

## Sacrificing the Sign

A singularly remarkable rite among those prescribed in the Hebrew Bible is that one recorded in Numbers 5.11–31. The ritual-legal procedure there set out is to be followed when a man, seized by a fit of jealousy (LXX v.14: ἐπέλθῃ αὐτῷ πνεῦμα ζηλώσεως), suspects his wife of infidelity. The man is to bring his wife, together with a grain offering, before a priest. As the woman holds the grain offering, the priest ‘sets her in the presence of Yahweh’ (LXX v. 18: στήσει . . . ἔναντι κυρίου), uncovering her head. While the priest then holds in his hand a vessel of water in which is mixed dust from the floor of the Tabernacle, he performs an enunciation, declaring how the procedure that is about to be utilized will reveal the guilt or innocence of the woman. The priest then writes these same words of enunciation on a scroll (or some such medium [βιβλίον]); when the letters are written, the priest washes the alphabetic characters from the scroll into the water-dust preparation. The priest then takes the grain offering from the woman and presents it to Yahweh, and the woman is made to drink the solution of dust and eviscerated letters. If the wife has been unfaithful, there will be consequent pathologic expressions of her guilt; if, however, she is innocent, she will not experience the envisioned reproductive morbidity.

This rite of the so-called *sotah* (from שטח ‘to turn aside’, as in MT v.12) has occasioned commentary since antiquity. Recent scholarship has been quick to bring attention to (*inter alia*) the apparent magic at work in the washing of letters into the elixir that will pass within the body of the suspect wife. Schniedewind 2004, for example, considers the Biblical procedure in the context of Egyptian execration texts. Already fifty years ago Sir Godfrey Driver had noted a similarity to a rite of exorcism attested in a then somewhat recently published Akkadian document from the Hittite royal archives: the procedure described in the text from Hattuša treats the driving away of fever utilizing a potable solution of donkey urine and clay from the ‘tablet house’ (*bît tuppi*).

I would suggest, however, that we consider the prospect that the fundamental *modus operandi* of the Biblical alphabetic rite was construed to be one of *sacrifice*, consistent with the many sacrificial procedures instituted in the Pentateuch. Josephus in fact – who states that it is the name of God that the priest writes on and washes from the scroll – groups the ritual of the *sotah* with other Mosaic procedures and identifies the set as matters περὶ μὲν τῶν θυσιῶν καὶ τῆς ἀγνείας τῆς ἐπ’ αὐταῖς ‘that concern the sacrifices and the religious observance related to them’ (*Antiquitates Judaicae* 3.273). The making of graphic signs *sacer* is otherwise known in antiquity. Conspicuous in this regard is the offering of alphabetic symbols to Zeus Semios on Mt. Hymettos in Attica (ca. 700 BC and following).