The Law of Jealousy

Destro, Adriana

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Chapter Five

The Epilogue of the "Judgment of God"

It can be seen from the preceding discussion that there are a number of connections, a precise dependence, between the rituals at the altar and the "judgment of God" (ordeal). The final judicial act must necessarily be preceded, and prepared for, by the ritual (cf. B. Sot. 19b), in order to permit entry into the more technical and effective stage. That the ordeal is part of a precise legal system, that is, that it has the form of a trial (cf. H. C. Brichto, 1975, 64) is proved by the interventions of two courts: in the first instance, the local court, and thence, the Supreme Court. That it uses a fixed, normative structure is illustrated by the norms according to which the scroll must be drawn up, and by the use of an oath formula in which an imperative style predominates.

It must, however, be added that the legal apparatus is insufficiently constructed. There is no preliminary enquiry into the circumstances of the transgression, the evidence is given separately and before the actual judgment, and the "verdict" is not clearly expressed in a legal form.¹

In order to better clarify the way in which ritual and judgment are related, it should be pointed out that while the scheme and sequences of the procedure have their foundations and raison d'être in the legal structure, the same cannot be said of the materials used in the ordeal (dust, water, Scripture). These materials are, in fact, extraneous instruments to the apparatus of the courts. Their symbology alludes to concepts of a 'cosmic' type, and to functions of divination.

¹The Mishnah does not specify if a real verdict exists, or in what terms it is given. In the Talmud the result of the trial is briefly summarized as follows: if the woman is shown not to be defiled, "she shall be free and will conceive seed" (B. Sot. 26a). Reference is also made to the formula by Midrash Rabbah to Numbers: "she shall be cleared immediately from the curses and the oath" (IX: 25). In both cases, it is only specified that there will be a solution in the woman's favour, which shall free her from human or divine punishment.
The appearance of cosmic symbology on the scene is of great help; it leads us to consider new themes and perspectives. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the emergence of something new does not belie anything which has already been accomplished. After having gained support from this symbology, the actual judgment makes the ritual action (confession and offering) retreat somewhat into the background. It, however, gives it the character of a powerful presupposition of the 'dramatization' of the final divine intervention.

To round off this introductory discussion, it should be noted that the legal nature of the ordeal is influenced by a structural viscosity, by unusual details and implications. These details give precious information about the value of the law and the extent of its influence.

The symbolic value of the water-dust

1. At the moment when the preparation of the ordeal begins, the type of action (begun at the scene of the "Supreme Court," and continued at the altar) suddenly changes. Elements with exceptionally expressive value are interwoven to obtain an instrument of supernatural powers, the "bitter waters." In fact, a small amount of dust is added to the water, and the words of the oath, written on the scroll by the officiant, are dissolved in this water. With these operations, the procedure enters the concrete phase of the revelation and the test.

The preparation of the "bitter water" is amply illustrated in the Mishnah, the Talmud, and particularly in parallel literature on the subject. In spite of this, it is not an easy task to identify and synthesize the integral meanings of the ingredients called into play. In the mishnaic description, it is first of all stressed that the water is taken from the laver (which is used for ablutions), and that the dust comes from underneath a stone on the floor, to the right (southern) side of the sanctuary (Sot. 2:2). In connection with this, Y. Sot. 2:2 describes water and dust as recalling man's origins and destination, and as mirror reflections of the well-spring and the hollow-tomb. Philo had already written that water and earth correspond to factors relating to "the birth and growth and consummation of all things" (De Spec. Leg. III:58).

These references remained practically unchanged in the memory of the Jewish people. The Midrash Rabbah to Numbers makes an interesting distinction: "Man was created from dust and woman from water" and so she must be subjected to trial with water, "to prove whether she is as chaste as when she was created" (IX: 15). This implies that, if water stands for the origins of woman, and dust for "the place to which she is going" (Midrash Rabbah to Numbers IX: 20), then it is important that they both be part of the "bitter waters." The
Palestinian Targum makes a similar comment, from which it can be inferred that the sign of death in particular characterizes the ordeal, because the destiny of mankind is to be reduced to dust (Addit. 27031 to Numbers 5:18).

The water from the laver, and the pinch of dust from the Temple, if referred to primordial presuppositions, become particularly eloquent instruments of ritual. Beyond the direct objectives of the ritual, they recall the structure of existence, from the beginning to the end. They are intimately connected to mythical thinking and to human genesis itself.

An interesting detail regarding the mixture of water and earth enables further clarification. Although the water and the earth are mixed, they are kept separate. The priest places the dust on the water (Sot. 2:2) or rather "visible on the water" (B. Sot. 16b) because this is the qualifying element (cf. B. Sot. 16b) which introduces the force of the curse (cf. Sifré to Numbers XVI:1). According to Philo, the pinch of dust is taken not from any chance place, but from the holy ground, which must be capable of fertility (cf. De Spec. Leg. III:59). The Gemara adds that the earth must have some kind of contact with the Temple and with everything which lives in it. It states, in fact: "If none (earth) is there, put some there (and take of it)" (B. Sot. 15b), thus showing the link which gives the earth its properties and functions (cf. Sifré to Numbers X: III).

The water has meanings which are of equal interest, although they are less immediate. The Midrash Rabbah to Numbers wonders why the water is taken from the laver, put into a vessel (cf. Sifré to Numbers X:1) and then, according to the interpretation of the Gemara, is "running water" (B. Sot. 15b). The reply which is given is that this laver "was made with the mirrors (made of brass) belonging to the women...who had said: 'God, bear witness for us that we went out of Egypt chaste.' When Moses came to make the laver, God said: 'Make it with those mirrors which were not fashioned for purposes of immorality, and their daughters shall be tried by them as to whether they are chaste as their mothers'" (IX:14). This tradition, then, gives value to the water, for the simple reason that it passes through a special place, a receptacle closely tied to the cult. Once again, the expressive force of the judgment instrument is derived from the seat of the highest symbolic action.

2The Midrash Rabbah to Numbers adds: "Your mothers, who grew up among the unclean, were free from suspicion, but you who grew up among the chaste have become suspect. Let therefore the work of the hands of those...who remained clean come and test and prove those who had been defiled" (IX:14).
Leaving aside the relevance of the afore-mentioned interpretation, it should be pointed out that these data as a whole enable us to state that the water and the dust unite the constitutive elements of creation with those representative and metaphoric elements inherent to the Temple. This, in turn, allows us to infer that the legendary character and the concrete meanings of the things contained within the Temple are perceived as first and final powers of existence. With great economy of symbols, the material and the extra-material world, the natural order and the superhuman order, are condensed and restore life to the dominant characteristics of cosmic symbology.

This way of organizing the widespread force of creation, and the particular force of the Temple, is only possible if there are catalyzers, that is, well-defined, specific situations or people upon whom the strength of the instrument of ritual may be realized. In the ritual of the "bitter waters," such a catalyzer is the accused wife. She has been identified as a disturbing element of community and family life, but even more so, as a link or means of mediation between the divine and the human. She therefore constitutes a proper base for the organization and the use of the force of the holy place.

2. The metaphoric messages contained in the water can also be traced in statutes before, or outside the ritual. Through the symbol of the water which "runs" (B. Sot. 15b) allusion is once more made to a world divided in two. On the one hand, there is cleanness: the water is running and pure, the priest is in a state of cleanness, the Temple is clean, the vessel containing the water is new, and therefore uncontaminated (Sot. 2:2; B. Sot. 15b). On the other hand, there is everything which constitutes the opposite of cleanness, or which threatens it. On this side, there is the woman who is periodically untouchable and, at the moment of the ritual, is under suspicion of a deadly transgression.

The strength of the water symbology also derives from its concrete function. On a cultic level, as has already been noted, water is a means of purification in specific circumstances. It constitutes an important way of reconquering ritual capacity. However, the Sotah trial cannot be explained through the scheme of the purifications because it is the transformation which the water undergoes that must be taken into account.

The procedure of maim ha-marim, rather than aiming at regaining a state of perfect cleanness, has a function which is derived from the theocentric nature of the Temple. The water must be running because it is destined to be in contact with the divine essence. The words of the Scriptures transcribed on the scroll, in fact, contain the Name of God. Indeed, Sifré to Numbers (XIV:I; XIV:II) declares that this Name must
be expressed in the formula of the "bitter waters" with the Tetragramm, that is, with specific symbols, and without paraphrasing which might obscure the signs of the divinity (cf. H. Bietenhard, 1956, 56). In fact, "in Jewish mentality a name expresses and represents a person: wherever the Name of YHWH is mentioned, God is present in a special way" (R. De Vaux, 1958-60, II, 168). Thus, by receiving this divine Name, the water receives the substance of God in its entirety. It is destined for this, and from this, it receives specific meanings in the ritual.

An important principle regulates the entire logic of the "judgment of God." Man is in the position of taking possession of divine signs and commands only when these are made available in instruments within his limits. The use of the pure water, the compiling of the scroll, the introduction of the Tetragramm in the water, are performed in this order with the aim of allowing man to attain superior powers and to benefit from them. In other words, the water is used, together with the dust, to produce an amalgam of 'ordinary' elements which are both accessible and controllable. It thus has the aim of capturing cosmic or divine means which would otherwise be unobtainable.

This constitutes a possible explanation for two opposing facts relative to the other ingredients of the ritual. The dust must be visible, it must not, therefore, be confused with the water. It must keep its qualifying character of a factor which channels the curse. On the other hand, the Scripture must be condensed into one written document, and then dissolved or dispersed in a drink in order to make it more accessible. What is ordinary or 'near' is kept isolated, what is 'far' and is not easily grasped, is integrated. The means of water makes possible a bidirectional process, with opposing signs.

The above supports the fact that the Tetragramm is added to the other two substances (water and dust). The unilinear sequence of actions highlights a process of enrichment of the ordeal instruments (already prepared, by blending the dust with the water) through an introduction of power without equal. The effect rendered is interesting because by making the divine words penetrate into a human being and into the

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3 It is interesting to note a curious feature of Sotah, with respect to the Name of God. The Midrash Rabbah to Numbers explains that the Name of God generally "symbolizes the Attribute of Mercy...but in our text it represents the attribute of ruthlessness" (IX:18).

4 It should, incidentally, be pointed out that the dust from the floor, and the water from the laver are not really ordinary elements. They are ritually distinguished, for instance, from other more usual elements (wood, fire, ashes of sacrifice) which are usually present at the scene of worship.
physical world, one creates a passage from the cosmology to the anthropology of the Jewish people, from the theoretical principle of divine power to the concrete, constitutive fact of God’s action in the human sphere. At the moment in which this happens, the visible world is changed. This contact has an unavoidable and necessary effect. It transforms, and we shall see how, the normal order of things.

All this is doubtless based on the assumption that divine symbols are always bestowed with immense power. In the action of Sotah, this assumption is made particularly evident by the fact that the Scriptural text transcribed onto the scroll is treated with great care. It is defended by precise rules (relating to the way it is written, and the materials used to write it) and by prohibitions and tabuizations. It must be possible to erase it, and it is thus written in ink, rather than other materials. It must respect the rules on the compilation of scrolls, and may not be written on papyrus or on "unprepared hide" (Sot. 2:4). No trace of what is written must be visible (cf. B. Sot. 17b and Maim. 3:10). Tabus and precepts can be seen here as clues to the incredible significance which it is attributed to the action of writing the Name.

A sure indication of the transformation which divine contact produces is contained in the initial warning the priest makes to the woman. On offering her the water, as has already been briefly mentioned, he exhorts her to confess, "for His great Name (lishmo hagadol)," which is written in holiness "so that it cannot be blotted out in the bitter water" (Sot. 1:4; B. Sot. 7b; cf. Midrash Rabbah to Numbers 9:17). In so doing, he invites her to safeguard "the great Name" and carefully evaluate the force that it could unleash, as well as the consequences it could bring to bear. He suggests, in other words, that she should not use the Name in vain, nor in an untimely manner.

The change of plan introduced by the "great Name" becomes clear in cases in which the woman refused to drink the water into which the Tetragramm had been poured (cf. Sot. 3:3). Such cases, as we have already seen, concerned a) the woman who declared herself "unclean." In this instance, the water with the name of God had to be poured "on the ashes" (Sot. 3:3) because power and clarity could no longer be obtained from it, since the truth was already known. Indeed, according to Maimonides "there was no more holiness" in the water (4:6).

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5The skin used must be of a pure animal "the same as used for a scroll of the Torah...in the sacred tongue with ink free of vitriol and specifically...the name of the woman" (Maim. 3:8); the priest "writes neither with gum not with copperas nor with anything which makes a lasting impression" (Sot. 2:4).

6Before the writing is cancelled, the woman can refuse to drink, and "her meal-offering is scattered on the ashes" (Sot. 3:3). The scroll with her name cannot be
They also concerned the woman who, without having declared herself unclean, refused to take the water. In the event of this second hypothesis, the accused woman was obliged to drink (Sot. 3:3; B. Sot. 20a-20b) because the power of the great Name could not be put aside, it could not have no effect. It had to be able to manifest itself in a recognizable 'intervention,' either by freeing the chaste woman (who, frightened and bewildered, had tried to avoid undergoing trial) or by punishing the guilty woman (who, by refusing, had tried to shirk her responsibilities).

The transformation introduced by the Name

1. Explanations of the value of the Name enable us to make a particular observation: the 'turbid' experience of deviance illuminates facts that would be impossible to understand in situations of transparency.

Frequently, a tormented or tragic experience demands a more careful or wider reading of the real. It introduces the need to search for transparency in a number of ways. It can eventually lead to the institution of exceptional means which are able to penetrate structural contexts as no other instrument could. This consideration highlights a further feature of the "bitter waters," which, containing a typical or special ingredient, and having an explorative and explanatory force (the Name of God), function as, and are indeed called, waters of "investigation" (cf. Palestinian Targum Addit. 27031 to Numbers 5:18). They assume the nature of means which clarify fundamental data, that is, positions supporting the conjugal relationship.

Given the exceptional nature of the means and the enquiry itself, can the obliteration of the divine words in the water be said to place the ritual of Sotah on the same level as an activity of divinatory and oracular type? The action of Sotah does not permit a unique or linear approach. Indeed, from a structural point of view, it consists of three
different, although inseparable parts: they are the "offering of the handful," the "dissolving of the scroll" and the "accepting of the oath" (Sifré to Numbers XVIII:1), as well as a physical test for the woman. Whilst it contains divine or legal means (use of formulae, oath) to decipher status and position (offering), it also provides the instruments to face the need. It constitutes an "operative" procedure in which, perhaps, resolutive effectiveness prevails over simple revelation. Here the point is raised that entering into relationship with the sacred – as is suggested by E. Durkheim – also has feared and incredible effects on the real level.

Whatever the implicit objectives in the "bitter waters" may be, it has been seen that these are, first of all, defined by the immense power of the great Name. Once materialized or condensed in the water, this can only be expressed in all its greatness and can only make the cosmos more comprehensible or different. Regarding the latter point, the Tosefta and the Babylonian Talmud add some particularly concrete comments. They attribute the value of a chemical reagent to the water, the earth and the Name: the bitter waters "are only like a dry salve" (Tos. Sot. 1:6; cf. B. Sot. 7b). The same priest explains that this substance is innocuous on healthy skin, but that on contact with a wound, "it penetrates through the skin" (B. Sot. 7b). The Midrash Rabbah to Numbers also attributes the quality of "solid poison" (IX:17) to the "bitter waters" which is destined to destroy what is infected. It is the mixture of common elements with 'divine signs' which transforms the water and the dust into a substance which produces enormous reactions (it reveals, penetrates, burns), and which throws the universe into turmoil. Health changes into disease, life is superseded by death.

It is important to make a further consideration concerning the incontrovertible altering effect of the "bitter waters." The abolition of the "law of jealousy" could signal a change in the mentality of Jewish society. It could indicate that the belief in divine power over natural power has changed. How much did this change influence the causes which were to outlaw the trial? Was the desire to prevent the divine power from materializing into a moment of ritual due to the fact that its effectiveness was not believed or because it contrasted with a precise

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9 Some secondary effects of the "bitter waters" merit further attention. The similitudes built around the poisonous medicine that the woman must drink, have the function of an alarm. It is certain that the "bitter waters" cannot remain inert in the presence of something infected or corrupted, and in this case, its strength will produce effects and consequences even before it is used. It convinces the accused woman to confess or forces the priests to use a bestial, degrading offering. It forces acceptance of submission and annihilation.
idea of what is sacred? These questions are raised only to indicate that some very interesting implications exist on a purely ethical-religious level, and that there were many problems connected with abolishing the ritual. The range of this analysis inevitably must limit the discussion of consequences, as described by the texts and their narrative structure.

2. Following the flux of the transformations, we should briefly return to the fact that divine manifestation does not only reformulate the social environment which solicits it. Since God’s intervention (through the Name) is beyond any limit, it is the instrument which can heal and unleash power at any time, and in any place. In this sense, the Sotah ritual follows a reformulation of various sectors of life, which are, in a sense, introduced *ex novo*, in stability or in clarity.

A particularly important and everlasting change is connected to the value of the law. We have noted several times that in Num. 5:29 reference is made to the "law of jealousy." Having the quality of "law," the procedure leads to effects in specific relational fields (opposing personal duties, loss of marriage endowment, warnings-prohibitions).

The whole procedure would be reduced to the normal technical-legal routine, were it not part of a context or frame in which, according to V. Turner’s theory, the flux of the action and interaction may lead to situations without precedent, as well as generate new symbols which are "dynamic entities, not static cognitive signs" (V. Turner, 1983, 96). Inasmuch as they obtain strength from the value of the "great Name," the formulae and legal actions transcend their usual limits. The supernatural element which comes into play bestows the law, therefore, with innovative, or more generally significant values.¹⁰

Before examining more closely what is meant by highlighting the meaning of the Law, and verifying what makes the legal apparatus more effective (even if it does have a rudimentary structure which is

¹⁰The general framework described here enables us to deduce that, in the experience of the ritual of Sotah, the judges-priests apply the law principally in order to revitalize it. The court of Sotah becomes a place of the supreme pronouncement in which the power and the unsubstitutability of divine manifestation (*Shekinah*) is proved. It should further be noted that the legal procedure is presented in terms of executions. The husband must take his wife to the court of Jerusalem. The priests who are to judge her must transcribe the formula exactly (cf. Sot. 2:3) and without omissions (cf. B. Sot. 17a). They must make the woman swear and drink. The woman can only accept the judgment, and follow the procedure which is being applied to her (sometimes she may avoid drinking the water, but not being tried). Through execution, repetition of formulae and behavior patterns, society is built.
not made completely clear), the relationship which binds the woman to the law, and to the "law of jealousy" in particular, should be explained. The woman is not comparable on a legal level with the man, either in an active sense, or in a passive one. She is, first of all, exempt from specific uses-precepts, and does not have legal autonomy. She does not receive instruction on the law (cf. Appendix 2). Relative to this, the Mishnah specifies however that "a man is required to teach Torah to his daughter" (Sot. 3:4) with specific reference to the imputations which could fall on her with the ritual of maim ha-marim.

Despite the contrasting opinions of some Amoraim (B. Sot. 21b), the teaching of the law of Sotah to the daughters seem to have remained an undisputable point. Importantly enough, in later Jewish tradition, it has been accepted that "unless it had been proved affirmatively that the woman knew the law relating to adultery she could not be convicted" (G. Horowitz, 1973, 205). The application of the law to the woman thus implies the recognition and the underlying of its pedagogical, formative value. This fact indicates a broadening of the connections between woman and law.

In order to move to a more juridical consideration, attention should be paid to the structure of the oath-curse, which constitutes a particular chapter of the "judgment of God." Such an oath, an act of particular delicacy may, in fact, reveal legal-social functions relative to the woman.

The formula of "'alah" and "shevu'ah": the expansion of the law.

1. Each oath alludes to obscure events but develops them in forms which are compatible with daily action and reality. The solemn words, requested of the woman who must make the oath, are thus explicit ways of reinforcing responsibilities, imposing duties, and emphasizing the ties of the law.

In the mishnaic structure, the oath is treated widely. The tractate of Shavuot (Division of Nezikin) offers a variety of sworn evidences relating both to civil cases (loans, deposits, payments, salaries, custody of property, debts, damages) as well as to religious errors relating to the Sabbath, impurity, abstinence (cf. Shav. 1:1; 2:1; 3:1). Applied to cases of varying importance, the oath bares witness to a fact, it permits defence or else defines economic and patrimonial problems. For juridical cases, the Babylonian Talmud defines three forms of oath (removal of guilt, oath of witness and of information) as residual evidence (B. Shav. 45a, 48b), permitted after the examination of other testimonies.

In the courts, the oath is under the jurisdiction of the judges. Outside the courts, many oaths are spontaneous. They are allowed in
certain circumstances, without distinction, both for men and women. The oath of testimony is, however, barred to the woman, because she is considered a legally dependent subject (Shav. 6:1). It is for this reason that, in the ritual of Sotah, after writing the formula, the priest asks the woman to give her consent, but takes responsibility for the whole procedure.

The judgment of Sotah displays several interesting features also in this field. The solemn formula used is extensive. It combines a curse ('alah) and an oath (shevu'ah): "The Lord make you an execration and an oath among your people" (Num. 5:21; Sot. 2:3). It presents, thus, a weaving of schemes and of fixed habits, albeit well-known elements.11 According to Midrash Rabbah to Numbers, the characteristics of Sotah give its formula the value of a paradigm, of a model. Following this example, therefore, "one can infer for every single oath in the Torah that it must consist of a curse and a oath" (IX:34).

The woman must follow this particular formula, and agree to patterns which cannot be founded in other procedures. She is made to repeat: "Amen, Amen" (Sot. 2:3). That is, she speaks the usual acceptance required of her by the judge twice.12 The double Amen is considered a separate consent to the oath and to the curse (Sot. 2:5).13 The Talmud here reconnects the meaning of a confirmation of things which have happened in the past and in the future, of acts committed with the man in question, or with other men, when the woman was betrothed, or after marriage (B. Sot. 18b; cf. further, Midrash Rabbah to Numbers IX:19).14 The two Amens are usually a collective reply, a cry of assent or approval used by the united community. It can be found in this form in Num. 8:6. Without placing too much importance on the meaning of the double Amen, we can see in it a reference to the general

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11In biblical texts, self-cursing is often presented together with, or instead of, the oath. In some cases, self-cursing is omitted, or is expressed only in a conditional form: "May God..., Cursed be the man..." (M. Greenberg, 1971, 1295-1296). In the ritual of Sotah, in accordance with the Bible, the formula must necessarily link the curse (‘alah) and the oath (shevu’ah). This is the condition for the legality and efficiency of the procedure.

12The priests-judges are chosen at random (cf. Tos. Sot. 1:7). The courts (which regulate the oaths) apply specific penalties to false testimonies: "They are liable for deliberately taking such an oath to flogging and for inadvertently taking such an oath, one is exempt" (Shav. 3:11).

13According to H. Bietenhard (1956, 62), the double Amen is also present in the scrolls of Qumran, as a ritualized expression of the people.

14According to Maimonides, the double Amen of Sotah can be spoken by the same woman for different men; or successive husbands may make the woman pronounce the double Amen, because of one man (Maim. 1:12-13).
context or collective expressions formed through the "wayward" woman.

The Sotah trial is also exceptional because of another rule. We have seen that the words of the oath-curse are cancelled or dissolved in the water. While, that is, for all types of writing one may add vitriol to the ink, this is not the case for the drink prepared for the suspected woman (cf. B. Sot. 20a-20b). The oath of Sotah is written in such an ephemeral way so that it can disappear from the scroll and 'reappear' in another substance, pass from one element to another, without losing its value.15

The consequences of this curious picture can easily be imagined. Through a double formula and a double reply, it is clear that the range of the law (that is, the fields in which it can be applied and the type of influence-control which it exercises) is doubled. Through physical dispersion, the words of invocation which are fixed and circumscribed in a scroll are deposited in a body. The range of legal penetration is thus widened considerably. From a verbal act, it becomes, in a sense, a "corporal" event. By directing the legal norms into the physiological processes, the law is given the necessary concrete forms which influence wide sectors of existence.

2. Other particular effects of the law on the woman merit closer consideration. In the formula of the curse, it is specified that the place of punishment, as written in Num. 5:21-22, will be the woman's belly and thighs, instruments of her perversion.16 The woman is held responsible for the form which the sentence will take, because she is responsible for the form in which the sin took place. Extending Num. 5:27, the text of Sotah adds, however, that, in addition to her thigh and her belly, "the rest" of her body (Sot. 1:7) will be affected by the curse. It speaks of the face which turns yellow, of the eyes which protrude, of veins which become swollen (Sot. 3:4). It states that all the limbs will progressively bear the signs of death, because they were involved in the act of sin, alongside the thighs and belly. Through the

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15As a rule, the oath appeals to God, it invokes "His great Name," and thus exposes this Name to dangers. A false oath therefore desecrates it (cf. M. Greenberg, 1971, 1296). Leaving aside the subject of desecration, which is too wide, it should be noted that the guilty and perjurous woman – like all perjurers – falls into a very delicate situation for different reasons from those which brought her before the court of Jerusalem.

16In Num. 5:21 and 5:22, two different orders, regarding the thighs and belly, are stated. In the first case, it is written "the Lord makes your thigh fall away and your body swell"; in the second, the belly is named first, and precedes the thighs. At verse 27, the punitive effects of the water are described and the natural order is returned to: "her body shall swell, and her thigh fall away."
connection between the places of sin and the penalty, the woman's guilt and its whole context are revealed. The persons present are thus made aware of the causes which have unleashed the crisis and made necessary such a concentration of punitive measures.

The emphasis given to describing the limbs which will receive the curse does not conclude the clarification of the law, and of the strengthening of its punitive effects. An extension of the curse to other people exists. The repetition of the words "the water shall enter" (Num. 5:24, 27) leads the Tannaim to say that "just as the water puts (the wife) to the proof, so the water puts him (the lover), (bo'el) to the proof," (Sot. 5:1; cf. moreover B. Sot. 28a; Y. Sot. 5:1; Midrash Rabbah to Numbers IX:20, 35). The Palestinian Targum (Addit. 27031 to Numbers 5:27) specifies that punishment will strike the lover wherever he may be. Maimonides adds: "Her paramour, on whose account she was made to drink the water, likewise died, wherever he happened to be" (Maim. 3:17) (cf. moreover B. Sot. 28a). The question of the effect of the law extends even to the husband. If he has had illicit relations with the woman, he will be punished by the lack of effect of the waters upon his wife (cf. Maim. 2:6). He will not be able to repudiate her. Even though unworthy and dangerous, she will maintain her status of wife. The dishonest husband will never have the possibility of being definitively freed from guilt or "iniquity" (Num. 5:31). The question need not be discussed further in order to realize that this constitutes an expansion of the letter of the law, to indirect 'guilt,' following that of the "wayward" woman.

With the administration of the poison-medicine, the performance of the ordeal is over and the dramatization of divine intervention has finished. The power of the law is not, however, expressed in a visible, concrete form. With the aim of evidencing such power, the ritual closes with a sudden reappearance of the dramatic actions performed around the woman. The people present seem to be suddenly frightened. They intervene with a further, more explicit act of defense. They fear that the Sanctuary will be contaminated by the uncleanness or the sudden death of the woman. They shout: "Take her away, take her away...so

17 The text of Num. 5:11-31 presents various repetitions which have led scholars to hypothesize that two original sources of the passage may have existed. See M. Fishbane (1974, 28-34), for a brief summary of the opinions on the 'repetitions.' Some have supported the thesis of "on coherent text" (cf. H. C. Brichto, 1975). T. Frymer-Kensky has discovered (through the division of the ritual into stages) a "literary use of repetition" which could illuminate the structure of the Biblical passage in question. This would appear to be built on the principal of "inclusive integration" which unifies the passages (descriptive and prescriptive) to the complex structure (1984, 13-14).
that she does not make the place unclean (she lo' tet'amme' 'et ha-
'azarah)' (Sot. 3:4; B.Sot. 20b). As a result of the shock or the tension, the woman could, in fact, menstruate or die within the perimeter of the Temple.

As a source of danger, the woman once more recalls the great fragility of the Jewish nation, the unclean contacts which the Temple may suffer, the evils that might threaten, the boundaries of holiness and the conservation of the people. Once the principle of reinforcement through supernatural means, which moves the whole trial, has been activated, the woman continues to maintain her characteristics. From the moment when she is found guilty, her death in the Temple can destroy cleanliness; if she is not judged "unclean," her ordinary biological characteristics may contaminate the holy place. She is rapidly removed from the scene, for the very reason that she has lost none of her difficult and threatening characteristics.

With respect to the law, these final scenes thus synthesize, as if it were still necessary, the idea which runs through the whole procedure: the woman, as a woman, continues to be seen as the factor which challenges, as the element which can harm. An immediate and scrupulous application of the law is thus made necessary to fight against contamination, obscure diseases, and profanation.

The tractate does not only give indications as to how to apply the "law of jealousy." The scene of the expulsion, which is necessary whether the woman is guilty or innocent, denounces the efforts of the sages (and the community) in the face of the female element. It does not bear witness to things which are well-known, it rather shows the solution to delicate and unusual problems.

The consequences of the oath-curse

1. Starting from the above-mentioned presuppositions, the parts that constitute the oath formula must be distinguished. Condensed into one unique act, this formula contains two elements which, external to the strictly legal context, strengthen the effects of the law.

   It has been noted that the formula a) speaks of the woman as an object of imprecation and oath-curse "among her people" (Num. 5:21) and b) that it specifies that the water will enter the woman "and cause bitter pain" (Num. 5:27), that is, make "her belly swell and her thigh to fall away" (Sot. 2:3).

   The first consequences of the oath can therefore be identified in the disgrace which will fall upon the guilty woman. The initial part of the formula states, that is, that at the very least, the woman's honor will be doubted, "a thing far more grievous than death" (cf. Philo, De Spec.
Leg. III: 54), and that she will be lowered in status in the community. Whilst expressing an indeterminate moral code, which can be manipulated, on the whole the formula of the oath reveals a particularly severe idea of judgment. The adulteress will certainly be reduced to the state of outcast, or of a person impoverished by the legal retortion already discussed. The women will be able to point to her as an example of shame and ruin. The Midrash Rabbah to Numbers adds that her name will be used as a deterrent, or as a means of curse: "If you have done such a thing, may your end be like that of So-and-so" (IX:18).

The second part of the formula reinforces the verdict, and makes it much more severe. A punitive effect, of a more subtle nature, will strike the reproductive capacity of the woman. The adulteress will become sterile. Sterility is synonymous with death, it alludes to the elimination of the woman. This dramatic observation has stimulated different interpretations and opinions. A good deal of debate on the subject springs from the biblical expression: (wezavtah bitnah wenaflah jerakah) (Num. 5: 22), which raises a number of problems, and which can be translated in a number of ways. Indeed, recently ancient and more modern theses have been reproposed which include the description of a "hysterical or false pregnancy" (H. C. Brichto, 1975, 66), and "a prolapsed uterus" (T. Frymer-Kensky, 1984, 18, 20-21). The idea of divine conception through the water itself has not been excluded (T. Frymer-Kensky, 1984, 19). The wide range of possible interpretations of the passage quoted above, highlights further the series of difficulties which arise around the question of female fertility. It is not superfluous to recall the extreme value attributed to female fertility in the ancient Jewish culture, and how the woman's destiny was frequently marked by her condition as mother. The symbolic figures of Sarah (cf. Gen. 16: 1-16), Liah and Rebecca (cf. Ex.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{18}}\text{Philosophers specify that the woman will be struck "by unwieldy belly, swollen and inflamed, and terrible suffering all round the womb" (De Spec. Leg. III: 62). For his part, Josephus speaks of "dropsy attacking her belly" and adds that if the woman has violated decency, "proved false to her husband" her right leg will be displaced (Ant. Jud. III: 273). Amongst contemporary authors, according to T. Frymer-Kensky there are other hypotheses based on the etymological study of Arabic, Aramaic and Syriac which make reference to a "dry and hot uterus, and consequently sterile" or to "a flooded uterus by waters and thus not suitable to conceive" (1984, 20-21). The thesis of miscarriage, however, can be rejected, still according to T. Frymer-Kensky (1984, 18), because the book of Numbers makes no reference to an accused woman being pregnant. On the other hand, it clearly names the problem of fertility, where it says that she "will conceive children" (cf. Num. 5:28).} \]
30:1-21) clearly illustrate the meaning of maternity in the Jewish world.

It is evident that the more precious the possession, the more complex and careful is its defense. Thus, the parameters of maternity implicitly illustrate the gravity of the crisis, just as sterility highlights the punitive measures to which it is necessary to resort. The series of problems which arise out of this are made clearer if one remembers that whenever the "bitter waters" were to give evidence of a woman's guilt, and cause the sterility of the sotah woman, a fragment of the people would lose its function, its essential quality. Negative and antagonistic forces would slow down the progress of a world which existed only to be bound to perfect creation, to active participation, to unity between Heaven and earth.

As an absence of embryonic life, hidden (but still authentic), the sterility which strikes the alleged unfaithful wife preannounces her death. As noted above, there is a close correspondence between one and the other. The road, however long, which begins with so negative a sign as sterility, may only end in a terrible way, with annihilation. Coherent with the idea that sterility is the price for adultery (cf. R. Patai, 1961, 80, 83), death becomes the natural epilogue to the worst possible female sin (cf. Philo, De Spec. Leg. III:58). The oath (which invokes the Name) therefore has only one effect on the guilty woman: it makes her sterile, as good as dead, and it eventually kills her.

2. In the complex fabric of Sotah, something more than mere punishment would appear to be involved. It might seem that a much harsher, irreversible action were under way: a dramatic 'reduction' of the value and destiny of the people is faced.

In connection with this, the status of the 'sinner' should be reconsidered. In Chap. 4 it was seen that whoever has marked himself by a voluntary sin is "expelled" from the nation, and in particular, adultery, proven or manifest, is punished with death. One might ask if, in line with these principles, the ritual of the "bitter water" has an indirect or deferred form of death sentence as its aim.

The mishnaic text does not provide much support for such a hypothesis. However, it should be remembered that any action directed at the physical elimination of the woman would go against the very logic of the procedure itself. That is, it would be inadequate or insufficient for the needs of the community, given that, as discussed in Chap. 4, the accused woman is supposed to be a factor which enables mediation and communication. The definitive expulsion of the woman from the community would result in the destruction of means which are
useful for understanding and communicating between the divine and the human spheres.19

That the ordeal aims to influence profound strata of existence is illustrated by the fact that, if death does not intervene to settle the structure, new life will certainly strengthen it. While the punishment of the woman's sin does not always free or facilitate life, her innocence regenerates and expands it. The wrongly suspected wife will blossom again, and will regain her health. She will literally be "recompensed" for the outrage suffered: she will conceive and have children (Num. 5:28). The amoraic text adds that she will fall pregnant, even if she was sterile before (B. Sot. 26a). On the basis of analogies to which reference cannot be made here, the Talmud states also that "a son will come forth from her like Abraham, our father" (B. Sot. 17a).20 This is enough to presume that, as a mother, the innocent and unjustly tried wife will be granted an honored position, and will have a beneficial function for the community.

The Midrash Rabbah's discussion to Numbers manages to clarify somewhat better the obscure question of the compensation due to the innocent woman. Whilst some teachers believe that the accused woman may obtain favour because "her suffering was sufficiently great to entitle her to be given children" (IX:25) and, further, "the Omnipotent will ultimately compensate her for her disgrace" (IX:41), other sages

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19 A historical point should be added here. By the beginning of the Common Era, precise restrictions had been imposed on the courts which judged cases involving capital punishments. Drawing on B. Sanh. 18a and B. Shav. 15a, S. Safrai writes that forty years before the destruction of the Temple "under Roman dominion," the Sanhedrin had lost its power to pronounce death sentences (1974, 398). He adds, however, that in a number of texts (including the Talmud) reference is made to death sentences proclaimed by Jewish courts "for which there is no mention that the judgement needed the confirmation of the Roman authorities" (1974, 399). All this seems insufficient to enable the conclusion that the aims of Sotah were orientated towards an indirect 'execution' of the accused woman. In line with some talmudic references (cf. for example Y. Sot. 3:1), the only hypothesis permitted by the logic of the ordeal and its effects on the woman's whole body is the progressive transformation of sterility into a shameful death, and that this sterility is attributable to causes which are similar to those which kill the 'wayward' woman (cf. note 21).

20 The reference to Abraham enables us to better grasp the meaning of the dust used in the preparation of the water. Abraham defined himself as "dust and ashes" (Gen 18:27; cf. B. Sot. 17a) and the dust is what establishes the power of revelation and transformation of the "bitter waters." Through this connection with the dust, "Abraham's children gained the merit of two religious duties: the ashes of the red cow and the dirt used for the accused wife" (B. Sot. 17a).
propose only that a prohibition is removed. They speak of a concession: "she is permitted to propagate from now onward" (IX:25). A prohibition which restricts and weakens her is removed.

In any case, whether or not it is a question of compensation, or the removal of a prohibition, the honest woman who has been unjustly damaged by suspicion will be allowed to live, and will be free from a shameful death.21 This will show that the structure is once more strong and whole, and that security has been reconquered. The people will be blessed, they will grow and spread. It is worth noting briefly that the idea of peaceful control and reorganization of the structure (through modification of the theoretically binary symbolic schema) is herein once more confirmed.

In the context of life-death, and fertility-sterility, the Sotah tractate expressly names the "unsuited to conceive" (she 'eina r'uya leiled) and the "infertile" ('ajlonit) (Sot. 4:3) as being amongst those women who cannot be taken to the "bitter waters" and who, therefore, will not have a part in the above-mentioned reconstruction. The sterile woman constitutes an element which is unsuited to the social and legal procedure as well as to the ritual plan. In Sotah she can neither participate in the Temple ritual, nor ask the tribunal for justice. She must withdraw and surrender to the unjust accusation, because she does not possess that 'perfect' state which only maternity may guarantee. This particularly subtle point offers some interesting explanations.

In spite of the fact that the wife, in theory, is depicted within the framework of "prosperity," and "favour of God," and is paralleled to the sphere of holiness of man, in practice, surprisingly, the possibility of her existing and exerting any influence whatsoever are measured against her role in the field of procreation and of the continuity of the Jewish people.

In more general terms, the situation concerning the "wayward" wife takes on meanings, function and clarity, as the marital area is abandoned and the area of procreation is approached. The "law of jealousy" embodies, above all, the protection of that part of the world which procreates and reproduces. It implicitly defines its limits, its potentiality, and places it above all else.

There is always a distance between the implicit and explicit objectives of the rituals.22 At the end of the ritual of Sotah the former emerge plainly. There seems to be a surprising concentration of juridical

21"If she was clean, she will ultimately die in the ordinary way, but if she has been defiled, when she ultimately dies her belly will swell and her thigh shall fall away" (Midrash Rabbah to Numbers IX:31).
22 Cf. Chap. 4.1.
results which, put together, can hypothetically give society a new appearance and another idea of itself.23

The "merits" of the accused

1. Owing to the severity of some of the experiences which the woman must undergo, the ordeal can be seen as a challenge, a direct means of defeating her. However, due to its humiliating and exhausting nature, if the woman does manage to overcome the trial, she may obtain advantages from it, or improve her status. The challenge can thus implicitly contain the promise of a reward.

Challenge and reward may be taken as points of reference, in order to clarify some implications of the law. In connection with this, it is worthwhile returning to a phenomenon to which reference was made in the first chapter: the suspension of the punishment for "merits." The Mishnah states: "If the woman had merit (zekhut), this can suspend the punishment. There are merits which suspend (ilh) the punishment "for one year, and there is the possibility that merit suspend the curse for three years" (Sot. 3, 4).

The zekhut is more exactly based on the principle that "he who respects the Torah and observes the commandments, can count on a reward" (H. Bietenhard, 1956, 70). The "merit" of the sotah woman procures a reward only if it has been acquired through service to the Torah. Just as studying is an act of merit for a man, so for a woman (who is not personally expected to study the Torah), helping her husband and son may constitute an advantage in delicate moments of family crisis. That is, the woman, who has shown herself to be patient with men engaged in study (cf. B. Sot. 21a) is guaranteed respectability and salvation.

It is clear that the meritorious effects make sense and are effective only within a conjugal and family relationship, and that this shifts the attention from the isolated woman under accusation to the woman as part of a family, occupied in personal duties, within her family. What she does for her family members amounts to a guarantee of the husband's trust, the protection of the community and the support of a system in equilibrium. As has been seen from the beginning, it is from a buried layer of private and obscure acts that one moves in a public,

23Adhesion to the "law of jealousy" gives rise to a variety of simultaneous effects: death strikes the guilty woman (immediately or after some time), the woman is repudiated, the husband is freed from suspicion, the marriage contract is dissolved, damages are paid through the forfeiting of the woman's marriage endowment, while the innocent woman is freed, and her children will increase, as will her beauty and prestige.
formal terrain, which is better suited as a background to the ritual (latent responsibilities of the woman, role of the husband, mother-
children relationship) and to giving meaning to the many-sided binary system.

At this point, it seems clear and well founded that the recognition of the "merits" is made possible only in situations of rescue. In the vision of the Amoraim, the "merits" therefore do not have the purpose of modifying or bettering the woman's status, but only of reducing the effects of a fall. They constitute mitigating factors, not factors of recognition or gratification. Obedience or submission would have counted for nothing without the tragic situation of the ordeal. Since this is a question of rescue, performed in extreme conditions, the ordeal, in the end, reveals, as will be seen in Chap. 6, a number of important values.

The opinions of the Tannaim and the Amoraim (cf. Sot. 3:5; B. Sot 20b, 21a) differ on the question of the merits which defer punishment. Much opposition to the principle of suspending punishment exists. Some sages peremptorily declare that "merit cannot suspend" ("ein ha-zekhut tolah"). They thus do not admit that the action of the "bitter waters" may be deferred. This would amount to discrediting the strength of the trial or indeed, to wholly denying it. For other sages, to accept the merits would mean to slander the clean women, who had drunk the waters, since it could be held that they had been saved by some secret good behavior (Sot. 3:5), instead of by their innocence. Among the different points of view, there seems to be agreement on a single fact: even if the "merit" momentarily deferred the punishment, the guilty woman sooner or later would lose her beauty, would become sterile, and would be struck by a mortal disease, as described in Num. 5:27 (Sot. 3:5). The zekhut does not annul punishment for the sin. It maintains its effects for moments which are more timely and proper, better suited to the "law of jealousy."

A nevertheless positive effect (or reward) is implicit in the ordeal. In the case of innocence, the "bitter waters" constitute an excellent

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24S. Safrai quotes a number of passages from the Palestinian Talmud (tractates Sheqalim and Moed Qatan) in order to list the "public occasions" (trials concerning money, penalties, lawsuits, cases concerning the property of the Temple, the suspected adultery of a wife, the ritual of the red cow, perforation of the ear of an Israelite slave, removal of the shoe, etc.) (1981, 129). These are occasions which take place on the 15th of Adar and they are "connected with pilgrimage, both because pilgrims in these circumstances dealt with matters for which they needed to consult the Sanhedrin or the priests of the Temple, and because the Sanhedrin postponed these procedures to that time" (1981, 129).
opportunity for the woman to try to harmonize the parts. The woman who has been subjected to the ordeal may eventually win a victory, and not only as far as maternity or the marriage endowment are concerned. She can, in a certain sense, redeem her destiny (cf. R. Biale, 1984, 187) because she has risked both her reputation and her life.

In conclusion, through a single theory and single technique, various results are obtained. All the solutions are, however, united by a single epilogue: the results will appear on the woman's body. If she is guilty, sooner or later the symptoms of the disease will manifest themselves with clearly characterized somatic effects. If she is not guilty, then the woman will stay intact and beautiful or, as has been seen, her attractiveness and fertility will increase.

A very important discussion is opened here. We saw the Mishnah and the Talmud speak of various "signs" which strike the suspected woman, which leave their traces on her face and limbs. The talmudic description does not, however, sound like a mere evidence of how her body was used illicitly, or sinfully. While the wife's deviance is treated severely, the shame and indecency of her behavior are facts which cause moderate alarm.

The interest of the sages is rather concentrated on the support which a 'marked' body can give to an idea. This body is exposed publicly "before the Lord," before the womenfolk and the whole people. It is used as a means of explanation and of warning. This point merits careful observation, if only to underline contemporary actions and principles which intervene on it.

The body of the woman: signals and messages

1. The setting which closes the ordeal highlights a repulsive, irreversible devastation of the woman's body. The final actions depict a defeated body. Even in the comments following the Mishnah, the woman's degradation is always described in a dramatic tone which alludes to annihilation. In Midrash Rabbah to Numbers, for instance, it is presumed that "if she (the woman) was white, it (the water) turned her black, if red it made her green; her mouth would emit an evil odor, her neck would swell and her flesh would decay, she would be afflicted by gonorrhea, she would feel inflated and languid" (IX:21). Terror and shame would have become impressed "in every single limb and every single hair" (IX:19).

The devastations described do not aim simply at emphasizing an abstract, apocalyptic picture of adulterous woman. They also contain signals or messages which are circumscribed and orientated towards control and order. It is, in fact, well known that the human body is
compared by A. Van Gennep (1909) to common material which every person possesses and organizes in his own way and which can be used to codify and eloquently present specific ideas. Any declaration 'inscribed' on the flesh explains clearly the structure of the norm, its alteration and its ends. By rendering the fundamental rules of the group transparent, it strengthens them (cf. P. Clastres, 1974). Although this is not the place to dwell on the physical signs as a memory, pedagogical instrument or code, it should, however, be underlined that, because of its nature, the ordeal uses the somatic 'marking' very specifically, in order to orientate common life.

If we accept the principle that the signals of the body have a function of revelation, what must be sought here is the meaning of the connection between the 'inscriptions' and the ideas behind them. As regards the first point, it should be noted that there seems to be an insistence on branding the woman as evidently as possible. After being brought "before the Lord," she is stripped, made repulsive, tired out, intoxicated by the poison, exhausted until near death, and finally hurriedly made to leave the Temple. Within this progression, the valuation of the act of transgression is slowly constructed through what is above, enters the body or comes from it. This is first indicated by the unpleasant condition of suspected wife, then, later by the condition of the defeated woman awaiting physical and social destruction. The linkage between one state and the other reinvigorates (whilst awaiting a global resolutive effect) the vital centers of the legal structure.

With reference to the second point concerning the principles, it seems that the treatment of the woman, from her ills to her own personal degradation, establishes exemplary parameters and measures. In order to reach this point, the accused woman's body is hypostatized through two general criteria, one explicit and the other implicit. According to the former, she will be judged by the same rule she has used (cf. Sot. 1:7). That is, the punishment will be of the same nature as the crime, it will strike the same context as that in which the transgression was committed. On the basis of the second, which is closely tied to the former, an 'over-turning' of the effects will take place. In the doctrine of the Talmud, the whole idea of 'marking' is based on the rule that what has been gained by the sin will be annulled and a punishment will be added. In accordance with this rule, the judgment takes away what is lawful: everything that the woman has sought is not given to her and all that she possesses is taken away from her (cf. B. Sot.9a).

Throughout the ritual, what the woman has committed, or what she is imagined to have committed, is repeated step by step, and reversed. As we have seen in Chap. 4, the stages of this action are
linear and consecutive: "She primped herself for sin and the Omnipotent made her repulsive, she exposed for sin, and the Omnipotent exposed her" (Sot. 1:7). Thus, the repetition-inversion turns into a general warning: each act of sin will be made vain by a more powerful counteraction. This will not reestablish the initial situation, the primitive state, it will intensify and retort the damage on the sinner.

2. The two principles described are applied even in the case of a negative reply to the "bitter waters." It has already been noted that, if the innocent woman has not committed acts of dishonesty, she will obtain recognition and divine favors. The list of favours in the Talmud is significant: her labour in birth will be painless, not painful; she will bear male sons instead of daughters, handsome and tall, not short and "dark" (B. Sot. 26a; cf. Rashi, in E. Munk, 1974, 43) and if Maimonides' idea is accepted, even the illnesses which affected her will disappear (4:22). The reversals imposed on the accused woman's body extol the value of the upright, ordered condition.

All this, clearly, better determines the fate of the accused woman. It has been emphasized on several occasions that the water-dust mixture drunk by the "wayward" woman follows a natural course of its own. It will enter her belly and will then continue to penetrate her body, and her thighs (cf. Sot. 2:3). As it penetrates, the effects of the medicine-poison and the unavoidable consequences of the law will be realized. Poured into the water, the medicine makes clear the various evils which are fought, through severe impact on the accused woman's body. The water defines the limbs which will bear responsibility for the sin, and on which punishment will be wrought.26

25 The act of inversion is amply illustrated in the Talmud. A series of details are described: if the woman displayed herself at the door of her house, then she will be displayed at the Nicanor gate, if she adorned her hair with a scarf, her head-dress will be thrown to the floor and trodden upon, if she made up her eyes, they will become bulging, and the good food and precious wine (herself) which she offered to her lover will be transformed into "animal's fodder" (B. Sot. 15b). The woman's clothes will be torn and her hair untied, the Palestinian Targum adds, because they have been prepared for pleasure (Addit. 27031 to Numbers 5:18).

26 In the Mishnah (Sot. 5:2) and the Talmud (B. Sot. 27b), the woman's uncleanness is symptomatically connected to the contamination which 'passes' from one object to another. The Gemara, however, does not treat the topic thoroughly, and any analogy is indicated only by the fact that the themes are treated together. In the following chapter, we shall see which are the particular features of Sotah which regard the problem of the sources of uncleanness.
To continue with the linking together of the 'markings' and on the range of the effects, it should be recalled that these are not only limited to the woman. The common or shared punishments are completed by an absolute prohibition: the body of the accused woman is forever forbidden both to the husband, and to the lover. In fact, the latter is not allowed to marry the woman after her divorce (Sot. 5:1). Once again, the legal precepts appear to give new meanings to the interventions on corporality. In specific circumstances, the body constitutes a perpetual barrier between individuals. That is, it excludes communication and exchange between people, it cuts them out of precise relationships. Once again, through an intervention-prohibition, less concentrated in signs-indications but still referring to the somatic context, the norm is emphasized and places itself as the basis of the structure.

These results reveal how energetic and complex is the 'marking' of the law (that is, of the judges, the tribunals, of the guardians of doctrine and legal jurisdiction) on the body of the whole community. They affect various parts of the latter in a recognizable and highly predictable way in the "bitter waters." The 'extended' result of the norm appears, to migrate, in a spatial structural sense, from the woman to the man, from the less solid person to the more structured one, breaking ties and imposing separations between individuals.

3. There is a further legal aspect closely bound to the judgment and the "merits": the problem of the adulteress' offspring.

The Sotah tractate covertly denounces the danger of illegal conception. Is this were not shown clearly enough by the sterility promised to the woman, it would be proved by the mechanism of 'merits.' The deferment provoked by the "merits," according to the Mishnah, could be two or three years (Sot. 3:4; cf. Maim. 4:20). Apparently this would appear to be independent of the problem of conception. The Talmud, however, reduces it to three or nine months and makes clear that such a reduction is aimed at verifying a possible pregnancy (cf. B. Sot. 20b).

The hypothesis that the trial of Sotah has the purpose of controlling the motherhood of the accused woman (see W. McKane, 1980, 474), albeit not always acceptable, does have fundamental importance. It should be borne in mind, because if the adulteress fell pregnant, her child would be considered mamzer, that is, the product of a forbidden union (in the case of a man with a married woman, cf. B. Yev. 15b).27 A child conceived in such circumstances would not only be a

27Mamzer is normally translated illegitimate or bastard. "He is the issue of a couple whose sexual relationship is forbidden according to the Torah and
cause of serious insult to the woman's husband, but would also provide the opportunity for further deception on the part of the "wayward" woman. In order to protect her child, she might be tempted – as explained by the Midrash Rabbah to Numbers – to illicitly introduce this "stranger" into the husband's house. She might rob her husband of his possessions and "obtain for him (the child) a share in the Promised Land" (Midrash Rabbah to Numbers IX:8 and 10). Because of his mother's deceit, the child would also be breaking important laws. He could be forced to honor a man who was not his father, and not respect his real father (Midrash Rabbah to Numbers IX:12). He could find himself in a criminal situation, only because he did not know who begot him.28

The need to circumscribe such dangerous consequences is even greater if one considers that the mamzer creates particularly serious problems and prohibitions with respect to marriage and filiation. While in several areas his status is not unlike that of other people's (he can for example be elected to positions of public responsibility, he can inherit possessions, teach) (cf. B. Z. Schereschewsky, 1971c, 840), in other areas he is subject to serious restrictions. The mamzer cannot, in fact, change his condition, neither through legal action, nor following the marriage of his parents. The mamzer "may not be admitted to the assembly of YHWH, not even his descendants to the tenth generation may be admitted to the assembly of YHWH" (Deut. 23:3). He may never contract marriage with pure Israelites (Lev. 3:12) and he will transmit his own legal condition to his children (Qid. 3:12).

From what has been said above, we can understand the extent of the complications which the mamzer creates for the community and its development. The child of the adulteress contrasts, by his very existence, the plan of consolidation of the people on the land given to them by God. Inasmuch as it is a form of verification of illegitimate motherhood, the ordeal necessarily tends to exclude any doubt as to

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28 The Midrash Rabbah to Numbers lists the commandments which would be broken by the mamzer, because of his status. Amongst them are: "Honor thy father"; "Thou shalt not bear false witness"; "Remember the Sabbath day"; "Thou shalt not steal"; "Thou shalt not murder" (IX:12).
who is in possession of the Promised Land, and who is part of the alliance of the Sinai.

A global allegorical picture

1. To identify the aggregating idea which was transmitted from one generation to the next by the legal mechanism of Sotah, attention should be drawn to a 'frame' of figures and metaphors which put together confession, sacrifice, and judgment. It is a frame which has been assembled gradually. The Midrash Rabbah to Numbers explains it in a sufficiently unitary way (IX:45-49). This text transposes some important points of the Sotah ritual onto the level of the anthropology of the Jewish nation.

The suspected adulteress represents Israel moving away from God. The man lying besides her is Aharon who permitted the golden calf, symbol of idolatry and the adultery of the people, to be built. The lack of witnesses symbolizes the absence of prophets in Israel, while the "spirit of jealousy" is the very spirit of God for his bride-people, testified in various passages of the Bible (cf. M. Fishbane, 1974, 40-43).

The analogies and allegories are also applied to the symbolic ritual actions, some of which are particularly interesting. The woman's hair, which is untied, represents the people letting themselves go to ruin. Her oath is similar to the pact stipulated on the Oreb (Deut. 28:69). The priest who officiates in the Temple is Moses and the offering symbolizes the Tables of the Law. The mixture of water and dust recalls the water (which flowed down from the mountain) in which Moses cast the golden dust of the calf (Deut. 9:21). The dissolved words represent the Tables broken and 'poured' or scattered in pieces. The oath makes reference to the Leviticus curses and the woman's "Amen, Amen" corresponds to the people's "Amen" against idols (Deut. 27:15).

Other parallels can be found at the level of the punitive effects. Just as the woman is made to drink the water, so Moses made the idolatrous Israelites drink the melted gold, which was to test them (cf. Es. 32:30). While the guilty woman dies as a result of her adultery, many sinners die of violent death or plague and just as the innocent woman shall conceive, so the honest Israelites "whose seed shall enter the Promised Land" (Midrash Rabbah to Numbers IX:48) will be rewarded.

It is not possible here to discuss fully the meaning of the allegory described above. The unitary description of the Midrash certainly speaks, however, in favor of its function, and its pedagogical ends. It shows that the traditions of the schools and the sages taught the
people to mirror themselves in the story of the Sotah woman. They adopted the "bitter water" as a reminder of symbolical turning points in the Jewish nation: the leadership of Moses, the escape from Egypt, the betrayal of the people, the punishment, the desert, the loss of the prophet's guidance. They led the nation to read its errors in the degradation of the suspected woman's body, and to draw the necessary conclusions. Through the "extension of the Topos of Num. 5:11-31" (M. Fishbane, 1974, 43) the community certainly gave itself a cultural physiognomy, while it constructed the law of idolatry around the "law of jealousy" which like the latter will be effective for ever (cf. Midrash Rabbah to Numbers IX:49).

Without too much rationalizing, the picture offered by the Midrash Rabbah to Numbers may be considered as outlining a construction created to meet the difficulties of identifying – in reality and in direct experience – the intricate game of fidelity and transgression. Through a sequence of interconnected frames, the allegorical discourse enables identifications of some indisputable facts concerning the bond between God and Israel, between what the people are and what they should be.

In order to understand the construction of the Midrash Rabbah to Numbers and relate it to the Mishnah, we must return to the fact that, as has already been pointed out, society awaits and, more exactly, mirrors itself in 'divine solutions,' which have been devised in order to compensate wrongs and infidelities, and to reveal invisible or unknown things (as Philo suggests in De Spec. Leg. III:52). This means that the ordeal of the "bitter waters," enables bonds with God-judge to be strengthened because it is the only example of direct contact with Him, because the solution is left in God's hands (cf. Chap. 6). The 'dramatization' in the concluding stages of the ordeal represents, unequivocally, the way in which God meets man, and guides him. It is thus a complete solution to the personal or "social drama," which gives protection from all evils (even those which cannot be verified), which placates anxieties and scruples.29

29Following the outline of V.Turner the sequence of the various phases of the drama is as follows. The moment of "breakdown" of regular life is represented by suspicion and by the action of the "spirit of jealousy," which urges the husband (to act); the "crisis" is sparked off by woman's hiding of her adultery. The "redressive action" is sought in the judgment-ritual. In the tractate of Sotah, each stage is described, except for the fourth that is the final "reintegration" (the opposite of the division) (cf. V. Turner, 1983, 33-45). The whole approach of the text is arranged in such a way as to highlight the third stage, which is the most truly ritual. Moreover, the absence of the fourth is what best connotes the plan of the Sotah tractate.
2. In the allegory of the Midrash Rabbah to Numbers the supreme and decisive event is unexpectedly overshadowed. The final effect of the "judgement of God" is barely represented. It is translated into a series of images which hinge on Moses, the Tables of Law and God's forgiveness. In response to a serious infidelity, the idolatry, there is a law (mosaic) which aims to punish and redeem a people, and a man-priest, Moses, who guides the people, and is their intermediary with God. This allows us to say that the Midrash Rabbah provides important evidence concerning the reception and use of the rite.

It will be useful here to compare the Mishnah with the Midrash Rabbah to Numbers. In the Mishnah, the meeting with God, at the final scene of the "wayward" woman's trial, reveals guilt and innocence, transforms life into death, or exhausts the strength of the woman (her fertility). According to Midrash Rabbah to Numbers, such meeting does not introduce a real variation, even if a revitalization of the bond with God and of His favor is obtained. The allegory is remembered as 'representing' the story of Moses and his salvation of the people. It is transmitted in terms of legality, of reconstituted order. The reconfirmation of the vigor and value of the law is thus placed in the foreground. The effect obtained by divine intervention is clear. It is exploited, and this will be discussed in the next chapter, only in order to reconfirm legally facts which are widely accepted and which are far from being innovative. The consciousness of Israel, as depicted by the Midrash, does not attribute to the Sotah rite the value of a rectification. Beyond the vision of the compilers of the Mishnah and of the Talmud, the rite serves to reinforce the existing state of things.

The discovery of the conceptual world contained in formulae, symbols and messages clarifies the cultural structure, but does not fully reveal its aims and objectives. Not even the synthesis of Midrash Rabbah to Numbers is able to shed light on this point. Even though it is a scholarly and consolidated interpretation, it appeals to analogical principles which do not explain the nature of the phenomenon of Sotah. At this point it will be useful to attempt some kind of interpretation which begins from the entirety of the mishnaic-talmudic compilations and which might envisage the attitude and the environment of the sages.