reads 'sons of Israel'. This form destabilizes what has gone before. The nouns 'Israel' and 'the people' are both inclusive terms, though they are male nouns grammatically. This is in distinction to the 'daughters of Moab' which is clearly exclusive in its focus. The appearance of the clause 'sons of' puts the inclusivity of the opening nouns in doubt. Perhaps the first noun 'Israel' stands, while 'the people' (those who both fornicate with and subsequently engage in the cultic activities with their Moabite hosts and are then said to be bound to Baal of Peor) seems to fall apart. 'The people' are 'the sons' referred to in the Samaritan Pentateuch. This makes sense, as we have a clear match up between the daughters of Moab and the sons of Israel. This choice is confirmed in verse 5 when Moses commands that all the men that have been bound to Baal of Peor be executed; this is demonstrably a crime of the Israelite men, the 'sons of Israel'[21].

The consequences of this are startling. Immediately, we are not reading the story with all of Israel in focus, but her sons. This confirms what we may have suspected; this is a male-centric text. However, all of Israel is present, which is to say, the daughters of Israel are witnesse(r)s of this scene; (nearly) invisible bystanders to a great national calamity in which they play no active role. Mothers, wives, sisters, daughters of Israel, see their 'sons', who are also their 'husbands', 'fathers', and 'brothers', engage in this activity with the daughters of Moab, though we have no (reported) sense of how they feel or react. In a sense, their presence through the use of the inclusive nouns 'Israel' and 'the people' could be seen to be an attempt to divert the blame away from the direct perpetrators, the sons. Nonetheless, it simply serves to underscore the

[19] The JPS translation is telling on this matter, for it uses 'the menfolk'.
[20] This being a literal translation of the MT. 'צמד' in BDB, 855.
[21] Hence, the reason for this particular choice in the Translation.

androcentric nature of the text and to contrast the silent, passive, though not quite invisible victims against the main protagonists of the unfolding drama.

'Whoring' in the Prophets

The word used to describe the sons of Israel's fornication with the daughters of Moab is derived from the root זנה, 'to commit fornication' or 'to be a harlot'.[22] It is a highly charged word, featuring prominently in the prophetic corpus. Routinely, the prophetic corpus condemns all harlotry.[23] The book of Hosea uses whoredom as a major rhetorical device throughout, imaging it as a symbol of Israel's infidelity to Yhwh. Hosea is instructed to marry a 'wife of whoredom' (Hos 1:2) and their marriage, and the subsequent pain it causes Hosea is a symbol of Yhwh's own pain and frustration with Israel. Of course, the word itself is multivalent in Hosea, as sexual immorality is intimately bound to Israel's rejection of Yhwh. Hos 4:13b-14 speaks plainly about the daughters of Israel playing the whore and of the men who go aside with whores. Thus, in their individual literal whoring, following in the footsteps of Gomer the archetypal whore, Israel at once becomes the symbolic whore.[24]

A similar theme is found in Ezekiel, though it is magnified greatly. In Ezek 16 Israel is established as God's bride.[25] However, she is an unfaithful bride; worse, a whore. The condemnation does not stop here. Whores are more than just simply women who have sex for money. The more accurate description is a woman who engages in sexual relationships with partner(s) with whom she has no covenant relationship.[26] It is in this covenantal sense that we have a point of entry for its use in cultic apostasy. In Ezek 16:33-34, Israel is cast as a whore who pays men to have sex with her.[27] This is described as sickness of heart (Ezek 16:30) and lewdness beyond all abominations (Ezek 16:43). The sexual imagery of this condemnation is stark, and while sexual misconduct is certainly in view, the image of the whore is again being used to describe Israel's covenant failings. In Ezek 16:59 this becomes clear, 'I will deal with you as you have done, you who

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[22] 'זנה', in BDB, 275.
[23] See Amos 2:7 as a representative text.
[24] As was discussed in Chapter I.2, I am taking Hosea to be earlier than Numbers.
[25] For further use of the use of whore imagery in Ezekiel, see Ezek 23.
[26] S. Erlandsson, "זנה," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1980), 103.
[27] This seems to have the makings of a thoroughly male fantasy.

have despised the oath, breaking the covenant.'(NRSV) And yet despite the apparent certainty of punishment in Ezek 16:40, a punishment of stoning and dismemberment, by 16:63 the tone has changed, and a new covenant is established, or perhaps, re-established, a thing so remarkable that Israel will be unable to open her mouth.

The use of זנה and its various forms is powerful, creating a vivid image of misconduct, of improper relations. That covenant failure is couched in such sexualized tones, particularly when sexual misconduct is also involved only serves to heighten the sense of Israel's failure. Sexual conduct was highly legislated in Israel, and while prostitution does not seem to be in any way foreign to the experience of Israel (for example, Judah and Tamar in Gen 38, the Samson cycle of Judges 13-16), prostitutes are considered to be a disgrace; wicked and deceitful.[28] Likewise, when Israel fails to fulfil her covenant obligations to Yhwh, she becomes a disgrace; wicked and deceitful. Her dalliances with the gods of other nations are essentially improper intercourse, a breaking of their covenant bond with Yhwh.

This same field of semantic meaning is easily discernible in our text. The sons of Israel whore themselves to the daughters of Moab, in the physical sense, itself a breach of their relationship with Yhwh. What follows is a binding to Baal of Peor, (itself a sexual image[29]) a worship of other gods, the symbolic whoring of apostasy. As in the allegory of Ezekiel 16, a punishment is declared, though this is later averted. The punishment decreed was also gruesome; not stoning and dismemberment as in the Ezekiel text, but impalement. Perhaps we might suggest that the brutality of the suggested punishment gives some insight into the perceived grievousness of the crime.

Relating this to Numbers 25, the actions of the Israelite men are cast as whoring, which is not only a comment on the depravity of their actions, but a portrayal of them in female terms (noting that grammatically, זנה is a feminine form). The sons of Israel are being characterized as morally loose women. This

[28] The wisdom tradition is particularly harsh in its assessment of prostitutes. See Proverbs 6:26, 7:10 23:27 and 29:3.

[29] צמד , meaning 'to bind' or 'to attach', BDB, 855. Interestingly, the Arabic cognate refers specifically to a girl bound, or joined, to two lovers.

characterization of 'the sons of Israel' as females significantly lowers the men's status in the community's hierarchy. Ironically, by the end of the chapter the blame has shifted entirely from the men and lays upon the head of the 'real' women, the daughters of Moab.

A Shared Experience?

The text of Numbers 25:1-5 includes the women of Israel in its collective terminology, though, as we have seen, the women of Israel are in no way implicated with the 'whoring' that is done by 'Israel'. It is very much a sin of the men of Israel. However, the women of Israel, the mothers and daughters of Israel are deeply impacted by the actions of their fathers and sons. From a purely textual historical perspective, they have been burdened through their inclusion under this umbrella of collective terms which fails to exclude them from blame. Indeed, by implication, the terms include them as culpable agents.

An alternative position to this is adopted by Tikva Frymer-Kensky. She argues that 'the people' necessarily includes the women, and that all of Israel sits at the table with the daughters of Moab. It is the eating of the food offered to idols which binds Israel to Baal-Peor.[30] Thus Frymer-Kensky suggests that the sexual overtones are the invention of post-biblical interpreters. As the History of Interpretation made clear, Josephus, Philo and many others read sex into this episode, casting the women of Moab as enticing, alluring seductresses, inflaming the lust of 'the sons of Israel' and ultimately leading 'Israel' astray.[31] The consequence of this reading is to divert the blame away from the weak-willed men and throwing it squarely at the feet of the foreign women. Frymer-Kensky's reading is based on a translation of זנה as 'faithless' or 'break the faith'. This fidelity is set against the notion of holiness, which she posits as its antonym; 'infidelity is anything that gets in the way of holiness'.[32] Perhaps the language could be symbolic, reflecting perhaps the highly sexualized metaphoric language of the prophets, though this is uncertain. Frymer-Kensky somewhat softens her

[30] Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 1st ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 217.
[31] Ibid, 219.
[32] Ibid, 217.

position; 'whether by food or sex, the women of Moab (or Midian) enticed Israel to sin'.[33]

As far as we can remove the women of Israel from blame throughout this episode, we are unable to remove them from the consequences. In verse 6, the entire congregation of Israel (a designation which we have seen includes them), are weeping at the tent of meeting. The reason for this communal lament goes unnamed, though by the way the narrative is constructed, we are persuaded that it is related to the whoring of the first five verses.[34] The women, clearly uninvolved in the apostasy are nonetheless bound by male-centric social convention to participate in the community's lament, which, given its location, carries some form of religious expression. Additionally, verses eight and nine mention a plague which kills 24,000 Israelites. Once again, the narrative construction appears to link this plague to Israelite male failures and possibly also stands as an explanation of the lament. That the plague is so widespread seems to indicate that women are also victims, even if (tragically) they are not included in the number of those killed.[35]

At this point, Schüssler-Fiorenza's imaginative identification becomes a valuable tool. Women are present in this text, though they are marginalized. While the main protagonists are male, it is almost certainly the women of Israel that have the most to lose, who suffer the most at the action of their men. What is the experience of seeing husbands, sons and fathers go after the Moabite women, to be the human victims of infidelity? And then, what is it to have those men return home, to have to live with the seemingly unrepentant 'whore[r]s'? This whole experience is not even glossed over; it is totally absent. This story is the story of men and yet the victims continue to be nameless, faceless across centuries of reading and interpretation.

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[33] Ibid, 218.

[34] Sarah Shectman, who suggests that vss. 6-18 are a part of H, posits that these verses follow on from the death of Aaron in Num 20:29. The communal lament is thus consistent with the mourning period for such an illustrious member of the community. The effect of this is to fracture the continuity of the two stories contained within the chapter. However, it makes no sense of the canonized form of the text which is the basis of our reading. See, Sarah Shectman, *Women in the Pentateuch : A Feminst and Source-Critical Analysis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 158. This criticism is not based on the basis of Shectman's analysis being feminist (a stance which I support), but grows out of my commitment to reading the final form of the text.

[35] This assumption is made on the basis that women and children are not included in the census.

And then, as the consequences of the apostasy are revealed, a divine order is given that the community leaders are to be impaled. This order is revoked by Moses and altered so that *all men involved* are to be put to death. Given that women find their place in the community by the nature of their relationship to men, this is a significant decree! Thousands of women and children faced the grim reality of becoming widows and orphans on account of male failure. How must the psychological trauma of this chain of events impacted upon these victims?

We must assume that these events aroused a gamut of emotional responses from the women involved; rejection, loneliness, fear, anxiety, anger, shame and so on. How then must they feel gathered together in lament? What do they feel in the presence of their violators, together weeping for things that have happened and are perhaps about to happen? Perhaps, in that moment of lament, their thoughts are not on the men who now seem repentant, though this is in some way forced upon them. Perhaps the women are lamenting their own loss, the damage done to them individually and as women, not on the damage suffered by the men, which is minimal by comparison. Perhaps this lament is therapeutic for the women of Israel, a chance to grieve a loss unspoken and unrecognized by the men, who appear to repent before Yhwh, but not before their human victims. Perhaps this is not a 'communal' lament at all. Perhaps even within the community, seemingly united in their grief there are fractures and factions.

At the same time, the location of the lament at the tent of meeting gives us reason to imagine some form of communal liturgy; a recalling of the sins of the sons of Israel. The repetition of these words must have been a bitter experience for the women, a cruel reminder of the hurts so fresh in their minds and the anxiety of what lay ahead of them. Suddenly Zimri and Cozbi appear together. The Israelite women have seen this scene before. And then in that moment of vulnerability, Phinehas, a male priest, commits a heinous crime to which they are witnesses. A spear is thrust through two human bodies, an image they will never forget, as they too consider the seemingly imminent execution of their own male family members.

The aftermath of this event is also noteworthy. Phinehas, the zealous executioner, is not sanctioned for his act of violence, but rather rewarded. His descendants, which is to say, his male descendants, will be the bearers of a new covenant, an everlasting covenant of cultic discharge. In the face of such violence at its inception, the thought of this continuing, divinely ordered male domination must have struck horror into the hearts of some of those women. Men had been the cause of this national disaster. Men are placed in positions of power to ensure (enforce?) that such things never happen again. The irony is both comical and cruel.

A further issue that demands highlighting is the characterization of male indiscretion in female terms. The verb **זנה** is, as we have seen, a female verb meaning 'to play the harlot' or more circumspectly, 'to fornicate'. The derivative noun, **זונה** is simply 'whore' or 'prostitute', as in Ezekiel 16. As we have noted, the use of this word, whether literal or figurative, is an indication of something abhorrent. The act is disgraceful; those who engage in it are a disgrace. Prepositions are used to indicate the unrelated partners and 'wronged men'.[36] What is telling is that the characterization is entirely feminine. Wickedness, evil, things that are disgraceful belong entirely to a feminine nomenclature, or as Yee suggests, women are used by (male) writers as a trope for evil and destruction.[37]

Yet in our text it is the men who are wicked, disgraceful and vile. It is the men who are the subject of the verb **זנה**. And yet, in some way they fall out of those associations on account of the female nature of the grammar. In verse 1 it is 'the people' who are said to fornicate, but as we have seen the women of Israel should not be included in this designation. Yet again, the grammar fails the female element of Israelite society so that they are never quite exempted from blame, while the men remain elusive.

[36] Erlandsson, "זָנָה."
[37] Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 3.

Sons and Daughters

At this point, it is helpful to consider some of these gendered terms used to describe particular groups of people, to see how the naming constructs the groups in view. The term 'sons of Israel', as we have seen, refers specifically to the men of Israel. The companion term, 'daughters of Israel' appears in Deut 23:17, a verse in which both sons and daughters of Israel are prohibited from being temple prostitutes. Clearly, the terms are intended to differentiate men from women. This pattern continues throughout the narrative portions of the Old Testament, where the term 'daughters of Israel' refers simply to the women of the nation.[38] In the prophetic and wisdom literature though, the expression 'daughters of Israel' is absent. However, another, more compelling term is found: Daughter(s) [of] Zion (Lam 2:31), or its parallel, Daughter(s) [of] Jerusalem (2 Kgs19:21).

In its singular form, it refers to the city of Jerusalem,[39] and her inhabitants, and refers to either the cities vulnerability to invasion or alternatively, to her promise of redemption.[40] In Lamentations, Daughter Zion has been invaded, defiled, humiliated at the hands of her enemies. No doubt, the feminine characterisation of the city follows the experience of the women who existed within her walls. While the lament makes clear that the calamity has been brought upon by the Daughter's own failings, still there remains an idealisation of her as a virgin (Lam 2:13). The term then is replete with irony, emphasising both the chaste daughter's weakness and vulnerability, but also her sinfulness.[41]

In contrast to this are the words of Zechariah. No longer is Jerusalem to mourn, or be anxious. Instead, Daughter Zion is to rejoice, to sing and to shout! Her King is coming, triumphant and victorious (Zech 9:9). The championing of the male attributes only serves to further highlight the vulnerability of the Daughter, who is in need of her male saviour.[42] The vulnerability and weakness is replaced

[38] Jesica Tinklenberg Devega, "Israel, Daughters of," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 101.
[39] Other uses of this construction include 'Daughter Babylon' (Ps 137:8), 'Daughter Tyre' (Ps 45:12) and 'Daughter Tarshish' (Isa 23:10).
[40] Larry L. Lyke, "Zion, Daughter of," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 988.
[41] Devega, "Israel, Daughters of," 101.
[42] Follis suggests that the femininity of the city may reflect the stereotypical characterisation of female nurture. While the sons are out pursuing acts of conquest at the boundaries, the daughters are at home, nurturing the community at its centre. This, she suggests, is why the expression is absent from the Torah narrative and the early part of the Deuteronomistic history, because in that

with a seemingly irresistible hope of restoration, a total reversal of the tragic past.[43] Again, the daughter is idealised: the once chaste virgin, defiled and humiliated, will be restored to her former glory again, thanks to the triumph of her saviour King.

Any idealisation of the singular daughter fails to carry through to the 'daughters of Zion'. The expression is clustered in the work of first Isaiah, and that text takes aim at the haughtiness and vanity of ladies of Jerusalem. Blenkinsopp notes that the criticism here is reminiscent of the charges laid in Amos 6:4-5,[44] and so should be understood as a critique of the upper class women ostentatiously flouting their wealth. The mention of 'ogling eyes' seems to indicate a promiscuity on the part of these women, their flamboyant dress and 'tinkling' jewellery all a ploy to attract male attention.[45] The threatened punishment is graphic: the ornate jewellery replaced by scabs on the head (NRSV) and the uncovering of their 'private parts.'[46]

In the following chapter, a restored Zion is in view, but not before the 'filth of the daughters of Zion' (Isa 4:4) has been washed away. The cleansing comes in the form of a fiery wind (רוח), an image of judgement, and recreation. The mention of the daughters of Zion heaps the guilt upon them, at the expense of the sons, who appear to escape culpability.

Of course, we must remember that the oracles of Isaiah are poetic, and so should not necessarily be taken literally. However, that the sin of Zion is reflected through a critique of her female citizens is characteristic of what feminist hermeneutics seeks to address. It appears, through the reading of Isaiah, that the 'daughters' of Zion are responsible for her downfall, though we can hardly imagine that to be the case. Surely 'daughters of Zion' is an inclusive term,

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part of the story, Israel is not settled in any way. See, Elaine R. Follis, "Zion, Daughter of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D.N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

[43] Lyke, "Zion, Daughter of," 988.

[44] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 201.

[45] R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1980), 51.

[46] Blenkinsopp notes the difficulty inherent in translating this phrase, but given other instances of the description of the treatment of prisoners of war, he opts for this translation. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 201.

encompassing all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Herein lies the problem. Sinfulness, even of men, is painted in feminist hues.

The final group of women to be considered are the daughters of Moab. The Moabites descend from the incestuous union of Lot and his daughter in Gen 19:37. The rabbinic tradition cites this union as the beginning of a history of debauchery by the Moabite women: 'The one who began in harlotry in the beginning (Lot's daughter), finally committed it again (the Moabite women).'[47] Interestingly, the women of Moab are the ones here accused of harlotry, while the text is clear in laying the charge of whoring against the sons of Israel. Further, biblical and post-biblical tradition surrounding this event lays blame at Balaam's feet. Numbers 31:16 claims that Baalam advises Balak to use the women of Moab to entice the Israelite men to 'act treacherously against Yhwh'.[48] This exchange is nowhere to be found in the biblical report of their exchange. Indeed, when Baalam had finished blessing the Israelites, the bible records that he returns home (Num 24:25).

Just as the daughters of Zion are painted as troublesome, so too are the daughters of Moab. By the end of Num 25, it will be the women who appear responsible for Israelite failure. As the Chapter II.1 revealed, historically, the women have been imagined as adorning themselves with jewellery and make up in much the same way that the court women who attracted the ire of Isaiah had done for the purpose of attracting young men.

Sadly, the daughters of Israel rate no mention in this particular story. In its sequel, Israel (no doubt, her sons) makes vengeance against the Midianites, again leaving the daughters behind. Perhaps some of the sons perished in the battle, leaving daughters to live their days as widows. Those that returned brought new women with them, and new girls (Num 31:17-18). We can only imagine how the daughters felt about that.

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[47] 'B'midbar rabbah 20.23', cited in Judith R. Baskin, "Post-biblical Interpretations: Parashat Balak," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), 955.

[48] Ibid. The women are said to have got the Israelite men intoxicated and then refused to sleep with them until that had sacrificed and bowed down to Baal-Peor.

Throughout the story, one woman is mentioned. She isn't a daughter of Israel, nor is she a daughter of Moab. Her name is Cozbi.

B. 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 being a man whose name will never be erased from human history. Instructive also is Naomi, whose name means pleasant but 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 (Hos 1). Either way, the names say something about the children. This power also belongs to the narrator. It is through his words that the story is revealed, that characters are given names, 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 who turns her neck away.[49] 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 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[50]. This is particularly true of Cozbi, daughter of Zur.

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

Cozbi's Name

The root from which the name Cozbi derives is כזב, which in its verbal forms is best translated 'to lie' or 'to be a liar'[51]. Its noun forms are consequently translated 'lie', 'deception' and 'falsehood'.[52] 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…' Its use in cognate languages adds to this negative picture. In Akkadian, *kubzu* means 'voluptuous, sexually vigorous'[53], or further, 'luxuriant, abundant, charm, attractiveness' and euphemistically, 'sexual parts'.[54] Together, these understandings paint quite a particular picture of Cozbi. She is both 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. Another 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! Lutzky argues that the sexualized nature of Cozbi's name, which derives from other Semitic languages, must surely have been known in Hebrew, given the eroticized nature of the early commentators.[55] 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[56] as 'their sister'. Cozbi then is portrayed as a trickster, a deceiver, as her name attests; her name carries a metonymic function.[57] Talmudic tradition

[51] R. Mosis, "I כּזָב," 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.
[52] 'כזב', in BDB, 469.
[53] 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.
[54] Harriet C. Lutzky, "The Name "Cozbi" (Numbers XXV 15, 18)," *Vetus Testamentum* 47, no. 4 (1997), 547.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Presumably these are the daughter of Moab in vss. 1-5.
[57] This is the same narrative play used with Orpah. For more on use of metaphor and metonym in socio-linguistics and discourse analysis, see Matthews, *More than Meets the Ear : Discovering the Hidden Contexts of Old Testament Conversations*, Chapter 1.

recalls her powers of seduction, suggesting that even Moses fell victim to her irresistible charm.[58]

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 fooled the Israelites. The 'delusion' reflects the expectations and perception of the people deceived only after the ruse, and so the use of the name 'Cozbi' 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,[59] 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.[60] 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 mute, unable to contribute anything

[58] Cited in J.F. Ross, "Cozbi," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 724.
[59] The appearance of Midianites as an oppressive force in Judges 6 is evidence that the command to utterly destroy Midian was not fulfilled.
[60] 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.

to the articulate Eve.[61] Also prominent amongst such readings is the recognition that the Hebrew word עזר 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[62], 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 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[63] 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 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. While it would be speculative to suggest that Midianite and Israelite social structure were congruous, it is to be expected that there were at least some strong similarities given their geographical proximity and the reports of their closeness at various points within the Torah narrative.

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[61] 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.
[62] 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.
[63] See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

Familial Matters

In Num 25:14-15, the names of the couple at the centre of the drama are revealed.[64] 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 נשיא, or 'chief'[65] of the ancestral house. Cozbi's ancestral house is unnamed, though we discover that her father, Zur, is the ראש אמות, 'head[66] of a tribe' or, head of his ancestral house.

That the fathers of both Zimri and Cozbi are referred to in similar ways lends credence to the possibility that socially, Midian and Israel were similarly structured.[67] Within Israel, the family unit was termed בית־אב, literally '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.[68] 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.[69] 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[70] indicate the primacy of the male; women are rarely mentioned. Within marriages, the wife was to refer

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[64] That their names are withheld until this point is telling. Now they are named, and forever shamed. Bal, *Lethal Love : Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*, 129. points out that the naming 'completes' their formation; their names, in particularly Cozbi's name, is 'fixed' into our memory.

[65] This form derives from the verbal form נשא, '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.

[66] 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 'Translation', and BDB, 910 ff.

[67] Helmer Ringgren, "ב□א," 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.

[68] Ibid., 9.

[69] Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible*, 35.

[70] Ringgren, "9 ",ב□א. Ringgren points out that the expression is most commonly found in lists. However, it is not exclusively so. Abram is commanded to leave his בית־אב at the commencement of his journey towards the promised land.

to her husband as *ba'al*, that is, master.[71] The father of the family unit wields absolute power over his children, even his married sons and wives if they live in his household.[72] This 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.[73] However, she did not become a full member of his house until she bore a son.[74] 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.[75]

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[76] 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[77] wife,

[71] This language is borrowed metaphorically in Hos. 2:16.
[72] de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, 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, "בַּיִת," 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.
[73] de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, 26. Hoffner, "115 ",בַּיִת. 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.
[74] This situation could lead to jealousy between co-wives. See 1 Sam. 1 as an example.
[75] Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible*, 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.
[76] Exod. 34.17-18, Deut. 7. It should be noted that the bible contains a variety of stances on this issue. While there are clear denunciations of inter-marriage, P is not so absolute. See, Sarah Shectman, *Women in the Pentateuch : A Feminst and Source-Critical Analysis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009); Sarah Shectman, "Rachel, Leah, and the Composition of the Pentateuch " in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, ed. Thomas B Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).
[77] Or perhaps a Cushite.

Ruth and Orpah were Moabite,[78] 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.[79] 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 (see Mal 2).

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 (but Aaron, equally culpable, is spared, the implication being that Miriam was behind the plot against Moses!) 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 to marry into another nation served to

[78] 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 ancestress of David destabilizes the notion of the danger of foreign women.

[79] 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.

strip her of any power she may have held within her own nation. The example of Num. 12 indicates that even within families so affected such marriages were coolly received. 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,[80] 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 woman Cozbi is a surrogate victim of Moses' wife-sister.[81] Perhaps this is pushing the issue too far. After all, Num. 12, as we have seen appears to regard the foreignness 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.

Stepping Back

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 elements 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*.[82] This was not always the case though, as sons were able to

[80] 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: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 224.
[81] 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.
[82] This is a payment made by the bridegroom to the bride's parents.

act of their own accord, perhaps even against the wishes of their parents.[83] 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,[84] 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 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[85] which we 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.[86]

This family celebration[87] 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 wellbeing or otherwise may 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 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 the Israelite man had committed a crime of some seriousness, though what it is certainly not specified.[88] That it involves his

[83] de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, 30. For example, Esau is Gen. 26:34-35.
[84] We must not assume this. After all, as we have seen, such marriages were not unknown.
[85] 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 examples. This was followed by a seven day feast, though the consummation took place on the first evening.
[86] Gen. 24:67, Gen. 29:23,30
[87] That is, the family of the bridegroom. There is no reason to assume that the bride has it in mind to celebrate! Her involvement in the event and the celebration is nonetheless mandatory.
[88] Shectman, *Women in the Pentateuch : A Feminst and Source-Critical Analysis* 163. Attributing this passage to H Shectman suggests that the crime committed is encroaching upon the sanctuary, a crime punishable by death. This is plausible in some sense, though it makes no sense

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 than a subject to it. At this point she is vulnerable, lacking any tangible sense of self-determination.

Cozbi the culprit?

'What makes a woman like Cozbi do this?'[89] is a telling question. As we saw in Section II, tt represents much of the history of interpretation round this issue which has levelled 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.'[90] 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,

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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, or 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 Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic; Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, 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.

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

[90] Ibid.

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?[91] 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 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.'[92]

The Hero Emerges

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[93] 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 Rabbis, it was this divine interjection which saved Phinehas from excommunication.[94] Milgrom claims that it is possible to defend Phinehas

[91] Ibid., 88.
[92] Helena Zlotnick Sivan, "The Rape of Cozbi (Numbers XXV)," *Vetus Testamentum* 51, no. 1 (2001), 69ff.
[93] TJ Sanh. 27b, cited in Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-midbar] : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, 477.
[94] Ibid.

on the grounds that he was following a command from God.[95] 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, so 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 agrees, this was an impulsive, perhaps even reckless act. Sivan takes this even further. She suggests that the stabbing of Cozbi with a spear which penetrates her belly constitutes an act of rape.[96] 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.'[97] 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.[98] 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 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.[99] 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 figures are easy targets for 'heroes'. Victories over them justify one's claim to the centre[100] which is where the divine decree places Phinehas and his descendants.

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[95] Ibid.
[96] 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.'
[97] Sivan, "The Rape of Cozbi (Numbers XXV)," 74.
[98] Bal and Jobling, *On Storytelling : Essays in Narratology*, 68.
[99] Bal, *Lethal Love : Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*, 37.
[100] Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy : The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible*, 225.

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.

[Re]Naming Cozbi?

How then might 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[101] 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 all been deceived, ironically, by their own false understanding of who Cozbi 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.

A recent article by Deborah Rooke clearly articulates the issue.[102] 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 androcentric interpretation that new light was able to be cast upon it.

[101] Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam : A Woman's Commentary on the Torah*, 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.

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

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.

Chapter III.3

Postcolonial Interpretation

A. A Short Introduction to Postcolonial Theory

Orientalism and Essentialism

In 1978, Edward Said published his seminal work, *Orientalism*, in which he launched a sustained attack on the history of western thought and education in relation to the East. Said, a Palestinian literary critic working in the United States argued that the East, as perceived in the history of western scholarship, was essentially a construct. In his view, terms such as oriental, Hindu, Muslim and so on are simply inventions, part of a compartmentalisation of Eastern phenomena into a manageable, easily manipulated system. The inevitable conclusion of Said's argument is that western thought has been illusory, fundamentally racist, and re-creative rather than descriptive or analytical. He consequently labels the history of western thought about the orient as essentialist.[1]

The publication of *Orientalism* marks a watershed moment in the history of postcolonialism. It would be incorrect to claim that the book occasioned the birth of postcolonial studies, but it was an affirmation that postcolonial theory had arrived and quickly set an agenda which could be appropriated by other disciplines. This comment reveals something significant about postcolonialism. It is not a discipline in and of itself in the way biblical studies or anthropology may be considered a discipline. Postcolonialism has been put to use across the spectrum of the humanities, as well as in 'scientific' fields such as environmental studies. Perhaps then, it is better to consider the range of studies that engage postcolonialism as a field,[2] and an immensely wide one at that.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin define the subject of postcolonialism as the 'effects of colonization on societies and cultures.'[3] The breadth of this definition is concordant with what has been discussed above and provides a basis for the

[1] Of course, by making such an all encompassing claim, Said too flirts with the label 'essentialist'. Nonetheless, the enduring significance of his work attests to the strength of his project.
[2] Here, I am defining 'discipline' in a comparatively narrow way. For example, 'History' could be considered a discipline, whereas I am defining 'field' more broadly, for example, 'the humanities'. Postcolonialism is not a 'discipline', but a theory taken up by various 'disciplines'. Indeed, so broad is its reach, that it crosses fields.
[3] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, "Post-Colonialism/Postcolonialism," in *Post-Colonial Studies: the Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

ongoing expansion of postcolonialism as a field. Postcolonialism is dynamic by nature, as it continues to explore the often traumatic affects of the colonial enterprise, all the while discovering new areas of enquiry and critique. This too is suggestive: postcolonialism is not just descriptive, but analytical and critical also. It is above all things a discursive voice, with an eye to the grand meta-narratives that have shaped, and indeed continue to shape, history: North-South, East-West, Euro-Asian, Empire-Native, Orient-Occident, Centre-Margin. However, as Clarke reminds us, postcolonial discourse takes place within local, micro-narrative contexts, and deals with issues particular to that place.[4]

While it is true that postcolonial discourse is an unashamedly discursive voice, it also strives to be a constructive voice. In this, it ideally tries to avoid the excesses of its close cousin, or more appropriately, older sibling, liberation theology, in uniformly deifying the poor and demonizing the rich. Postcolonial discourse needs to be cognizant of the reality that structures of oppression and suppression are not the sole possession of colonial powers. For instance, Clarke[5] outlines a five tiered caste system which operated long before the imperial powers arrived on the shores of Asia. Those who were born within the lower castes were condemned to lives of social inferiority from which they could never escape, the so-called *sub-altern*. This term was coined by Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, and refers to the group(s) within society that are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes.[6] Postcolonial studies picked up the term, particularly scholars interested in historiography in the South Asian context. While this is a local concern and should not be universalised, it is also true that issues such as gender inequality, racially based violence, tribalism and so on are a part of the history of a large part of the 'colonised' world. To simplistically portray victims of colonialism as helpless innocents is a mistake and paints postcolonialism as a dissident monologue. Bearing the tension in mind creates a space to break down the binary notions of coloniser-colonised and allows critical exchange between the two, recognising that in a postcolonial space, both exist together, in an admittedly complex relationship.[7]

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[4] Sathianathan Clarke, "Viewing the Bible Through the Eyes and Ears of Subalterns in India," *Biblical Interpretation* 2, no. 10 (2002).
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, "Subaltern," 198-201.
[7] R. S. Sugirtharajah, "A Brief Memorandum on Postcolonialism and Biblical Studies," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 21, no. 73 (1999).

As previously noted, Said's project in *Orientalism* highlight the rampant fixity, or what we might also term essentialism, in the academic work and the attitude from the West concerning the East. Essentialism is the assumption that groups or classes of people can be defined through particular qualities exclusively and uniformly carried by that group.[8] Of course, such a practice or attitude has a polemical function; the group in question is compared unfavourably against the powerful group. The 'Oriental' then is described as irrational, depraved, childlike, "different", the implication being that the European is rational, virtuous, mature, "normal".[9] Other such binaries are primitive-developed and savage-civilised. Having described 'orientals' in such a fashion, or perhaps better, in constructing the orient is this way, in which the West claims some form of natural authority over it, it is not hard to see how an ideology of invasion and subjugation is imagined. Said summarizes this line of thought in this way: 'There are Westerners and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power.'[10] One can see this pattern in the history of the West's posture towards the Orient, a posture which continues in large part through to the present day.

Essentialism in the Scriptural Narrative

As revealing an argument as Said's is, to label fixity as simply a Western imperial trait fails to take account of the reality that the history of the peoples of the world is a history of domination and subjugation. The narrative of Israel is largely congruent with Said's observation of the western construction of the Orient. Within the narrative Israel, Israel are characterised as a subjected people[11] in Egypt, state slaves of the most powerful Imperial centre of the time. Their story of escape, a powerful paradigm for other enslaved[12] groups across history, did not lead them to a place of peace. Rather, the ensuing story of their conquest of Canaan (modern day Palestine) shows the people of Israel as an essentialising

[8] Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, "Essentialism/Strategic Essentialism," 73-75.
[9] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2003), 40.
[10] Ibid., 36.
[11] While it is true that Israel's emergence as a nation is generally linked to the events at Mount Sinai (Ex 19-32), the Pharaoh of the Exodus story refers specifically to the 'Israelite people' (Ex 1:9). So at least on a narrative level, Israel exists in Egypt.
[12] Used here to describe all manner of enslavements.

nation with their own aspirations of domination and control. Indeed, Israel's colonial ambitions are canonized and legitimized through Divine instruction. It is Yhwh, who later becomes Israel's god, who initially tells Abraham about the land that will be 'given' to his ancestors (Gen 12:1), the land we discover in Exodus 3:8 which is already inhabited by Canaanites, Hivites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites and Jebusites. It is a land not to be given, but taken, and taken with extreme force. The narrative development of this theme is striking. In Ex 23:23-33, the text indicate that the angel of the Lord will drive the inhabitants out. The original inhabitants will be expelled and the people of Israel are warned not to intermarry, nor to form covenants with them.[13]

In Num 33: 51-56, the agency of expulsion has shifted. No longer is the angel in view. Instead, the people of Israel are told that they will drive the inhabitants out. In both instances are instructions to destroy the apparatus of the local cults and to by no means worship their gods. In Deut 7: 2, as Moses stands before the people of Israel and addresses them for the last time, the nature of the impending conquest has changed. No longer are the people of Israel to drive people out. Instead they are to 'defeat them, then utterly destroy them … and show them no mercy.' The reason for this destruction has to do with the unique nature of Israel; a people chosen by God out of all the peoples of the earth to be his treasured possession. (Deut 7: 6) Further justification for this destruction is the abhorrent nature and practices of the indigenous Canaanites. (Deut 18: 9) This has to be read as commending the 'pure' practices of Israel. The litany of Israel's failure in Psalm 106 reiterates this theme. Their attachment to local gods (Ps 106:28), their serving of idols (vs. 36), the sacrifice of their children to demons (vs. 37) make them 'unclean' (vs. 39). The ongoing danger is summed up in the final affirmation, 'Save us…and gather us from among the nations' (vs. 47)

What is present in the Old Testament narrative then is a construction of the inhabitants of Canaan which paints them as unclean, and which condemns their

[13] Baruch J. Schwartz, "Reexamining the Fate of the "Canaanites" in the Torah Traditions," in *The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, Qumran, and Post-Biblical Judaism*, ed. Chaim Cohen, Avi Hurvitz, and Shalom M. Paul (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 153. Schwartz identifies two distinct views in the non-P literature. In the D tradition, the inhabitants are wiped out (following the command of Deut 7:2), while in J and E, which he describes as 'pre-deuteronomic', the inhabitants flee Canaan in the face of Israelite invasion.

lives as abhorrent and classifies them as expendable. Their land is the rightful inheritance of Yhwh's treasured possession, the only correct response to them is to annihilate them completely.[14]

To suggest that fixity, or the notion of essentialism as a legitimation for destruction necessarily plays itself out in the text of the Old Testament is not universally true. While the divine decree to destroy everything is issued, the text reminds us that such brutal destruction, this was often too much to ask of the Israelite people. It seems that there was mass destruction of cities at some point but this practice lost its urgency as time passed. Of course, such a view relies on a reading of the text that takes its historical claims seriously.[15] If we were to follow the understanding of process championed by Gottwald,[16] that the conquest was no militaristic conquest, but a peaceful infiltration, or even a peasant uprising, this makes sense of the continued presence of indigenous peoples in Canaan, but makes no sense of the presence of the divine decrees to the extermination of the original inhabitants of the land. Again, we are confronted with the incongruity of the brutality of the text and a less brutal reality.

In recent scholarship, questions around the integrity of the biblical narrative has been a highly contentious site in biblical studies, particularly in relation to Israel's origins.[17] Mark Brett has carefully examined the dispute, seeking the 'broad range of opinion that lies between the two extremes.'[18] What Brett finds is a consensus that early Israel, sometimes referred to as 'proto-Israel', was itself indigenous to Canaan. Israel then has some continuity with their Canaanite neighbours, which is reflected in much of the similarity which is evident between

[14] It is important to clarify that while this is the dominant attitude, the Old Testament is not univocal on this issue. Even within the Torah we read an alternate view of particular 'outsiders' who seem not to threaten Israel, such as Jethro. In the conquest narrative, it is the Canaanite Rahab who plays a major role. While these are isolated figures in the narrative, their presence serves to interrupt the dominant ideology, and threaten then overturn it.

[15] Coogan, amongst many others, states that it is nigh on impossible to take the conquest narrative at face value. Rather, it is better to think of the narrative as an extended etiology written several centuries after the events in an attempt to explain how the Israelites came to inhabit the land of Canaan. Almost certainly, violence would have been involved, and some of these narratives may have some historical basis. However, no data is available which supports the kind of aggressive conquest imagined by the author of the biblical text. See, Michael David Coogan, *The Old Testament : A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 206.

[16] For a discussion of this, see Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible : A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2002), 157.

[17] See discussion of this struggle on Pg 7.

[18] Brett, *Decolonizing God*, 63.

Israel and her neighbours. Over some period of time, perhaps involving waves of resettlement, this group begins to form its own ethnic identity, distinct from her neighbours.

Ambivalence

Another way of considering this problem comes from postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, who has written extensively on the notion of ambivalence. Ambivalence was originally coined in the field of psychoanalysis and describes a fluctuation of desires for one thing and its' opposite. It refers to an attraction to something with a simultaneous repulsion.[19] By describing the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized with this term, the polarity of the binary is problematized. No longer can the relationship be conceived of in such absolute terms. The colonizer is never totally set against the colonized, and conversely, the colonizer is never fully demonized by the colonized. Instead, the two exist in a fluid relationship which is characterised by fluctuation between exploitation and nurture, desire and derision.[20] As Liew puts it, Bhabha's theory discloses the incoherence, insecurity and incompleteness of empire.[21]

The notion of ambivalence is built upon the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of 'otherness'.[22] Fixity produces the colonial stereotype, which Bhabha calls the major discursive strategy of colonial discourse, so that certain characteristics of colonised people are 'known', such as the duplicity of the Asiatic, the bestial sexual license of the African and so on.[23] Bhabha goes on to discuss how the exercise of colonial power has a sexual element, which is particularly crucial an understanding of ambivalence.

The presumed sexual deviancy of the Africans is a theme established by Bhabha's precursor, Frantz Fanon. His work, *Black Skin, White Masks* provides an insight into the coloniser's fear of black men: 'Our women are at the mercy of the

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[19] Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, "Ambivalence," 10-11.
[20] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge Classics (London Routledge, 2004), 96.
[21] Liew, "Postcolonial Criticism: Echoes of a Subaltern's Contribution and Exclusion," 215.
[22] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 95.
[23] Ibid. Such stereotyping is commonplace in the current discourse in Australia surrounding asylum seekers. These people are cast as 'queue jumpers', and more recently had their actions described as 'un-Christian' by the Australian Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott. See Julian Burnside, "Boat people un-Christian? Wrong, Mr Abbott," http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/4123872.html. Accessed, 24th November, 2012

Negroes…God knows how they make love.'[24] The view of the profane sexuality of the Negroes adds to the understanding of them as degenerate, justifying conquest (of land and body) and the establishment of administration and instruction.[25] This litany reveals ambivalence: rather than destruction, there is instruction. The aim of the litany is to produce compliant subjects; subjects who reproduce the assumptions, habits and values of the colonisers.[26] However, the result is *mimicry*, which is always far closer to mockery than it is to compliance. Mimicry undermines colonial authority. Citing Lacan, Bhabha says that mimicry is like camouflage; a form of resemblance, *Almost the same but not white.*[27] Bhabha's conclusion is that the colonial relationship generates the seeds of its own destruction: the colonisers never really want the subjects to be exact replicas, as that would undermine the reason for invasion; removing difference and achieving sameness serves to make colonisation indefensible.[28] Instead the relationship fluctuates, sometimes nurturing, at others exploitative, sometimes both.[29]

The Hebrew Scriptures assert a divine warrant for the genocide of various ethnic groups who exist in the so called promised land. Deut. 7:2 makes it painfully clear: 'Show them no mercy.' And yet the scriptures also make it clear that this decree to wipe out whole peoples never really comes to fruition. Num 25 is a great example of this. The decree comes to 'be hostile and destroy' the Midianites. But in Num 31 when the story of the war is told, virgin women and female children are kept. Later, in the period of the Judges, Gideon goes to battle with the Midianites, again with the decree to destroy them completely, evidence that the earlier destruction was incomplete. At the end of Joshua's life, he exhorts the people of Israel to finish the task of taking the land, which can only possibly mean that Israel continued to mingle with the people of the land.

Ambivalence is a credible explanation for this situation. It is clear from the narrative that taking foreign wives was common practice, its prevalence seemingly pointing to periods of co-existence and friendly relations between

[24] Cited in, ibid., 59.
[25] Ibid., 101.
[26] Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, "Ambivalence," 10.
[27] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 128.
[28] Liew, "Postcolonial Criticism: Echoes of a Subaltern's Contribution and Exclusion," 220.
[29] Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, "Ambivalence."

Israel and the nations it is called to destroy. Nothing much changes: at the end of the Old Testament narrative, Ezra's complaint is that the men left behind in Judea have (again) taken foreign wives, compromising themselves in the process. Ezra seems unaware that the returning exiles themselves are the product of colonial hybridity, their survival almost certainly the result of mimicry in the colonial centre of the Persian empire. Ironically, it is as agents of the empire that they return, the younger ones almost certainly more Babylonian than Judean.

Said and Bhabha, joined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak[30] are the three pillars in the emergence of postcolonial criticism: any history or review of the field begins with them. The following section moves from postcolonial criticism to its appropriation within biblical studies. As was established earlier, postcolonialism is not to be considered as a discipline in itself, but rather, provides an agenda for use in other disciplines. In looking at biblical studies, the focus is placed upon two edited works which engage postcolonialism in various ways. The aim is not to provide a history,[31] but to demonstrate the engagement of biblical studies with postcolonial criticism.

B. The Bible and Postcolonial Interpretation

It seems almost self-evident that postcolonial criticism should prove to be a fruitful tool for biblical interpretation. After all, the biblical story is the story of successive empires: of Egypt, Israel, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Rome. It is the story of a people both as subjects and ruler. The attitude of Israel to itself, as subject and ruler, and its attitude to its rulers and subjects is an enormous area to be covered.

An equally, if not more important focus is the history of the reception of the text(s). It is true that the bible is one of the foundational documents of western civilization and that it has been used to condone western behaviour, particularly in relation to the West's dealing with the East. Indeed, the influence of the bible in the development of the world-view Said termed 'Orientalism' is immense. For example, in 1910, Frenchman Jules Harmand commented

[30] Space precludes as examination of Spivak's work here. She has pioneered work in highlighting the way in which the *subaltern* has been ignored in both society and scholarly discourse.
[31] For a more comprehensive survey, see Bradley L. Crowell, "Postcolonial Studies and the Hebrew Bible," *Currents in Biblical Research* 7, no. 2 (2009).

> It is necessary, then, to accept as a principle and point of departure the fact that there is a hierarchy of races and civilisations, and that we belong to the superior race and civilisation, still recognising that, while superiority confers rights, it imposes strict obligations in return. The basic legitimation of conquest over native peoples is the conviction of our superiority, not merely our mechanical, economic and military superiority, but our moral superiority. Our dignity rests on that quality, and it underlies our right to direct the rest of humanity.[32]

Biblical themes lurk stealthily behind this ideology of invasion, though its influence is not mentioned explicitly. Within these few sentences are found some of the key issues of postcolonial critique. We have an elected people, a 'superior' race with superiority caste in absolute terms, assumed degeneracy of 'native people', a legitimate conquest and a right to direct 'the rest' of humanity. Of course, all of these themes are taken directly from the pages of the bible, which while not cited directly, undergirds the supposed authority of this kind of statement. This, Harmand seems to believe, is a god ordained reality.

Even in the midst of the colonial enterprise undertaken by the West the bible played a crucial role. It travelled on the ships with the invaders, the strongest weapon of [the] conquest.[33] As colonies were established the bible was used to impose upon the minds of the subjected people their natural inferiority, the degeneracy of their culture and the practices, the need to convert. Written in a language the native people could not speak nor read, with an authority they could not question, the bible became the greatest tool in the colonial project.

Today of course, the bible plays a less visible role in our culture. There is a constant stream of data lamenting the declining place of scripture in our society, highlighted by recent controversy in New South Wales regarding the emergence of ethics classes as an option to traditional scripture classes in primary schools. Nonetheless, the bible is still present, its influence still lingering, particularly around what we might call postcolonial issues.[34] Simmering tension in Australia

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[32] Cited in, Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), 17.
[33] *For the Healing of Nations* 1916: 30, cited in R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 74.
[34] See, Roland Boer, *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes*, New Slant (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

around the continuing rise of Islam and the perceived threat is one such example. So too is the underlying anxiety around boat people and their 'invasion' of our promised land.

Even though the era of colony is largely past us, and we live in a post-colonial world, the effects of colonisation live on in political and educational systems, in issues of national and cultural identity and so on. Indeed, globalisation is a factor of the postcolonial world, insofar as it seeks to establish a hegemonic world dictated almost uniformly by the standards of the West. As Ashcroft *et al.* suggest, the process of the world becoming a single place[35] at the expense of cultural diversity is one of the hallmarks of the colonial project. Biblical studies has a role to play in each of these discourses, to enlighten and critique contemporary attitudes to these significant issues and in the acknowledgement that the bible has played a significant role in their formation.

In light of this history, perhaps it is not surprising that postcolonial criticism has been slow in infiltrating the field of biblical studies. The existent field, so thoroughly White seems to have so much to lose. Postcolonial criticism threatens to tear down much of the received wisdom upon which the field rests and to reveal the reality that even amongst people of faith, people who by their mouths are committed to peace, a culture of domination has been allowed to develop unchecked. It is this religious element to biblical studies, in that many of its practitioners are engaged specifically because of their confessional stance toward the scripture, which stands to lose the most.

Voices From the Margin

One cannot talk of postcolonial theory and biblical studies without reference to R.S. Sugirtharjah. A Sri Lankan born academic, Sugirtharajah has been at the forefront of postcolonial theories emergence within the field, both through the publication of monographs, and equally importantly, and through the editing of very significant volumes.[36] The importance of the edited volumes is closely tied

[35] Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, "Globalization."
[36] See, R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed. *Voices From the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991); R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed. *Voices From the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, New ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995); R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed. *The Postcolonial Bible*, Bible and Postcolonialism (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*; R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*

to the nature of postcolonial criticism: there is no singular, universal postcolonial experience. Rather, it is a multi-vocal, multi-valent field that must necessarily place different voices in dialogue with each other. The finest example of this type of work is the volume *Voices From The Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*.[37] This important work first appeared in 1991 with a second edition in 1995. In 2006, an expanded and revised third edition appeared. In the fifteen years since its initial appearance, much had changed in biblical studies, including the rise of postcolonial criticism.[38] In retrospect, it seems as if the 1991 edition were the nascent steps of postcolonial criticism into the world of biblical studies, something not quite grasped at the time. The 2006 edition though, with its new postcolonial emphasis seems to understand its new place.[39]

In his own contribution to the volume[40] Sugirtharajah places postcolonial criticism in conversation with two of its partners: feminism and liberation hermeneutics. Both of these strategies pre-date the emergence of postcolonial discourse, particularly in biblical studies. It is the relationship with liberation hermeneutics which is most telling. Sugirthrajah notes the points of convergence; championing the aspiration and elevation of the subaltern "other" and a rejection of the idea of objectivity, neutrality and universalising reading practices; resistance and liberation; the disruption of western hermeneutical discourse; the commitment to political stance and moral vision while being aware of the hazards of such prescriptions.[41] On these things, liberationist and postcolonial hermeneutics agree. However, Sugirtharajah goes on to distinguish the points of

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and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Sugirtharajah, *Voices From the Margin, 3rd edn*; R. S. Sugirtharajah, "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation," in *Voices from the Margin*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (New York: Orbis Books, 2006); R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

[37] Sugirtharajah, *Voices From the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World.*

[38] Sugirtharajah seems not to share this optimistic view. The Introduction to the third edition is titled *Still at the Margins*, making clear the continued peripheral status of such hermeneutical approaches.

[39] It is worth noting that Gerald West lamented what he saw as a caricature of liberation hermeneutics in Sugirtharajah's work, particularly, the omission of his compatriot, Itumeleng Mosala's work from the 3rd volume. Sugirtharajah sees Mosala as a pivotal figure from liberation hermeneutics to postcolonial hermeneutics, a stance West is not convinced by. See, Gerald O. West, "Sugirtharajah, R.S., ed. *Voices From the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, 3rd edition.," *Review of Biblical Literature* 2007, no. 05 (2007). In a 2009 article, West takes up this issue again. See, Gerald O. West, "What Difference Does Postcolonial Biblical Criticism Make? Reflections From a (South) African Perspective," in *Postcolonial Interventions*, ed. Tat-Siong Benny Liew (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009).

[40] Sugirtharajah, "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation."

[41] Ibid, 77.

divergence, seeing them rooted in liberation hermeneutics' background in modernist discourse and postcolonial background in postmodern discourse. One of the results of this difference is the reality that liberation hermeneutics seeks to enforce the authority of the bible. This flows into the other areas of divergence that Sugirtharajah identifies. Particular biblical images and motives are deployed without a critical awareness of the problems posed by such motifs. The Exodus motif is paradigmatic of this approach. So long the foundational text of the liberation movement, given its dramatic story of escape from enslavement and the overthrow of imperial power, liberation hermeneutics ignored the underside of the story which wreaked havoc for the people of Egypt and the people of Canaan. It also forgets that one of the immediate acts following the exodus was the regulating of conditions regarding the buying and selling of slaves (Ex 21: 1-11).[42] Such behaviours stand against the very thing that liberation hermeneutics fight against and so undermine the entire enterprise.

Also noted is the Christian-centric nature of liberation hermeneutics. Emerging as it did from the heavily Roman Catholic continent of South America, perhaps this is no surprise. However, the moral vision of liberation hermeneutics is one drawn from the bible itself and more broadly, from other Christian sources. Postcolonial criticism takes a wider view, being informed by other religious traditions and recognising that the bible's moral vision is in no way innocent. Indeed, as we have already seen, the bible was the chief ideological weapon of the colonial project. Should liberation hermeneutics abandon 'its unrelieved biblicism', Sugirtharajah comments, 'it should be able to join postcolonial thinking to work for a different world from the one we live in.'[43]

This final comment provides a keen insight to the development of *Voices* across its three editions. The 1991 edition and the 1995 were born in the aftermath of the euphoric days of liberation hermeneutics. As Gerald West notes, they were drenched with the ideas of liberation theology.[44] By 2006, the idealism of that time was past. The 'margin', previously a site of protest and counter-reading, has been crowded by an angry, militant, reactionary segment who seek to silence the

[42] Ibid, 78ff.
[43] Ibid, 80
[44] West, "Sugirtharajah, R.S., ed. *Voices From the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, 3rd edition.," 2.

reader and flatten the trajectory of the text, freezing the meaning forever.[45] So, Sugirthrajah surmises, the hope that the initial appearance of *Voices* provided, enabling people to see God as siding with the poor, has been eroded by a loud speaking group that instead preaches a message of a retaliatory, vengeful God.[46] Across the time-span that separated the various editions of *Voices* , the view of the bible had changed: no longer was it seen as a source of hope, but rather, it had become a tool of hate.

In response to this situation, Sugirtharajah calls for an alliance between postcolonialism and other liberative discourses, such as feminism and liberation hermeneutics. It seems that he hopes such an alliance will fulfil several significant goals, primarily countering the current fanaticism of the margin. However, surely far greater a goal than that should be strived for. Such an alliance may see the overturn the colonial spirit at the heart of the biblical material and scholarship as it seeks to address issues confronted in the realities of peoples' lives.[47] This echoes concerns he had voiced in 2002, noting the detached nature of biblical studies from the contemporary world and its accompanying social and political issues.[48]

In a 1999 editorial[49] Sugirtharajah discussed three things that postcolonial criticism could bring to biblical studies. Firstly the need to reconsider the colonial influence within the text, embedded in the content, plot and characterization. How colonial intentions and assumptions influence the production of the text also fall into this category. As a result, lost voices and causes can be resurrected. Secondly, Sugirtharajah suggested that postcolonial criticism take on a reconstructive approach with sensitivity to feminist and subaltern concerns. Here we see the germination of his later call for interpretive-methodological alliances. He almost immediately comments that the success of postcolonial criticism will rest with its ability to engage more than one constituency, again reinforcing the need for a joint effort.[50] Thirdly, an interrogation of colonial and metropolitan interpretations with a view to revealing

[45] Sugirtharajah, *Voices From the Margin, 3rd edn.*, 3.
[46] Ibid. See also, Boer, *Rescuing the Bible*.
[47] Sugirtharajah, "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation," 68.
[48] Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 26.
[49] Sugirtharajah, "A Brief Memorandum on Postcolonialism and Biblical Studies."
[50] Ibid., 5.

the colonial influence upon commentarial writing, historical records and so on that form the material of biblical studies. In 2006, these aims are restated[51] with little revision. The content remains essentially the same, though perhaps the latter statement is more finely nuanced and more carefully grouped. Perhaps this stands behind his claim that it is still too soon to celebrate the 'grand hermeneutical achievements' of postcolonialism[52] in biblical studies. These continuing emphases point to the reality that there is still much to be done, despite modest success in its early endeavours. Most positively, Sugirtharajah notes that postcolonial critics have proven capable of exploring a wide range of issues; local and global, vernacular to cosmopolitan and as such have been able to appeal to a wide constituency, fulfilling one of the keys to its ongoing influence.

As a way of pointing to the future, Sugirtharajah lists three future tasks for postcolonial biblical studies: an appraisal of the role of biblical studies in assisting and reinforcing colonialism, a return to inventive fiction writing and thirdly, an increasingly demanding role of vigilance in light of the return of imperial discourse in contemporary political discourse. As he reminds us, '…no one intervenes in other people's affairs unless there is something to gain from it materially, politically or ideologically.'[53] These areas seem to transcend the three aims previously asserted and so it seems that Sugirtharajah seems to envisage a fruitful future for postcolonial biblical studies as it continues to expand.

Minority Voices

In 2009 a similarly conceived work appeared. *They Were All Together In One Place: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* is a volume edited by Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew and Fernando Segovia. The latter two of these three have also made significant contributions to the emergence of postcolonial theory in biblical studies. Bailey, an African-American has been at the forefront of raising the status of the African American community in the academy as well as calling for attention to the presence and influence of Africa(ns) in the text itself. The significant difference between this volume and *Voices*, is that while Sugirtharajah's project utilises scholars from across the globe, this later project draws exclusively from American based scholars, albeit scholars who are

[51] Sugirtharajah, "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation," 67.
[52] Ibid., 81.
[53] Ibid., 82.

identified as 'minoritised'; specifically, African American, Asian American and Latino/a American.

This project defines itself without reference to Postcolonial Hermeneutics. However, a glance at the subject matter shows that the volume is concerned with what might be called postcolonial issues. Ethnicity, race, location, sexuality, foreign-ness, all of which are a part of the gamut of postcolonial concern are taken up by the scholars involved from a variety of perspectives. What gives strength to this volume is that it aims to create a 'minority alliance'. It begins with the acknowledgement that each minority groups' experience is different, all the while aware that the fragmentation that that entails is the first barrier to overcome. This volume is in some sense a response to Sugirtharajah's observation that such diversification within the margins of the discipline is troubling.[54] The narrow focus on one's particular identity issues results in the neglect of shared values, a fragmentation which likely decreases the potency of marginal hermeneutics. Indeed, as Said warned, "Being completely focussed on yourself means that you are far more likely to fall prey to a stronger, more secure and dominating culture."[55]

The notion that an American work such as this could be considered postcolonial is in some sense problematic. While America was once a colony and that experience is fundamental to her identity, America has fulfilled the prophetic utterance of Paul Tillich, emerging as a 'world centre, ruling the other nations through liberal methods and democratic forms!'[56] America, like biblical Israel, has moved from subject to Imperial power. More telling has been the attitude of 'America' to its own marginal groups. It is here that the term 'postcolonial' might have the greatest relevance in discussions about America. Ethnic minorities are marginalised in America,[57] a reality that the volume picks up. The experience(s) of colonial domination is experienced internally. The historical aspect of this domination is well known, particularly as it relates to the African American

[54] Sugirtharajah, *Voices From the Margin, 3rd edn.*, 4.
[55] Edward Said, *Peace and Its Discontents: Gaza-Jericho 1993-1995* (London: Vintage, 1995), p 96. in ibid.
[56] Paul Tillich, *Love, Power and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Implications*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), 105, cited in Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 34.
[57] The intent here is not to particularise America. The recent conservative shift across Europe and Australia has also featured a wariness of 'foreigners' within 'our' own borders. For extreme cases, see 'A Violent turn' in the History of Interpretation.

experience. However, it is not a thing of the past, it is a contemporary issue; America's colonising activity is as significant internally as it is externally, particularly as it relates to the two postcolonial themes examined earlier: fixity and ambivalence.

A remark from the preface of this work is telling, in which the editors define what they mean by 'minority'. They

> '…employ the term with reference to "minoritization" or the process of unequal valorization of population groups, yielding dominant and minority formations and relations, within the context, and through the apparatus, of a nation or state as the result of migration, whether voluntary or coerced. We are, therefore, using "minority" simultaneously to signify (on) this demeaning practice and to challenge, contest, or change the term's meaning…'[58]

Give the parameters that the editors set for their discourse, it seems possible to place their project in the field of postcolonial studies as we have discussed it thus far. The issues of minoritisation are common to the issues of colonisation; a powerful group dominates a weaker group. The issue of immigration is also a key issue, insofar as colonialism is itself an act of migration, both voluntary and coerced, and its result is the displacement, that is, coerced migration, of other people. In today's world, where the invading colonialism of the past is not practiced, the ramifications of those migratory experiences are still being felt. The emergence of new metropolitan centres has led to a new wave of migration so that these centres are also more cosmopolitan than ever before. Nonetheless, the attitude of superiority from the dominating culture(s) remains and has given rise to the practice(s) of minoritization. It is important to bear in mind that minoritisation has nothing to do with number, but with power.[59]

Situating this issue in the context of biblical studies, the contributors to this volume speak about the bible from their perspective as minoritised people, both within the world of biblical studies, but also within wider society itself. In much the same way as the contributors to *Voices From the Margin*, this serves to open the bible up to new perspectives and helps to 'decolonise' the field of biblical studies. Talking about ethnicity, race, gender, [dis]place[ment], diaspora and so

[58] Bailey, Liew, and Segovia, *They Were All Together in One Place? : Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ix.
[59] Ibid, 6.

on, from a minoritised, which is to say, marginalised place, continues to open the field and fulfils Sugirtharajah's desire to see biblical studies remain relevant to people's lives. It also serves as a corrective to the colonising tendencies of the discipline which has too long remained blind to these issues.

These two volumes, then, provide an outstanding lens for understating the place and value of postcolonialism in biblical studies, even while they are not explicitly named as such. Their warnings and prescriptions provide a way forward, opening up new avenues of exploration and discovery. Their mutual call for alliance along various lines, racial-ethnic, methodological or otherwise opens the possibility for a re-energisation of the discipline as it seeks to engage the world in a meaningful way. As texts are (re)read, old assumptions questioned, perhaps even torn down, it may well be possible to create a new world. As Liew reminds us, 'Reading can be a powerful force both on and by the reader.'[60]

[60] Liew, "Postcolonial Criticism: Echoes of a Subaltern's Contribution and Exclusion," 216.

C. Numbers 25 and Beyond: Phinehas and Other Detestable Practice(r)s

This Music: Beginning with Ezra

In Ezra 9, having returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon and finding that the "holy seed ha[d] mixed itself with the peoples of the lands" (Ezr. 9:1), Ezra is appalled (9:4). His response takes the form of a lamenting prayer (vv. 6-15), which is more like a sermon, addressing what he perceived as faithlessness on the part of the returned exiles and those who had not been deported. The word הועבה, abomination, or as the NIV renders it, detestable practices, is used three times in Ezra 9. Ezra makes clear his view on the state of Judahite society and institutes a series of social reforms to purify the nation once more. The story that we read in Numbers 25, which tells of an Israelite man and a Midianite woman speared through on the occasion of their marital embrace is in effect an illustration of Ezra's reform. It is clear through the way the story is told who we are to believe the detestable practice(r)s are.

While Ezra's words, as in the NIV translation, are the inspiration for the title of this chapter, it should be clear that I am interested in reading against colonial ideology. The chapter itself is guided by a story told by an Australian Aboriginal elder. In fact, it is a story told to him by his mother. It is a brutal story, bringing together three images of abuse and violence committed against Australian Aboriginal people in the first half of the nineteenth century. These three images will be put in dialogue with three biblical texts with which they have resonances.

This methodological practice is not without precedent, nor problems. In some respects, it is contrapuntal, a musical term borrowed by Edward Said[61] to describe the practice of reading two texts together, from both sides of the colonial collision. This practice is one that is consistently championed in biblical studies by R.S. Sugirtharajah . Of course, using the bible in such a way presents its own unique problems, it being in some way the great legitimating tool of colonialism while itself being a witness to the experience of colonisation. The Ezra text already cited gives expression to this dilemma: Jerusalem has been razed by one empire, and another empire appoints Ezra to rebuild. The citizens of Jerusalem

[61] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 52.

continue to have foreign rule impressed upon them, Babylonian rule having given way to Persian, their own practices said to be detestable. This imposition of foreign rule is, in some sense, the very definition of colonialism.

In contrapuntal music, different musical lines are woven together, with themes developed side by side.[62] Melodies appear time and time again, perhaps disguised by different timbres or registers, perhaps played by a different instrument; but as the music progresses, the melodies converge: after all, contrapuntal music--in the manner of its great master, J.S. Bach--is consonantal, the tension of dissonance always and only temporary, a part of the building of drama which will be resolved in the end. Perhaps then, "contrapuntal" may be an inappropriate term for reading colonial texts. Are we necessarily reading for consonance? For resolution? Of course, these questions assume the consonance that ultimately characterises contrapuntal music, but such an assumption need not be made. Indeed, the word lends itself to the expression of dissonance, in that one "point" (*puntus)* is pitted "against" *(contra)* another.

A Cross-Textual and the Reading "I"

Perhaps it may be better to describe this approach as "cross-textual," a term favoured by Archie Lee. Lee articulates the goal of such an exercise as "…each text…illuminat[ing] the other…".[63] That is, each text brings new ways of understanding the underlying complexity which gives rise to each; reading two texts together allows each to [in]form how we read the other. Rather than working in counterpoint, we look at one text from the vantage of another, before leaping (crossing) the divide and peering back to where we jumped from. So in this model, the texts continue to exist independently from each other, even as they come together in the creation of a new [con]text.

Lee's project is to read Asia (a social "text") with/against the Bible.[64] This chapter reads a variety of biblical texts with/against the experiences of Australian Aboriginal people in the colonial period. Are these two texts related in any way? Certainly there is much that separates them, geography and time by no means the

[62] In this way, it is similar to the 'mosaic' approach which guides this project.
[63] Archie Lee, "Returning to China : Biblical Interpretation in Postcolonial Hong Kong," *Biblical Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (1999), 157.
[64] Ibid., 161.

least significant differences between them. One set of texts has been, and indeed continues to be, used as religious literature; the other is the recollection of an individual. However, there is a mutuality of experience which crosses both and so enables the two texts to be crossed through the mediation of reading.

In reading this way, it is important for me to be clear about who I am: a white, middle-class Australian man with a touch of English ancestry. The two primary texts under consideration bear on me in different ways. As a white Australian, the mistreatment of Aboriginal people, both historically and its aftermath which continues down to the present day, is a reality which demands our attention. As a Christian, indeed, as a church minister, the bible has been a formative text. Its difficult passages continue to trouble me as I seek to make sense of this book which comes from a different time and place, yet which continues to inhabit our world. As one with an interest in postcolonial studies, my whiteness is of course an issue. With Daniel Smith-Christopher, I ask "What is a white, [Christian] liberal to do?"[65] And with him, too, I respond, "…to listen to, engage and support our colleagues from more or less dissimilar backgrounds or social locations" . To be silent on these issues is to be complicit, so with a measure of humility, I offer my thoughts, hoping that they may in some way contribute to a conversation that leads to understanding, to reconciliation, to a better world.

Abuse of Aboriginal Women in Australia

> … they spent most of the day raping the women, most of them were then tortured to death by sticking sharp things like spears up their vaginas until they died.[66]

The sexual abuse of indigenous women is highly documented in the history of colonial Australia. Roberts notes that similar events to the ones found in the story cited (from North-East Victoria)[67] occurred throughout the interior of New South Wales, where communities were spread out and isolated. With no equitable recourse to the law, such crimes were largely ignored, the victims left to suffer

[65] Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, "Abolitionist Exegesis: A Quaker Proposal for White Liberals," in *Still at the Margins,* ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (London: T and T Clark, 2008), 132.
[66] J. P. Roberts, *Massacres to Mining: The Colonisation of Aboriginal Australia,* Australian updated ed. (Melbourne: Dove Communications, 1981), 19.
[67] This story belongs to a lady from the Ya-idthma-dthang tribe. It is still being recalled today. See, *Massacres to Mining: The Colonisation of Aboriginal Australia* , 19.

both the savagery of the detestable crime and the injustice of the legal system which likened their evidence to the chattering of the ourang outang.[68]

This view of Aboriginal people as chimps was widespread. A letter to The Australian newspaper in 1838 says this very thing: "I look on the blacks as a set of monkies".[69] Of course, this blatant lack of respect for the Aboriginal people both forms and informs white attitude towards them in a cruel circularity: we don't respect them and so we treat them disrespectfully, or using our terms: We think they are detestable, and so we treat them detestably. The letter goes on, "…the earlier they are exterminated from the face of the earth the better. I would never consent to hang a white man for a black one".[70] In November 1838, men were tried in the Supreme Court in Sydney for the murder of 28 Aboriginal people. The evidence was overwhelming, the chief justice acknowledged that a heinous crime had been committed, referring to the Aboriginal people as "fellow creatures", and reiterating that the life of a black person was as precious and valuable under the law as of a White person. In just fifteen minutes the jury found the perpetrators not guilty. Thankfully, some of the men were retried, and with the same evidence were later found guilty and sent to be hanged. They confessed their crimes, their moral defence resting on their ignorance to the fact that killing Aboriginals was illegal. On the street, it seemed that the citizens of New South Wales agreed with them.[71]

But we return to the matter of the rape and cold blooded execution of Aboriginal women. Most commonly, "rape" is used in discussion of forced intercourse; it describes an act of overpowering and domination. The effects upon the victim are of course catastrophic on all levels. The act is a violation of human dignity, an act of de-humanisation, so we should not be surprised to find such acts in the history of colonisation, itself a project built on assumed power and superiority.

On a broader scale, rape is a weapon of war and conquest. It destabilises, even destroys the community that suffers from it. The children born of the illicit unions are routinely ostracised from their communities and families and create

[68] Ibid., 20.
[69] Cited in Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatments of Australian Aborigines Since 1788* (Frenchs Forest: Child & Associates, 1988), 83.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., 92-94.

significant problems for family systems, particularly those based on patriarchal figures. Discussing the rape of Dinah in Gen. 34, Sivan notes that a woman's great power is the ability to generate patriarchs, and so to perpetuate or disrupt patterns of succession.[72] Aboriginal society is based around clearly defined intra-familial behaviour, requiring certain categories of kin to avoid each other.[73] For example, brothers and sisters must avoid social contact, or should behave in formal, patterned ways. So too is the relationship with the mother-in-law, a well established taboo through much of Australia.[74] Marriages were generally contractually organised, partners brought together who met certain kinship rules.[75] Acts of rape therefore cut a swathe through these family systems, doing untold damage to women and their communities, completely dismissing the importance of cultural values and norms.

The sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women, in its violent and degrading form, fits neatly within the postcolonial concept of ambivalence. The idea that an Aboriginal woman could be married to a white man was almost implausible, given that the prevailing wisdom was that it would be "degrading to the man, even in the instance where the man was of a very low type.[76] Such views were common in contemporary scientific journals. One such journal, *Science of Man*, declared in 1907 that "hybrid and mongrel mixtures of mankind are as unsatisfactory as those of the lower animals and they usually degenerate and become extinct".[77] A mother to such children bore no rights to them and had them almost universally taken from her. It was thought that the white blood in their veins gave the children some cause for hope, but only away from the degrading influence of their mother.[78] Despite this, the absence of white women in the early days of settlement seemed to ensure the enslavement of Aboriginal women, who were often locked up for the use of their owners and their owner's staff, traded between cattle stations, forced into labour, and isolated from their communities. In every way, they were put to shame.

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[72] Sivan, "The Rape of Cozbi (Numbers XXV)," 74.
[73] Ian Howie-Willis, "Family," in *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. David Horton (Canberra: The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1994a), 356.
[74] P. Duncan, "Shame," in *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. David Horton (Canberra: The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Islander Studies, 1994), 978-80.
[75] Ian Howie-Willis, "Marriage," in *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. David Horton (Canberra: The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Islander Studies 1994b), 664.
[76] Roberts, *Massacres to Mining: The Colonisation of Aboriginal Australia*, 26.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., 27.

Raping women from outside your group is not a practice confined to the classical colonial period. The scriptures' conquest stories show us that this was an ancient practice in warfare. Here is the "them-us" dualism which is destabilised by the theory of ambivalence. The difference which is meant to keep us apart is in some way alluring. Desire and derision are never too far apart, and when issues of power are involved, that is, when there is not an embrace of the Other, the consequences, for the colonised, are tragic. "Just as proper marital relations are constructive for peacemaking, relations formed by rape… are destructive."[80]

Our story of Aboriginal experience doesn't merely end with the rape of women though. The story quite graphically describes acts of murder; the women are literally raped to death, reminding us of the story of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19. The murder is accomplished by the spearing of women's vaginas, and here we come close to the story of Cozbi, Zimri and Phinehas.

Cozbi: Murder and Rape in Numbers 25

> Now, a man from the sons of Israel came, and he brought a Midianite woman into his brothers in view of Moses, and in view of the entire congregation of the sons of Israel. They were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting.
> And Phinehas, son of Eleazer, son of Aaron the Priest saw, and he stood up from the midst of the congregation and he took a spear in his hand.
> He went after the man of Israel, into the tent and he pierced through the two of them, the man of Israel and the woman, in(to) her stomach. (Num. 25: 6-8)

On the surface, the relationship between Zimri and Cozbi appears to be that of the newly wed couple coming to their new home for the consummation of their new marriage. What we appear to have is a proper marital arrangement between two families. Such relationships were not unknown in Israel. Moses, Israel's leader, was married to Zipporah, the daughter of a Midianite Priest. There is nothing in our tale to suggest that anything has happened out of order. So the rape of Cozbi is not effected by her new husband, but rather by the zealous priest Phinehas, who rapes Cozbi to death. The spear, a great phallic symbol if there ever was one, penetrates Cozbi and causes her death.

[80] Ibid.

The physical point of Cozbi's penetration is an interesting conundrum. Different versions have translated the difficult Hebrew אל־קטבה in a variety of ways. Most commonly, this is rendered "through the/her belly" (NJPS, NRSV) or "through the body" (WEB). However, other translations see a more aggressively sexual act taking place. For example, the 1899 Douay-Rheims translation suggests "through the genitals." Such a choice is not without precedent. Reif"s article, *What Enraged Phinehas,*[81] alerts us to an ancient tradition stretching back to the Babylonian Talmud and other rabbinic sources that read this as a penetration of Cozbi's genitals. Other sources--LXX, Peshitta and Vulgate--choose to render the word as "womb" which too has a sexual connotation. It is far different to penetrate a womb than a belly. Targum Onqelos uses מעא, a form which most often refers to the belly, bowels or intestines, but which may also be rendered "womb".[82] Targum Jonathan of Isaiah 49:1 uses this same form, translating "when I was in my mother's *womb* he named me."

Phinehas' action, as we read, must be seen as more than an act of blind rage or, as the text puts it, zeal. The death of Cozbi in this manner is highly symbolic. Her textualised death, in such an act of sexually related violence, serves as an official, or perhaps better, ideological delegitimisation of her relationship with an Israelite. It tells its readers that it is acceptable to treat foreign women in this way.

Controlling the sexuality of foreign women is an obvious ploy of the colonising power. If you control what, if any children, the women produce, you control the sort of society you wish to build. This brings Ezra's prayer *cum* sermon of Ezra 9 into focus, where foreign wives and their children are to be put away for the sake of the purity of the holy seed. Is this too far removed from the experience of Australian Aboriginal women and their children? Sivan suggests that underlying the story of Cozbi, Zimri, and Phinehas is a process of redefining family and society.[83] It illustrates perfectly the unspoken terror of Ezra's sermon. The same must be said of our elder's story. The tragedy is, of course, that the "putting away" of foreign women has continued to be far more difficult in practice than in rhetoric. It is exactly Cozbi's foreign-ness which is so appealing and which,

[81] Reif, "What Enraged Phinehas : A Study of Numbers 25:8."
[82] Marcus Jastrow, "מְעָא," in *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (London: Luzac and Co., 1903), 812.
[83] Sivan, "The Rape of Cozbi (Numbers XXV)," 78.

sadly, is a matter of tragedy for her. The irony of Cozbi's story is that even though she suffers such a tragic, violent death, her virgin Midianite sisters are spared in the ensuing war against Midian. Derision and desire are never too far apart.

Back to Today: Rape the Women, Kill the Babies

> I lived because I was young and pretty and one of the men kept me for himself, but I was always tied up until I escaped to another land to the west.[84]

> My mother would sit and cry and tell me this: they buried our babies in the ground with only their heads above the ground. All in a row they were. Then they had a test to see who could kick the babies' heads off the furtherst [sic]. One man clubbed a baby's head off from horseback.[85]

It seems implausible that there could be a more detestable act than the one described above. The actions of the settlers are despicably cruel and appallingly calculated. If anything could be worse than what is recalled above, it must surely be the trauma of having to remember it. This story is told because there was someone, an un-named mother, who was a witness to it, and whose life was lived haunted by the things that she had seen.[86]

Atrocities against children in the theatre(s) of war are these days a common practice. Genocide, ethnic cleansing and other such detestable acts have been widespread in the latter part of the twentieth century: from the killing fields of Rwanda, through to the Serbian carnage wreaked on Bosnia,[87] the child soldiers of the Tamil Tigers and the still untold stories of Afghanistan, Iraq and so on. Children, those who have no part in any battle or conflict, seem to be even more vulnerable than ever before. Even those who escape death do not escape the

[84] Roberts, *Massacres to Mining: The Colonisation of Aboriginal Australia*, 20.
[85] Ibid., 19.
[86] For sustained reflection on genocide in Australia, see, Colin Martin Tatz, *With Intent to Destroy: Reflecting on Genocide* (London: Verso, 2003).In particular, Ch. 4.
[87] As I write, former Serbian General Radko Mladic is on trial at The Hague for war crimes. At a football match between Australia and Serbia just in the last few weeks, a banner was unfurled which cried for his release, a sure sign that violence lingers not far from the surface.

affects of war: orphaned, made homeless, destitute, disowned, they become a shame to their communities.[88]

Kill the Babies: Back to the Hebrew Bible

But we are wrong to assume such actions are new in our world. There is a strong biblical tradition of violence against children, both real and imagined. 1 Sam. 15:3 records the King, Saul, ordering the ruthless slaying of the Amalekites, saying they are to be "utterly destroyed," including the *yoneq*, the suckling ones. The verb "utterly destroy" here (Hebrew *h-r-m* Hif.) is the root of *herem* ("ban"), which lends the extermination a sacred element. Those things which come under the ban are devoted to Yhwh.[89] Verse 15:8 records that all the people were put to the sword, though some of the more valuable sheep, cattle and fatlings were spared. As the narrative is told, it was in sparing the life of these animals that Saul's Kingship began to unravel.

In 2 Kgs 8:12, Elisha predicts that young men, little ones, and even pregnant women will be put to the sword by a rampant Hazael. This instance is slightly different from the example in 1 Samuel, in that the Samuel example comes to us as a direct order from the King, and an unspoken assumption that his orders are followed. In Kings, Elisha is speaking of something that may come to be, rather than issuing an order. Nonetheless, Hazael goes on to become a King, as Elisha predicts, and is responsible for the oppression of Israel. Again, we are left to assume that Elisha's predictions come to pass.

Moving to the writing prophets the nature of the delivery changes once again. Hos. 14:1, in an oracle against Israel, declares that their "little ones will be dashed in pieces and their pregnant women ripped open." This is the second instance of this image in Hosea, the first coming at 10:10,[90] though in this instance there is no ripping open of pregnant women, just dashing in pieces of little ones. So, too, in Nah. 3:10 a remembrance is made of infants dashed in pieces as a result of the exile of Thebes. Nahum seems to suggest that Nineveh should expect the same.

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[88] Anastasia Boniface-Malle, "From Violence and War to *Shalom* in the Hebrew Bible," in *Validating Violence - Violating Faith? Religion, Scripture and Violence*, ed. William W Emilsen and John T Squires (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2008), 77.
[89] Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible*, 28-55.
[90] See also Isa. 13:16

Clustered together in his fashion, it is clear that the image of children being killed in such cold-blooded fashion was simply a part of the practice of ancient warfare, or perhaps, a part of the rhetoric that surrounded warfare.[91] Either way, the idea is detestable. This tradition takes a cruel twist in Psalm 137.

> O Daughter Babylon, you devastator!
> Happy shall be they be who pay you back
> what you have done to us!
> Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock.
> (Ps 137:8-9)

The style of discourse here is telling. The psalm is an act of remembrance, of recollection, and looks forward to recompense. But as a psalm, its language is metaphorical, poetic. The previous examples talk of the killing of children in similarly poetic forms. While this psalm takes up the oracular imagery of the prophets, the examples which form part of the narrative account of Israel's history contain no such concrete descriptions of the murder of the children.[92] Keel points out that Middle Eastern writing much prefers such concrete imagery, but that such images often signify something far greater than reality. The suggestion is that "the little ones" or "children" actually represent the ruling class that perpetuates the dynasty, and so the verse may be rendered "Happy is he who puts an end to your self-renewing domination," which is far less troubling than the actual image offered.[93] Yet it is the image offered which is what concerns us. Why this image? Why this sick fantasy of violence against children?

Allen suggests that the "spiritual framework of the psalmist" provides a key to understanding this image.[94] Such images are inextricably linked with the theological concepts of the chosen nation, of the territory possessed by divine right, of the holy city and its corollary, holy war. Such passionate nationalism is considered a virtue in the Old Testament record. The desolation of Jerusalem, the ignominy of the exilic experience is an affront to Yhwh, and so the psalmist's lament is related not only to those things the community has experienced, but also to the sin committed against Yhwh, the killing of the children coming in some

[91] John Goldingay, *Psalms*, ed. Tremper Longman III, 3 vols., vol. 3, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 609.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 9.
[94] Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 2002), 309.

way to represent "satisfaction of divine justice".[95] The act of speaking the psalm, of performing the remembrance, is an act of clinging to historical identity in the face of humiliation and distress. It is in the expression of such violent fantasy that the lust for revenge is sated and that such hopes are committed to the god of [presumed] universal justice, so that even those who mouth such things submit themselves to this justice. Actually, as Goldingay suggests, this is even more than hopefulness: in the end, this is an expression of confidence in Yhwh's willingness to fulfil the promises made by the prophets.[96]

Such arguments can only be made by those who have such atrocities in their sacred texts, and they presumably are of shallow comfort to those who exist within the communities that are victimized and/or marginalized by such imagined violence. As we have established, this psalm does not devise in itself the most detestable image it can fathom. Instead, it borrows from prophetic tradition[97] which in turn develops an older, less graphic narrative tradition in which children become the target of imperial aggression. It is surely no surprise that such brutal, now canonised images continue to cause tension and violence as they are held up as sacred and authoritative.

To this point we have been consumed by the image of the murdered children. As awful as this is, it is at least matched by the description of the perpetrators. Some word studies will assist in highlighting this. אשרי is an important word in the psalter. Indeed, it is the first word of the psalter, an instance where it is traditionally translated a "happy" or "blessed:" so for instance in the NRSV, "Happy are those…" Mowinckel saw no difference between אשרי and the more common term for blessing, ברוכ, though Kraus discerns a more secular tone in the former. Happiness never refers to god, whereas blessing demands certain behaviours.[98]

Athalya Brenner, who reads this psalm with Jan T. Gross' book *Neighbours*, a story of the total destruction of a Jewish community in Poland in 1941, argues

[95] Ibid., 310.
[96] Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3, 610.
[97] Goldingay notes that this prophetic tradition also images Judah's children as the victims of Babylonian violence. See Jer. 13:14 and 51:20-23.
[98] Cited in Henri Cazelles, "אַשְׁרֵי," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 445-58.

persuasively for a translation of אשרי as "praised".[99] Indeed, she argues that the choice of the translation/understanding of "happy" or "blessed" as the first word of the psalter is ideological, despite a long-honoured tradition. However, either of the traditional choices presents a significant ethical dilemma for readers of Psalm 137. Are we content that those who murder children can be either happy or blessed? Even as an act of revenge, surely there is nothing uplifting in the destruction of innocent people. Brenner's choice of "praised" softens the extremity of this outburst, noting that a verbal assault on the most defenceless of the enemy constitutes affirmation, in the sense of "righteousness" perhaps (see Psalm 1), and/or is praiseworthy for the avenger, but does not in any way solve the moral problem. Nonetheless, it is altogether different to suggest that the perpetrator of violence may actually be "happy" about the cruel actions, or in some divine way "blessed" on account of them.[100]

What we are speaking of is a verbal or textualised fantasy of violence. It is one thing to talk about, or to write about committing such horrors, another thing altogether to carry it out. The verses that conclude Psalm 137 are a call for revenge, but there appears to be little if any evidence that such atrocities were committed against Jewish children.[101] The textualised image of the crushed children, then, serves as a symbol to remember the catastrophe of the exilic experience and the desire for revenge, without carrying with it the actual intention of fulfilling the detestable wish that the symbol represents.

The great tragedy of this image is that in our story of Aboriginal recollection, the brutality moves from the fantasy of one's[102] mind, from the pages of a book, to cruel, calculated execution of a barbaric crime.[103] The grim reality of this story is that the various understandings of the psalmist's אשרי appear to resonate within the performance of the psalm in colonial Australia. This story inverts the relationship of the psalm. The Psalm speaks from the position of the subject,

[99] Athalya Brenner, "'On the Rivers of Babylon' (Psalm 137), or Between Victim and Perpetrator," in *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post Biblical Vocabularies of Violence*, ed. Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood, *Bible in the Twenty-First Century* (London: T and T Clark, 2003), 90-91.
[100] Ibid., 91.
[101] Ibid., 84-85. This, as Brenner points out, stands in stark contrast to commentators' assertions that child killing was part of the mechanics of ancient warfare.
[102] Albeit a "collective" one.
[103] This too is the case in Brenner's article (following Gross' account), where the fantasy of the violence is played out against the Polish Jews of Jedwabne.

desiring revenge against the imperial aggressor. This story, however, is about the unbridled expression of colonial aggression, a clear statement of presumed superiority. The depravity of the action is in the game that it becomes. Not content with the destruction of innocent lives, not content with committing this atrocity in the faces of the children's family, the killing becomes a contest. One can imagine the banter and laughter that accompanies sporting contests – the urging on, the sledging, the laughter. In a sick, detestable way, these murderers enjoy their work, they are אשרי, happy. Sadly, as we will see in the following section, community attitudes towards Aboriginal death was at best ambivalent. Many statements were made about the uselessness of the Aboriginal people. Many wished for their extermination. So again, these men may well have been אשרי, praised. And as Mark Brett has shown,[104] colonial attitude towards Aboriginal people, even amongst the missionary movement, reflected a belief in the colonisers' divine right to their land and to the widespread belief that Aboriginal people were degraded, "on the level of the beasts." Perhaps, in a sick way, these men had a sense of being אשרי, blessed.

Castrate and Kill the Men: Australia

> They tied the men's hands behind their backs, then cut off their penis and testes and watched them run around screaming until they died.[105]

In recent times it has become common, or perhaps better, less uncommon, to hear about women who have cut off the penis of men who have cheated on them. The dismembering of the offending man has become the ultimate act of female retribution. It is an enormously powerful statement about sexual control: the ones who were unable to control themselves, have the tool of their indiscipline forcibly removed. The result is that manhood, that is to say the thing which makes one so obviously a man, is lost, or more specifically, taken.

But the penis is more than the marker of manhood. It also plays a reproductive function. In an incisively symbolic way, slicing off a penis is a way of saying that this is a person who does not deserve the right to have children, or put differently, no child deserves this man as a father. Even more coarsely, we don't want the

[104] Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God*, The Bible in the Modern World (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009).
[105] Roberts, *Massacres to Mining: The Colonisation of Aboriginal Australia*, 19-20.

progeny of this man to be a part of our society. Unborn, even unconceived children are in some way condemned by this action.

Colonial attitude towards Australian Aborigines, as we have seen, was contemptuous and violent. Already we have heard the story of the women, so dreadfully raped and murdered in such brutal, detestable, sexually violent ways. But here too, we have a story of sexual violence committed against the men of Aboriginal Australia. What we have is a story of rape against men as well.

What differentiates this story from the example of the wronged woman exacting her revenge is that the Aboriginal men were not perpetrators of violence against their assailants. Instead, the invaders of the colonial project mutilate the men in a way which sends the same symbolic message: their sexuality is controlled and, furthermore, their women's children will not be theirs. This is, quite simply, a method of racial extermination. Once again: if you control sexual activity, you are able to go a long way towards shaping the society that you want to produce or, more pointedly, eliminating the parts of society which you find undesirable.

Unmanned Men: The Hebrew Bible

> No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Those born of an illicit union shall not be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD (Deut. 23:1-2, NRSV).

These verses introduce a series of prohibitions against people who may enter יהוה קהל, the "assembly of the LORD" (vv. 1-8). The קהל is the group of people who are able to join together for worship, for reading and hearing the Law, for the celebration of religious feasts and so on. In this sense it is a smaller, more exclusive group than the entirety of the people of Israel, which necessarily includes people that fall outside the parameters set by this legal code. Indeed, the latter half of Deuteronomy 23 deals with concerns around the מחנה, the "camp", in which the entirety of the population live together. Verses 3-8 go on to exclude other groups on purely national grounds, with varying degrees of severity.[106] What seems clear is that what is being promoted is a pure people, much like the

[106] Of special interest to us is the harsh treatment to be levelled against the Moabites (See Num. 25:1-5). Their welfare or prosperity are not to be promoted "as long as you live" (v. 6)

society envisioned by Ezra.[107] The standards once required only for the Priesthood (Lev. 21:20) are now expanded and required across all of the assembly.

Why this prohibition? Why must Yhwh's men[108] be fully equipped? Most commentators see this as a regulation against those who have been mutilated in the context of the worship of other gods,[109] and so Craigie suggests that those who have suffered these injuries as a result of illness or accident are most likely not in violation of this law.[110] Consequently, their view tends towards interpreting this text using the holy seed ideology of Ezra: these men are disqualified because of prior allegiances to other deities. But of course, without functioning testicles or a penis, reproduction is impossible in any event, and so these men provide no danger to the holy seed of Israel. Perhaps, then, these prohibitions are more about purity and order, and are consequently closer to the Holiness code provisions from Leviticus. Such men are to be excluded because of some injury which places them outside the realm of the "whole;" they are blemished, permanently, and so they are excluded, permanently.

Jione Havea suggests another, simpler reason. These people are not real men.[111] They are unable to penetrate or be productive. Having had their tools of productivity taken away, having been "dismembered," these men are relegated to the sidelines of the Israelite community, never to penetrate the boundary of the קהל again, never to be fully functioning members. It seems unlikely that one with a sliced off penis would live very long anyway; certainly the Aboriginal story suggests that this was an act of murder, although one who had suffered from crushed testicles almost certainly would not die immediately. Either way, these men were to be excluded from the worshipping community, unwelcome at the religious feasts, never to hear the very Law which made them outcasts.[112]

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[107] It seems that the Deuteronomy text is less extreme than that of Ezra. As we see in Deut 23:7-8, Edomites and Egyptians are permitted into the assembly, which is unthinkable for Ezra and the maintenance of the 'holy seed'.
[108] Clearly, this prohibition is relevant only to those who have or have had a penis and testicles.
[109] J.G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, ed. David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 348.
[110] Peter C. Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, ed. Robert Hubbard, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1976), 296.
[111] Jione Havea, "Members Only," (2010), 11. This echoes the idea of purity and wholeness mentioned previously. These men are "blemished," they are not "whole."
[112] As Havea (p. 11) playfully notes, perhaps such individuals would not, under the circumstances, have any desire to join such an assembly!

Deut. 23:2 deals with those born of an "illicit union" (NRSV). Such people, too, are barred from entering קהל יהוה. The word used is ממזר, a form that is used in only one other place in the Tanakh, Zech. 9:6, where the NRSV translates it as "mongrel", suggesting some form of colloquial expression for a mixed race. Older translations render it here as "bastard." Commentators are agreed that the expression involves the child born to a relationship that breaks the "prohibited degrees of relationship",[113] and so goes beyond the notion of the bastard as the child born out of wedlock. This includes, as McConville recognises,[114] marriage with foreigners, citing Deut. 7:3. Craigie sees a cultic element: that is, according to him the term might denote children born of cultic prostitutes, thereby conceived in an environment directly related to foreign religion.[115] For ten generations, the descendants of these "bastards" are to be excluded. The form, ממזר, seems to lean upon the element, זור, meaning foreign, strange, even forbidden. This word is commonly used of foreign women (Pr. 2:16), and so also suggests a feminisation of the ממזר.

What is evident is a concern to promote purity and wholeness and a lack of willingness to include those, nor the direct descendants of those, who fail to fit within established guidelines. Indeed, as Deut. 7:4 suggests, any tolerance of intermarriage will lead to swift punishment and quick destruction.

All of this serves to bring us back to our Aboriginal story. The Aboriginal men have their penises forcibly removed. In the context of these verses from Deuteronomy, those who are inside take matters into their own hands and, cutting off the men's penises, they make sure of their exclusion. What is at stake here is not membership in קהל יהוה, but there certainly is a sense in which membership or participation in the community is at stake. The dismembered men, robbed of their (re)productivity, are no longer "real" men and are condemned to a life on the outside of the privileged community. The blemish, inflicted upon them by insiders, serves to keep them perpetually outside.

[113] Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy*, ed. Robert Hubbard and Robert Johnson, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 245.
[114] McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 348.
[115] Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 297.

What is more, the children born of the Aboriginal women will now inevitably be seen as a ממזר, born to illegitimate relationships and condemned to life as outsiders. They will be born of "mixed" relations, as children of rape, as mongrels, as half-castes, as misbegotten children. Sadly, these children will be thought of as detestable, though it will be the actions of their fathers where the true crime lies.

After Ezra's sermon comes to an end, we read in chapter 10 that the Jewish men respond by sending away their wives and children. Ezra encourages them: 'Be strong, and do it.' (Ezra 10:4) In a tragic way, like the foreign wives and children of Ezra 10, Aboriginal children were "put away," by which I mean taken away from their mothers to be cared for by the very people who looked down on them for their Aboriginal blood. They too become excluded, their lives lived outside the privileged community, always looking forward to a time when—perhaps--they may be allowed to enter.

Back to Ezra, By Way of a Conclusion

We began with the words of Ezra 9 ringing in our ears: remove yourselves from the [results of your] detestable practices! Perhaps we have not come that far, seeing as though we end with Ezra 10, and the putting away of foreign wives and their half-caste children. I hope though, that the notion of both who and what is detestable has been subverted.

Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, in the introduction to *Pregnant Passion*, writes:

> Violence is that which violates, destroys, manipulates, corrupts, defiles and robs us of dignity and true personhood. Violence is the use of thought and deed within a continuum of the physical, the philosophical and the psychological that oppresses and robs an individual or community of their gift of freedom and the sacredness of their person. Violence is a practice of idolatry: that which defames God's created order.[116]

We have considered a number of texts that have, at their core, the very type of thing that Kirk-Duggan describes: acts of violence intended to damage individuals and communities physically, philosophically and psychologically. We have read of innocent victims, robbed of their dignity and their personhood, who have had

[116] Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, "Introduction," in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex and Violence in the Bible*, ed. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 3.

their sacredness demeaned. We have witnessed the defamation of the sacral nature of the created order.

It is this violence which is the truly detestable thing. It is this violence which we must condemn. It is the victims of this violence that we must stand with, lest we too like Phinehas and the rest, and become detestable practice(r)s.

Conclusion

Looking to [the] End

Biblical studies is a discipline divided, perhaps even in crisis.[1] Debates over method, and strategy, and interpretive frameworks have created rifts, and the results have been characterised using military analogies.[2] The 'in house' fighting is really a cover for a greater problem: biblical studies is becoming, perhaps has even become, irrelevant. The situation is so bad that some, for a variety of reasons, are calling for the end of biblical studies, or for a reappraisal of the 'end' of biblical studies.

Perhaps the road to a different end is suggested by the nature of the text itself. Many are anxious about the fragmentary nature of biblical studies, that the fragmentation of methodology has damaged the discipline. But the bible itself is fragmentary. It is comprised of different books, each one with a history. For many, we know that they have gone through a series of revisions and editions, material ripped out, new material added in its place, voices suppressed and silenced, and new voices added. The text this thesis has considered, Numbers 25 has been seen to have such a history. Section I explored that history, both in the exercise of establishing a translation and then in charting the text's emergence through the various stages of its development.

What is true of Numbers 25 is true of much of the canon. It is possible to think of the scriptures as a mosaic, an assembly of many parts, and in doing so the scriptures invite us into their conversation, both to hear the voices present, obvious and not-so-obvious, and to add our own voice to them. Section II served as a way of hearing voices from the past. Those voices brought their own diversity, coming as they did from different circumstances. They also brought a measure of creativity to the task of reading and retelling the text, which enabled

[1] This is not to say that division or crisis is unhealthy. Rather, a crisis can serve to bring energy and resolve, resulting in increased creativity.

[2] Mark Brett suggested this crisis was upon the discipline over twenty years ago. He thought the situation serious enough to suggest that biblical studies could hardly be thought of as a single discipline, and that the differing interpretive goals of practitioners of different methodologies would likely remain incommensurable. He called for an ethical pluralism in the discipline, keeping the horizons wide. See, Mark G. Brett, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis?: The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

the mosaic to develop in unexpected ways, and created an inviting space for further reading and retelling.

That history included some disturbing voices. It revealed that some of those voices are still present in the world today, through the oppression of women and the biblical justification for racial violence.[3] Avalos suggests that such voices demand the end of biblical studies.[4] Why invest time into a book that justifies such barbaric behaviour?[5] Perhaps he has a point. However, as has been argued, this is precisely the reason that biblical studies is so crucial. Biblical studies may appear an irrelevant exercise to some, but that does not mean that the bible is irrelevant. Critical scholars may walk away from the bible, but if they do, that will not stop the appropriation of the bible by those who want to use it for their own interests. This is Boer's point in *Rescuing the Bible*.[6] And while we might argue that Boer simply wants to use the bible to promote his own political interests, what he does suggest is that the bible speaks with more than one voice, and so demands that more than one voice speak for it. Brett's notion of ethical plurality enters at this precise moment. A plurality of voices is an inherently good thing.

Boer and Brett's ideas come together here. Boer calls for allegiances and alliances, which suggests plurality. Brett calls for plurality, a qualified ethical plurality. The mosaic invites such diversity; diversity of both reading(s) and method. The mosaic unity calls for allegiance, solidarity. It reminds us of our

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[3] This is not to say that the bible speaks only in support of violence. As as been seen through the works of Nihan and Schmid, to mention only two, is that the ancient sources include what we might even go so far as to call 'pacifist' voices. See, Christophe Nihan, *From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch: A Study in the Composition of the Book of Leviticus*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2 Reihe, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); Nihan, "The Priestly Covenant, Its Reinterpretations, and the Composition of "P"."; Schwartz, "Reexamining the Fate of the "Canaanites" in the Torah Traditions."; Thomas B. Dozeman and Konrad Schmid, *A Farewell to the Yahwist? The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006); Dozeman, Schmid, and Schwartz, *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research.*

[4]Hector Avalos, *The End of Biblical Studies* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2007).

[5] For detailed work on the explicit use of biblical language in colonising discourse, see, Brett, *Decolonizing God*; R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed. *The Postcolonial Bible*, Bible and Postcolonialism (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Sugirtharajah, *Troublesome Texts: The Bible in Colonial and Contemporary Culture*; Roland Boer, *Last Stop Before Antarctica: The Bible and Postcolonialism in Australia*, 2nd ed., Semeia Studies (Leiden Brill, 2008).

[6]Roland Boer, *Rescuing the Bible*, Blackwell Manifestos (Oxford: Blackwell Pub. Ltd, 2007).

connectedness, despite our apparent incongruence. It reminds us that being fragmentary is not the same as being broken. The individual pieces are both connected and connecting. It reminds us, as we listen to the voices from the past, that readings are transitory, which should force a measure of humility upon us as we offer our own readings, themselves temporary.

Section III adds more voices to the conversation. The readings listen to the voices of the past, while trying to add something new. They are inspired by the creativity of old readings, while trying to speak about them in a new way. Brett, citing Frank Kermode, reminds us that of texts like these, 'there will always be something else and something *different* to say.'[7] (Italics added). What is said is never terminal, never definitive. It is simply something else, something different, one piece in the enlarging mosaic.

If there is always something else to say, something different to say, then this begs the question, 'what next?' This thesis has engaged a number of reading strategies, but has not exhausted the possibilities. A psychoanalytical approach to reading this text would surely be a fruitful exercise. The subject range is broad: Why does Moses alter the divine command? Why is Zimri so bold in bringing an innocent woman into a grieving community, assuming that he knew the aggravation it would create? Why does Cozbi's father allow the marriage in such strained circumstances? What lies behind Phinehas' maniacal rage?

Or perhaps one might wish to read the story from another place. What might this story say to a family who has suffered shame killings? What might it say to people co-opted into acts of violence against their neighbours? Against their families? Equally, what might those people say back to the text? How might their contribution enrich the mosaic?

To What End? The Unfinished Business of Biblical Studies

This thesis began with Barton's idea of 'plain sense'. It has become clear that plain sense is contested ground. What is plain to one is decidedly unclear to someone else. The lack of clarity comes from all manner of places, whether by

[7] Kermode, *Forms of Attention* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), p. 62 in Brett, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis?: The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies*, 167.

experience, methodology, motivation or something else quite different. Rather than seeing this as a problem, rather than considering it a crisis, even an 'end', it is hoped that this plurality can be a sign of strength. Plurality creates the space for allegiances, for unity. The wide horizon hoped for by Brett may well hold the key for a relevant biblical studies.

To do so, a new way of thinking about biblical studies is required. In the light of the real world issues that could consume our time and work, there is little or no time for parochialism about methodology or strategy. This isn't to say that reflection on such things is unimportant: certainly not. As Patte and Brett have reminded us, there is an ethical concern that needs to be present in our work. However, becoming consumed with these matters, as has been the case for the past several decades, has led the discipline to the brink of irrelevance, so that established professionals have called for the end.

Actually, what is required is a new ending, or a new end, if we consider the word as signalling a purpose. The mosaic is a way of imagining this new end, as it draws our work together rather than divides us. It recognises the temporal, transitory nature of our work, while always inviting something new. It encourages us to see our work as contributing to a larger project rather than existing in isolation. It calls us to solidarity, celebrating difference, innovation and creativity, all the while respecting the work that is already in place. It must seek to critique violent mis-readings, recognising the harm these have done to others, both physically, emotionally and psychologically, both in the reports of the textual world, and in their appropriation in the physical world. It must aim to create new ones marked by a commitment to justice, readings which resist the temptation to exercise mastery or control over others.[8] In doing so, it is possible to imagine another end, and doing so, we find that there is still work to do: the unfinished, unending business of biblical studies.

[8] Brett, *Decolonizing God*, 182.

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