



THE VIOLENCE OF THE ORDEAL AGAINST WOMEN SUSPECTED OF ADULTERY IN NUMBERS 5:11-31

A violência do ordálio contra a mulher suspeita de adultério em Nm 5,11-31

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ABSTRACT¹ The relevance of the article lies in the analysis, of the ritual of the ordeal in Num 5,11-31, which highlights the forms of violence against women. The text uses the hermeneutic male/female approach to gender, appropriate to the patriarchal and androcentric, socio-religious context of the time. Thus, the study aims to highlight the ideology of the ordeal ritual that legitimizes discrimination and practices of violence against women. The following steps are taken: introduction, context and purpose of the report in the book of Numbers, translation, structure, analysis of characters and actions, and hermeneutics. This study results in a more realistic view of the situation of a woman suspected of adultery since, through the ordeal, she is subjected to a risk interpreted as punishment if found guilty of infidelity. From the alleged victim, she becomes the guilty one. The article concludes that the narrated violence serves as strict control of the wives' bodies by their jealous husbands. This critical reading disallows the form of judgment through the ordeal, which also exists in other cultures of the Ancient East.

KEYWORDS: Ordeal. Woman. Violence. Judgment Priest.

RESUMO: A relevância do artigo está na análise do ritual do ordálio em Nm 5,11-31 que evidencia as formas de violência contra a mulher. A abordagem do texto se serve da hermenêutica de gênero: masculino-feminino. Ela se mostra apropriada no contexto sociorreligioso patriarcal e androcêntrico da época. Assim, o objetivo do estudo é realçar a ideologia do ritual do ordálio que legitima a discriminação e

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¹ The translation of Biblical terms and quotations, except of formulations created by the author for exegetical purposes, follows the text of the New American Bible (NAB), available on the Vatican Homepage, October, 2021 (https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_INDEX.HTM).

práticas de violência contra a mulher. Percorre-se os passos seguintes: introdução, contexto e objetivo do relato no Livro dos Números, tradução, estrutura, análise dos personagens e das ações e hermenêutica. Resulta desse estudo uma visão mais realista da situação da mulher suspeita de adultério, pois mediante o ordálio ela é submetida a um risco interpretado como castigo, caso ela seja culpada de infidelidade. De vítima acusada sem provas ela é tornada culpada. O artigo conclui que a violência narrada serve de controle seguro dos corpos das esposas por parte dos maridos ciumentos. Essa leitura crítica desautoriza a forma do julgamento mediante o ordálio, existente também em outras culturas do Antigo Oriente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ordálio. Mulher. Violência. Julgamento. Sacerdote.

Introduction²

The ritual called “ordeal” is a judicial trial, which generally has the goal of proving the guilt or innocence of the accused persons. In this case, the woman accused of infidelity was subjected to a risk interpreted as punishment coming from God. It was applied when the evidence of guilt against the accused man or woman was insufficient. Thus, the ordeal aimed to request that the verdict come from God, in relation to the veracity of the woman’s declaration (MIGLIO, 2010, p. 229; CARDELLINI, 2013, p. 243). The practice of the ordeal is prescribed in the ancient Code of Hammurabi (18th century BC). It says that the woman suspected of adultery, as well as the person accused of witchcraft, was thrown into the river: if the person survived, he or she was innocent; if the person died, he or she was guilty. Thus, the final judgment was attributed to God. Narrations of similar cases of ordeal are also found in Mari (18th century BC). In these writings, the ordeal was the way to find a definitive solution in disputed issues. The water was mixed with dust or dirt, so the conflicting parties took an oath and then drank this mixture; the party who suffered any harm from the drink lost the issue (MARFO, 2017, p. 162; PRITCHARD, 1969, p. 632). Ordeals are found in other cultures, in very varied forms. For example, the poison proof is common among African peoples (LÉVY-BRUHL, 2008, p. 220-221).

In the Middle Ages, the practice gradually disappeared. Agobard, Archbishop of Lyon (760-840), held that God, despite being omnipotent, has secret designs that are not revealed through the ordeal of boiling water or red-hot iron or cruel combat (FERRASIN, 2011, p. 13). Gradually, the legal

² This article is the result of a postdoctoral project carried out in 2019-2020 at the Postgraduate Program in Religious Sciences at the Methodist University of São Paulo (*Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências da Religião da Universidade Metodista de São Paulo*), under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Ademar Kaefer.

systems evolved towards more rational procedures (FERRASIN, 2011, p. 7), and the belief that the results of the ordeal came from a divine verdict was losing strength. The research deals with an account of an ordeal rite still considered sacred, without parallels in the Biblical context and differentiated by the violence in the form of its application and in its effects on the woman's body.

It is recognized that, in the ancient accounts of the ordeal, God's judgments were manipulated by the powerful to legitimize oppressive practices. The old text of Num 5:11-31, from the 6th century BC, requires an analysis from this critical perspective to understand the ideology in the institution of a sacred rite. The purpose of the study is to verify the harmful effects of the ordeal on the woman's body, and how the physical and moral violence against women was justified in that context, which was still patriarchal. In view of this, in methodological terms, the text is analyzed according to the basic category of the feminist hermeneutics of domination over women, androcentrism and sexism (SCHOTTROFF; SCHOROER; WACKER, 2008, p. 49-51). With this analysis, from the perspective of the accused person and the cry for justice, the judgment is disallowed. For this purpose, special attention will be given to stylistic expressions and details of the account in which it may be possible to identify how the ordeal ritual reinforces patriarchal control over women (BRITT, 2007, p. 1). We also intend to show advances in interpretation, considering both the situation of women and the violence of the institution of the ordeal, aspects little observed in the historical-critical exegesis.

1 Context and objective in the Book of Numbers

Stepping back from the delimited text, it is important to verify its position in the literary context of the journeys and stays of the people of Israel until reaching the Promised Land, as narrated in the Books of Exodus and Numbers. This helps in understanding the author's reasons for inserting the ordeal account into the Book of Numbers. The pericope of Num 5:11-31 is part of a block of various laws and rituals (Nm 5:1-6:27), located at the Sinai stay in the first part of the Book of Numbers (Num 1:1-10:10) (LEVINE, 2000, p. 121). The introduction of the phrase: *The LORD said to Moses*, repeated in the Book of Numbers (Num 1:1; 2:1; 3:5,11,14,40,44; 4:1,17,21; 5:1,5,11; 6:1,22), usually indicates the beginning of a new action, as well as the connection of the Book of Numbers with the rest of the Pentateuch (MARFO, 2017, p. 152, footnote 30). The redaction took place in the post-exilic period, as the community of the sons of Israel tries to redeem their identity based on the observance of the law received by Moses. Num 5:11-31 would then be a retro-projection, made by the post-exilic

Jewish community's organization, to the period of the stay at Sinai. From a literary point of view, all these narrative texts and ancient legislative texts are aimed at preparing the community for the departure from Sinai to Moab (Nm 1:1-10:10). They are, in general, rules for the purity of the camp and the people.

For De Vault (1972, p. 89), this legislative bloc from the priestly tradition is divided into the following rules: about the expulsion of the leper from the camp (Num 5:1-4); about repairing damage to the to neighbour (Num 5:5-10); about the jealousy ordeal applied to the woman suspected of adultery (5:11-31); about the Nazirite (Num 6:1-21); and, concluding with the blessing of Aaron (Num 6:22-27). According to Wenham (1985, p. 86), the association of the offense with guilt offerings serves to link these three sections of Num 5:5-10; 5:11-31; 6:1-21. According to Fishbane (1974, p. 26), this corpus of ritual praxis is set in a broader context between Lev 1:1 and the blessing of Aaron in Num 6:22-27, and framed with information on the completed construction of the Desert Tabernacle (Ex 40:33 and Num 7:1). The insertion of Num 5:11-31 in this priestly context is justified by the role of the priest. The ordeal is performed by the priest (Nm 5:15), in the Dwelling (Num 5:17), along with various offering rituals (Num 5:15,18,25,26).

Thus, like others in the priestly context, these purity rules reaffirm that Israel in the desert is the chosen people and that they need to purify themselves in order to continue the march. In this view, infidelity is considered an impurity. And, any doubt about the guilt or innocence of the accused woman must be settled in view of purification, because Israel is a cult community on the march. When Miriam was a leper and, therefore, impure, the community of the sons of Israel remained in waiting. They only resumed the march when they were sure she had been purified of leprosy, so that she could be reintegrated into the community (Num 12:11-15). In the case of Num 5:11-31, the suspicion of adultery has to be clarified in view of the purification of the whole community. Here, one understands the insistence and repetition of the vocabulary about pure and impure. This is the interpretation relating to the Numbers text in its final form as it was established. However, anyone who reads this pericope as an isolated one will not be satisfied with this interpretation. It is necessary to analyze the text in a socio-historical context, using methods and approaches that help to interpret it in the light of another culture very different from that time. It is advisable to look at the text for its content and form, and then interpret it.

The literal translation of the Hebrew text is presented with special concern for certain style details, not always observable in current editions of the Bible in Portuguese.

¹¹ E o SENHOR ³ falou a Moisés dizendo:	And the LORD spoke to Moises, saying:
¹² “Fala aos filhos de Israel e lhes dirás: ‘Se um homem ⁴ , cuja mulher se afasta ⁵ e comete uma traição contra ele,	“Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them: ‘If a man whose woman goes astray and commits a betrayal against him,
¹³ visto que escondida dos olhos de seu marido um homem deitou-se com ela, havendo ejaculação de sêmen, e ela tornou-se impura, sem testemunha contra ela e sem ser agarrada em flagrante;	since hidden from her husband’s eyes, a man lay with her, having ejaculation of semen, and she became impure, without witness against her, and without being caught in the act;
¹⁴ entretanto, se atravessar sobre o marido um espírito de ciúme e se tornar ciumento de sua mulher que se tornara impura, ou ainda, se atravessar nele um espírito de ciúme e se tornar ciumento de sua mulher, que não se tornara impura:	however, if a spirit of jealousy passes over the husband and he becomes jealous of his woman who had become impure, or still, if a spirit of jealousy passes through him and he becomes jealous of his wife who had not become impure:
¹⁵ tal homem fará vir sua mulher até o sacerdote e trará a oferta dela em favor dela própria: um décimo do efa de farinha de cevada. Não derramará sobre ela azeite e não colocará sobre ela incenso, porque ela será uma oferta de ciúme. Será uma oferta de memorial, uma lembrança da ofensa.	such [a] man will make his woman come to the priest and will bring her offering on her own behalf: a tenth of the ephah of barley flour. He will not pour oil on it, and he will not put incense on it, because it will be a jealousy offering. It will be a memorial offering, a reminder of the offense.
¹⁶ O sacerdote fará aproximar-se a mulher e a fará permanecer diante do SENHOR.	The priest will make the woman come near and will make her stand before the LORD.
¹⁷ O sacerdote tomará águas santas em um recipiente novo. Então o sacerdote tomará do pó que está no pavimento da morada e colocará na água.	The priest will take holy waters in a new vessel. Then the priest will take the dust that is on the floor of the dwelling and will put it in the water.
¹⁸ E o sacerdote fará a mulher manter-se em pé diante do SENHOR e ele deixará soltar os cabelos ⁶ da mulher, entregará nas palmas das mãos dela a oferta do memorial, oferta de ciúmes. E na mão do sacerdote estarão as águas da amargura ⁷ , que amaldiçoam.	And the priest will make the woman remain standing before the LORD, and he will loosen the woman’s hair, will place into the palms of her hands the memorial offering, jealousies offering. And in the priest’s hand will be the waters of bitterness that maledict ⁸ .

³ We chose to translate the sacred tetragram יהוה (YHWH) – “LORD” in respect to that tradition of not pronouncing the sacred name which is proper to the Jewish people.

⁴ In Hebrew, the term “man” appears twice. In this case, as in others, one of them means the indefinite pronoun which is generally translated: “some man”, “any man”.

⁵ The verb (*tistheh*) [Translator’s note: sic, according to the original], here in the *qal* imperfect tense, means moving away, going astray, being unfaithful, speaking of the married woman (Num 5:12.19.20.29). The Sotah treatise of the Mishnah will deal in more detail with cases of suspected infidelity.

⁶ According to our translation of ופרע את־ראש האשה (uphara’ ‘et-ro ‘ishah) [Translator’s note: sic, according to the original], it means: to be / to become unkempt, walk unkempt, with loose hair (Lev 10:6; 13:45; 21:10). Thus, Ashley (1993, p. 118); Harrison (1992, p. 110), among others. The proposal of the Seventy and the Vulgate, also adopted by Cardellini (2013, p. 211), is “to uncover the head of women”.

⁷ In this case, the adjective is added in the genitive: “waters of bitterness”. One would simply expect “bitter waters”, with the adjective having an attributive value. However, according to Gesenius and Kautzsch (1910, p. 128s), the idiomatic use of the construction by which adjectives are added in the genitive, assuming the value of nouns, is not infrequent. Therefore, it is about waters which are bitter, in which bitterness can be preached: waters are bitter, that is, waters that are bitter (Is 28:1: a withered flower; 28:4: a flower that is withering). This is because they potentially produce damage, an aspect reinforced by the *piel* participle: “that maledict” – המְאַרְרִים (hame’ararim).

⁸ Translator’s note: I choose to use the somewhat archaic verb “to maledict” instead of “to curse”, because it allows differentiating between verb (maledict) and noun (malediction), which is not the case with “curse”.

19 Então o sacerdote a fará jurar e dirá para a mulher: Se nenhum homem deitou contigo e se não te afastaste pela impureza enquanto sob o poder de teu marido, sê livre das águas amargas que amaldiçoam.	Then the priest will make her swear, and he will say to the woman: If no man laid with you, and if you have not gone astray by impureness while under your husband's power, be free from the bitter waters that maledict.
20 Mas, se tu, quando te afastaste enquanto estavas sob o poder de teu marido, e que te tornaste impura e algum homem afora de teu marido se deitou contigo... ⁹	But, if you, when you went astray while you were under the power of your husband, and you have become impure, and some man besides your husband lay down with you...
21 Aqui o sacerdote fará a mulher jurar com juramento de maldição. O sacerdote dirá para a mulher: O SENHOR te entregue por maldição e por juramento no meio de teu povo. Quando o SENHOR entregar tua coxa caindo ¹⁰ e teu ventre estiver inchando-se,	Here the priest will make the woman swear with a swearing of malediction. The priest will say to the woman: The LORD may give you in malediction and for swearing in the midst of your people. When the LORD will give your thigh falling and your womb will be swelling,
22 entrarão estas águas que amaldiçoam em tuas entranhas para incharem o ventre e para que caia a coxa. A mulher dirá: Amém! Amém!	these waters that maledict will enter into your bowels to swell the womb so that the thigh falls. The woman will say: Amen! Amen!
23 O sacerdote escreverá essas maldições no livro, lavará nas águas amargas	The priest will write these maledictions into the book, will wash in the bitter waters,
24 e fará a mulher beber das águas amargas que amaldiçoam. Entrarão nela as águas que amaldiçoam e se tornarão amargas.	and will make the woman drink of the bitter waters that maledict. The waters that maledict will enter into her and will become bitter.
25 O sacerdote tomará da mão da mulher a oferta dos ciúmes, agitará ¹¹ a oferta diante do SENHOR e a oferecerá no altar.	The priest will take from the woman's hand the offering of jealousies, will wave the offering before the LORD, and will offer it on the altar.
26 O sacerdote tomará um punhado da oferta rememorativa dela e queimará no altar. Depois fará a mulher beber das águas.	The priest will take a handful of her reminiscent offering and will burn it on the altar. Then [he] will make the woman drink from the waters.
27 Fará beber das águas e acontecerá que, se ela se tornou impura, se cometeu uma traição contra o marido dela, entrarão nela as águas que amaldiçoam, que se tornaram amargas, e o ventre dela inchará, e as coxas dela cairão. A mulher se tornará maldição no meio de seu povo.	He will make her drink from the waters, and it will happen that if she has become impure, if she has committed a betrayal against her husband, the waters that maledict, that became bitter, will enter her, and her womb will swell, and her thighs will fall. The woman will become a malediction in the midst of her people.
28 E, se a mulher não se tornou impura, então ela será limpa. Será, então, inocente e conceberá uma descendência.	And, if the woman has not become impure, then she will be clean. She will then be innocent and will conceive a descendant.

⁹ From a long hypothetical sentence of dependent conditional clauses, the text presents a discontinuity, a rupture. One would expect the main sentence to complete the period. It is tacitly understood here that it happens the opposite of what is said in the apodose of v. 19b (CARDELLINI, 2013, p. 212, footnote 53). This may indicate the presence of different sources which were juxtaposed.

¹⁰ אֶת־יָרֵכֶךָ נִפְלֶת (*et-yerekek nophelet*), "your thigh falling", "thigh" is an euphemism for womb (ASHLEY, 1993, p. 118), and to fall the thigh of a woman may mean, in this text, a possible abortion.

¹¹ The verb form וְהִנִּיף (*wehenîph*), *hifil* perfect tense with *waw*, translated as "will wave", indicates the "tenufa" rite which was a gesture of ritually waving an offering before the Lord. It was also a gesture of offering. Old versions diverge, proposing translations with other verbs and always in the future tense: The Seventy translates "will put"; Targum and Vulgate "will lift", and Syriac has "will offer" (CARDELLINI, 2013, p. 214, footnote 64).

²⁹ Essa é a instrução dos ciúmes, quando uma mulher, sob o poder de seu marido, afastar-se e se tornar impura,	This is the instruction of the jealousies, when a woman, under the power of her husband, goes astray and becomes impure,
³⁰ ou quando atravessar sobre ele um espírito de ciúme e causar ciúme à sua mulher, fará comparecer a mulher diante do SENHOR e o sacerdote lhe fará essa instrução.	or when a spirit of jealousy passes over him and causes jealousy in relation to his wife, [he] will make the woman appear before the LORD, and the priest will make her this instruction.
³¹ O homem ficará livre da ofensa, mas aquela mulher carregará a ofensa dela”.	The man will become free from the offense, but that woman will bear her offense’.”

2 Structure

Diachronic studies show that the text of the Book of Numbers can be considered a composite text with literary strata from different times. We must recognize the limits of these methods, which are more attentive to ruptures and incongruities, rather than the style and elements of the text's unity (ARTUSO, 2012, p. 295). The structure of Cardellini (2001, p. 470-475), proposed here with few adaptations, reveals a thematic unity around the judgment with the predominant actions of the priest and the man; and, while the woman is the most mentioned, she is also the most silent. The characteristic of a sacred rite appears in the frame as the word of the LORD revealed to Moses (v. 11.12), at the beginning, and the institutionalization of the ritual before the LORD (v. 30).

It explains the content of the text and highlights the forms of violence against the woman:

- 1 – Introduction: it begins with the word of the LORD revealed to Moises (v.11-12a). This characterizes the text as sacred;
- 2 – Definition of the issue (vv. 12b-13 – beginning of the protasis): the woman of a man commits adultery, expressed in four different ways (going astray, infidelity, relationship with another man, contamination). The fact is not proven, and the absence of proof is also expressed in four ways (ignorance of the fact by the husband, concealment of the fact, lack of testimonies, lack of flagrancy);
- 3 – Presentation of the case (v. 14): jealousy of the husband and suspicion of adultery;
- 4 – Proceeding of the ordeal: preparation and execution of the offering (v. 15-26) by the priest;
 - Cardellini (2001, p. 475) divides the text corpus into four acts:
 - Act no. 1: (v. 15) – beginning of the apodose-action of the husband: conducting the wife to the priest;
 - Act no. 2: (v. 16-17-18) – action of the priest: putting the woman before the LORD;

- Act no. 3: (v. 19-24) – words of the priest: addressed to the woman under Oath;
- Act no. 4: (v. 25-26) – execution: offering before the LORD and the ordeal;
- 5 – Consequences of the ordeal: violence against the woman (v. 27-28):
 - if guilty: her womb will swell and her thighs will fall.
 - if innocent: she will be free and conceive a descendant.
- 6 – Epilogue (v. 29-31) – Norm for the case of suspicion of infidelity, with clarification about the guilt. Cardellini (2001, p. 475) sees the conclusion of the text in v. 30 and considers v. 31 as a clarification aside. In our view, the verse that condemns the woman is essential in order to realize the androcentric priestly ideology that justifies the institution of the ordeal as an instruction coming from God (Num 5:29).

3 Analysis of the ordeal's characters and actions

In the narrative of the ordeal, the main actors are the priest and the man (husband). The woman is mentioned but remains passive, guided by the men. God is mentioned in the speech of the priest (v. 21) and of the narrator (v. 1,30), which characterizes the sacred character of the ritual. This analysis of the characters and their functions throughout the account reveals traces of a culture of submission of the woman, that is legitimized in an institutionalized religious rite.

3.1 The woman in the ordeal ritual

אִשָּׁה ('ishah) appears 19 times in the ritual (Num 5:12,14,15,18,19,21,22,24, 25,26,27,

28,29,30,31). Five of those times, it appears in the third-person masculine singular: "woman of him", "his woman"; and, three times it appears mentioned while under the power of the husband (v. 19,20,29). This shows her dependence because the ritual, arising from the suspicion of the adultery of the woman, is commonly called "the sotah case". The woman is mentioned in the text while under the authority of the husband (v. 13), and is destined for trial as guilty of committing a betrayal against the man (husband). She contaminated herself, has become impure. As mentioned above, when she is quoted, it is with the preface of the third-person masculine singular: that is, woman of the husband. In v. 14, "his woman" appears twice, as property, as the object of the husband's jealousy. In v. 15, she is led to the priest under these conditions, and the jealousy offering is to remember the guilt. In vv. 16 and 18, the woman is led by the priest to stand before the LORD. There is a detail here, in which the priest loosens the woman's hair

and then places the jealousy offering in her hands. In the priest's hands is the instrument that triggers the judgment: the bitter waters that maledict. In vv. 19 and 21, she must swear, and hears the terrible consequences of the ordeal from the priest, who tells her of: if guilty, in addition to the physical damage, she is given over to the malediction in the midst of the community (v. 21,27). It is noteworthy that the woman may speak for the first time and respond: "Amen! Amen!" (v. 22).

In vv. 24,26,27, the priest will intervene again and make the woman drink the bitter waters. The woman's posture is passive: she holds the jealousy offering in her hands, but the one who offers it to God is the priest (v. 25). He will do the burning of the reminiscent offering (v. 26a) and then make the woman drink from the bitter water (v. 26b). The waters will enter the body of the woman, who will suffer the effects of the bitterness. Verses 29,30 recall the jealousy instruction as the husband's right to lead his woman before the LORD to perform the ritual. At the end of the ritual, it is concluded: that woman will bear her guilt (v. 31). Wenham (1985, p. 86) notes that both the adultery and the offenses narrated in Num 5:11-31 are described as offenses (v. 6), infidelity (v. 12), and contamination (v. 27). The purification of women was also a practice that kept women dependent. Adulterous wives were chosen to deserve special attention, because adultery pollutes the persons involved, making them impure (v. 13,14,19,20,28,29; Lev 18:20,25,27).

The woman is the only one in need of purification and is forced to accept everything, as there is no explicit opportunity to move or speak. She just drinks the water that contains the content of the judgment (BRITT, 2007, p. 3). The woman drinks the water and, along with it, she drinks the verdict of the malediction. According to Mary Douglas (2001, p. 219), "it is surprising that, although it is the ordeal that establishes her guilt or innocence, she is treated as guilty without the ordeal's verdict". She is put to stand before the LORD, led by the priest, with loose hair, with an offering in her hands. She doesn't move by herself. She is treated by the man as a living mannequin. However, her body speaks. Later, Britt (2007, p. 3) completes: "Like Ezekiel, who becomes a prophet when he eats the scroll containing 'words of lamentation and mourning and woe', the woman of the Sotah acquires a mantic power (see Ezek 2:10, and 2:8-3:3). Her body's 'speech', which declares innocence or guilt, unites verdict and punishment in a single action." The repercussion of the fact speaks louder than the account. The cry of suffering bodies echoes through the ages. Therefore, the hermeneutics of the text needs to focus on the central character: the woman who does not act, and only moves as directed by the man.

3.2 The jealous husband and the origin of the judgment

As the reason for the ordeal, her husband's jealousy was enough. It raised suspicion of the woman, even without concrete evidence. Whether she has become impure or not, what matters is a subjective fact: "if a spirit of jea-

lousy passes through her husband and becomes jealous” (v. 14). Cardellini comments: “The spirit of jealousy, with a strong emotional connotation, indicates the torment of the husband, his anxiety in relation to his wife suspected of infidelity” (2013, p. 243). The husband’s jealousy becomes the legal basis for the judgment and for the law itself. Knierim and Coats (2005, p. 79) comment that what triggers the legal process is not the possible act of infidelity of the woman, but the jealousy. The law, therefore, concerns the case of the husband’s jealousy regarding the possibility of the act of adultery. For this reason, the expression “jealousy offering” (v. 15,18,25) also must be interpreted as an oblation “memorial offering”, that evokes the tormenting doubt of the husband. This doubt has to be clarified by the ordeal, which becomes a judgment rite, a proof, either of the woman’s innocence or of her guilt. This judicial power is given to the priest. If we look at the aspect of jealousy, the motivation for the ordeal, with the offering of flour, comes from the husband and not from the wife, since the institution of marriage was strictly protected by the categorical prohibition of adultery (Ex 20:14; Deut 5:17) (FISHBANE, 1974, p. 25,37). Here the harmonization of two different cases is strange: one, an allegation of marital infidelity, apparently substantial, although the woman was neither seen nor caught in the act; and two, an allegation of marital infidelity based on pure and simple suspicion. We do not see any reasonable justification for this claim, that becomes the law of jealousy (FISHBANE, 1974, p. 35).

3.3 The husband's action: presentation of the offering (v. 15)

The Code of Hammurabi decrees the ordeal of the woman’s judgment through the water of the Euphrates River (Hammurabi n. 132; apud BOUZON, 1987, p. 141). Apsu, the Goddess of the Waters, pronounced the judgment and, if the woman died, she was guilty. However, the Code also provided for the use of a simple oath to release the woman (Hammurabi no. 131; apud BOUZON, 1987, p. 141). The legislation in the second case gave more credence to the woman’s word. In Num 5:11-31, there seems to be a blending of two laws into one. The woman could be released only with the oath, but the husband had the right to take the woman to the bitter waters’ trial. The jealous husband takes the woman to the priest and presents the offering (Num 5:15). According to Budd (1984, p. 66), “the introduction of a cereal offering by the author (v.15.18.25-26) brought the ritual into the mainstream of the post-exilic sacrificial system, and helped to ensure that it would only be conducted by the priests at Jerusalem”. The husband presents the offering as someone who needs the priest’s service to obtain God’s help in order to resolve the doubt (GRAY, 1956, p. 50). Let us note that this woman is under the power of the husband and submissive to him. Here the ritual prescribes an oblation of barley flour without incense and without oil, which underlines the painful character of this ceremony (DE VAULX, 1972, p. 95).

By itself, the offering of flour without the mixture of incense and oil was an offering of the poor for the purification of sin (Lev 5:11-13). This is a justifiable composition because it is not an offering of thanksgiving and praise, but a sign of sadness (CARDELLINI, 2001, p. 471, footnote 210). This offering of barley flour is an indication that the woman is considered impure (WENHAM, 1985, p. 89). Philo of Alexandria comments that this offering would mean a negative sign: "The barley flour was also food for animals without reason, as a symbol of an adulterous woman who does not distinguish herself from the animal"; in the same sense, Gamaliel comments in Sotah II,1 (apud GRAY, 1956, p. 50). Therefore, the offering assumes that the woman is guilty or, as Ashley (1993, p. 127) points out, potentially guilty. The reader could raise the question about the reason for this flour offering: "Why could the woman's word before the priest not be enough for the husband to settle the doubt of the woman's faithfulness?" This is one of the details that indicates the condemnatory character of the rite. The woman here appears excluded from participating and must simply submit. She is led by the man to the priest because the husband does not trust her word, her oath. Thus, "the man will make his woman come to the priest" (v. 15). Then, "the priest will make the woman come before the LORD" (v. 16). This is information that highlights the dependence and submission of the woman, directed by the man.

Two terms draw attention to clarify the meaning of the offering (ASHLEY, 1993, p. 127): it is a jealousy offering, a and memorial offering: "*He will not pour oil on it, and he will not put incense on it, because it will be a jealousy offering. It will be a memorial offering, a reminder of the offense*" (v. 15). The offering recalls the offense, and is a memorial to the seriousness of the woman's action. The seriousness of adultery and the condemnation fall on the woman: the act is a loss to her husband, and his honor needs to be repaired. The guilt falls on the woman: it must be repaired with the offering, and remembered so that the infidelity will not happen again. The end of the ritual says once more that that woman will bear her offense, while her husband will be free (v. 31). There is no mention of any ordeal in the case of suspected adultery by the husband. In the case of adultery, the legislation of Deuteronomy is different. In that case, the man and the woman are penalized when caught in the act of adultery (Deut 22:22). However, the legislation in the case of suspected adultery only exists in relation to the woman, as she was considered to be the man's property, part of his house. There was no instruction in the case of suspected adultery by the husband.

3.4 The priest's action in the name of the LORD

The action of the priest appears in the whole text, in main actions, in the preparation of the whole ordeal ritual. It is possible to observe how the woman's passivity is highlighted in the priestly laws, with the use of verbs in the *hifil* mode, with a causative sense. The text highlights the action of the

husband who “makes the woman come near” (v. 16), and the priest “makes [her] stand before the LORD” (v. 18) (SHECTMAN, 2010, p. 492, footnote 34). Then, she drinks the holy water, and only the priest prepares the mixture (v. 17). Next, he loosens the woman’s hair (v. 18b). Loose hair recalls the shame and suffering if she were guilty. It also indicates her potential impurity, like a leper who had to walk unkempt (ASHLEY, 1993, p. 129; CARDELLINI, 2001, p. 472). Then, the priest places the food offering in her hands (v. 18b), makes the woman swear (v. 19a,21a), explains the consequences of the malediction oath to her (v. 21b), and even writes into the book (v. 23a) (KNIERIM; COATS, 2005, p. 80). The important detail is that the priest will make the woman come before the LORD (v. 15). Here, Amzallag and Yoná (2017, p. 387) note a piece of evidence of the Javist context of the whole ritual: “This is revealed by the fact that the ceremony takes place within YHWH’s sanctuary, because of the offering to YHWH, by the use of holy water, and by YHWH’s name being extensively mentioned throughout this text. It is even specified in v.18 that the whole process occurs under YHWH’s authority.” Similarly, Daniel Miller (2010, p. 5-16) argues that the ritual is Javist, as it is performed before the LORD and administered by the priest.

In v. 18, it is specified that the whole process takes place under the authority of the LORD. The word כֹּהֵן (kohen) appears 13 times in the text (v. 15,16,17,18,19,21,23,26,30); the tetragram יְהוָה (YHWH) 7 times. The tetragram is found once each in vv. 16,18,25, while it appears twice in v. 21, and precisely in the words of the priest uttering the consequences of the ordeal as a divine action: “The LORD may give you in malediction”, “when the LORD will give your thigh falling [...] so that your thigh may fall”. Furthermore, the ritual takes place in the dwelling of the LORD. There, the priest will make the offering to the LORD. Therefore, the whole action results in a sacred rite, and this gives legitimacy to the priestly action as coming from the LORD. The woman remains passive, as she is led at all times. The only time she speaks is to accept with resignation the evil that can happen, saying twice: “Amen! Amen!” (v. 22).

These data characterize a judgment rite, the result of which comes from God. The *androcentric* vision is noted, as the woman is led by the man in the whole preparation of the ordeal. The ritual is performed to resolve the jealous man’s doubts, at the expense of exposing the woman to a risk. Amzallag and Yoná (2017, p. 385) highlighted:

The essence of an ordeal is to expose the suspected person to a perilous situation. If the river ordeal in the Hammurabi code truly kills the suspected woman, the hazard inherent in the drinking of a cup of water necessarily transforms the Sotah prescription into a poison ordeal.

4 Hermeneutics: forms of violence against women

The aim of this analysis is to show the various forms of violence against the woman, whether physical or moral. They are outstanding as coming

from the action of the man, who denounces only on suspicion and without objective evidence; and, especially, in the consequences of the ordeal on the woman's body throughout her life. There is no information that this kind of judgment took place at the time of the account's writing. However, the hermeneutics carried out here is critical, as it reveals the legitimizing ideology of a judgment that ultimately is intended to safeguard the honor of the jealous husband. Thus, the ordeal was performed on the basis of doubt, not of certainty. The law condemns the woman, without evidence, to a trial that puts her physical and moral integrity at risk. In the legal mindset in Mesopotamia, it was legitimate that the jealous husband raised suspicion of his wife, but this was not enough to incriminate the suspected woman (LAFONT, 1999, p. 267).

4.1 Make drink from bitter waters

The text mentions the action of the priest twice: "[he] will make the woman drink the waters" (v. 26-27). These waters also appear in vv. 18,19,23,24 and had different interpretations,¹² with a hermeneutics that does not contemplate the situation of the woman forced to ingest this mixture. Classic comments see it as a magical potion. The addition of a small piece of the written scroll to the water has also been interpreted as an Israelite substitute for a pagan component of such a magical practice. In Tibet, ingesting a paper on which a spell or superstition was written was a means of curing disease (GRAY, 1956, p. 54). This magical position is questioned by Amzallag and Yoná (2017, p. 386-387), based on the text, as the potion is already called water that brings the malediction in v. 22, before the addition of the piece of the written book (v. 23) to the water. In v. 23, the book is to be added to water qualified as "bitter". This confirms that there is an active component, already present in the mixture, before introducing the written fragment. This does not even consider other elements, such as the dust on the floor of the sanctuary, which, according to the interpretation proposed here, is a suspicious component. The woman will drink this mixture without knowing its composition, but the priest knows the dangers to which the woman is subjected and attributes the result to a revelation from God. Thus, the ritual has divine legitimacy and, at no time, it will be questioned by the accused person. The fact that the suspected woman is coercively led to drink this mixture and to pronounce an oath characterizes a violent action that will later continue the harmful effects on the woman's body.

Wenham (1985, p. 87-88) was right to question these actions of the ordeal by the bitter waters. Faced with this text, the [male] reader will wonder:

¹² Cardellini (2013, p. 249) in excursus n. 12 discusses several interpretations: "waters of conviction, that maledict" (Septuagint), "waters of judgment", "waters of the oracle" because it aims to give the answer about the guilt or innocence of the woman, "waters of dispute", in the sense of a water that clarifies doubt.

because an oath was not enough in itself, is this why it was necessary to go through this terrible trial? Wouldn't God have answered the priest's prayer to declare the woman innocent without resorting to this perilous ritual? Does this ceremony not show a notion of a God subject to human manipulation or of an unscientific¹³ belief in the efficacy of the bitter water? These are questions that emerge from the analysis of the text.

4.2 Abortive effect of the waters of malediction

On the probable abortive effect of the ordeal of the bitter waters, recent interpretations diverge from the traditional interpretation. On the one hand, Milgrom, for example, raises doubts about whether the content of the drink ingested produced any harmful symptoms in the woman. According to him, the purpose of the ritual was to prove the woman's innocence and prevent her from being lynched. It seems that Milgrom does not question the limits of the ordeal, since his interpretation, like that of other authors, is limited to the meaning of the ordeal in the literary and cultural context of the author, and does not advance towards a critical hermeneutics. He does not question this, because the ritual of ordeal was applied only to the woman in the case of suspected adultery and was not applied to [male] persons who committed other crimes.¹⁴

On the other hand, to support the hypothesis of the possible abortive effect of the waters that maledict, it will be necessary to advance to the study of their composition. Recent studies, such as those by McKane, Cardellini, Feinstein, Amzallag and Yoná, have interpreted the term "bitter" as toxic. Thus, the water component would not have a magical effect, but a predictable one. According to McKane (1980, p. 478), waters that maledict are waters that maledict with poison. The mixture of water with the dust and ink of the writing on the scroll would make the water poisonous (E. VONNORDHEIM, *apud* CARDELLINI, 2013, p. 249). An interesting composition of the "bitter waters" in Num 5:11-31 is that they are not only unpalatable but, above all, "bitter" in their effects (v. 24,27). Therefore, in the description of "bitter waters", the punitive aspect of the ritual is highlighted, with emphasis on the description of the waters that maledict (FEINSTEIN, 2012, p. 304). Through the study of the composition of the waters one can notice that the ritual is not simply an ordeal that operates by magical effects, but by the predictable effects of the poisonous component mixed in the waters that maledict.

¹³ Recognizing that the reference to the "scientific character" of the bitter water experiment is anachronistic, that is, at the time of the text, this concept classified as "scientific" was not known.

¹⁴ More information: JACOB M. The case of the suspected Adulteress, in the creation of Sacred literature; *apud* Richard Elliot Friedman. Why is this case different from all other cases? Essays in honor of H.G.M. Williamson on the occasion of his sixty-fifth Birthday. In: PROVAN, I., BODA, M., (Eds) Let us go up to Zion. Leiden: Brill, 2012, p. 372. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/3040444/the_sotah. Retrieved on June 26, 2019.

According to Amzallag and Yoná (2017, p. 338), it is preferable to consider the presence of an active component in the mixture with an effect that is not only psychological, but also physical, and with serious consequences. According to v. 17, the preparation of the mixture consists in the dissolution of אָפָר ('aphar) in the water. Amzallag and Yoná (2017, p. 389) work the hypothesis that there is a mineral component in the dust of the dwelling's floor, אֲשֶׁר יִיחַיֶּה בְּעַרְשָׁתָּהּ אֶת־הַיָּדָיִם אֲשֶׁר יִיחַיֶּה בְּעַרְשָׁתָּהּ אֶת־הַיָּדָיִם אֲשֶׁר יִיחַיֶּה בְּעַרְשָׁתָּהּ אֶת־הַיָּדָיִם (ûmin-he'aphar 'asher yihyeh beqarqa' hammishkan) (v. 17). Quoting Job 28:2, we read: "Iron is extracted from the אָפָר ('aphar), out of the rock, copper is poured". Following the Seventy, scholars translate אָפָר ('aphar) as dust/powder rather than mineral. However, in another text, in Num 5:17, אָפָר ('aphar) can mean mineral, because the iron was melted from mineral and not from dust/powder (Job 28:2,6). The designation of אָפָר ('aphar) might be disputed by the fact that minerals were hardly to be found on the floor of the tabernacle or in the sanctuary where the dust was taken from. However, Amzallag and Yoná (2017, p. 390) argue in the text that the use of verbs in the future tense is significant: "the priest will take the holy water", "from the dust that will be from the floor of the tabernacle", "the priest will take and put in the water". The future tense is used in verbs to instruct a prescription (when x occurs, you will do as y). Thus, the potion prepared may have elements not necessarily present in the sanctuary, but brought in from outside and mixed into the potion to be ingested.

The (female) authors also observe that:

Metallic ores were finely crushed before being smelt. Accordingly, the presence of crushed ore within the dust of a sanctuary's floor implies that cultic metallurgy was practiced there. Such an occurrence concerning the Israelites is not related in the Bible. However, a tent sanctuary has been identified in the copper mining area of Timna (southern Arabah). (2017, p. 390)

This means that a layer of dust from the floor of the sanctuary had been enriched with copper metal. In this specific case, אָפָר ('aphar), as mineral and dust/powder, designates the same reality: a thin layer of crushed copper mineral. This, in contact with a component of the dust of the floor, this new composite becomes toxic and causes serious disturbances (AMZALLAG; YONÁ, 2017, p. 390). As soon as a quantity of אָפָר ('aphar) is mixed with water (v. 17), the mixture potentially causes the malediction (v. 18), without any need for an incantation rite or need to invoke the LORD. With these arguments, Amzallag and Yoná (2017, p. 394) argue that the effects of ingesting these toxic components are abortive. Therefore, they cause short-term physical and psychological violence.

These [female] authors, Amzallag and Yoná (2017, p. 396), bring together arguments that the potion induces abortion instead of sterility. One starts from the principle of the meaning of אָפָר ('aphar) (v. 17), as commented above. This copper metal composition would be the copper salt that produces a rapid abortive effect in the early stages of pregnancy (AMZALLAG;

YONÁ, 2017, p. 396). In larger doses, copper salt causes acute intoxication and strong psychological disorders. This could be lethal (SAVARU et al., 2007; ROYCHOUDHURY et al., 2016, p. 12-13).¹⁵

The text says that the ingestion of bitter waters will make “the thigh fall and the womb swell”. These consequences are declared by the priest to the woman in v. 21, repeated in v. 22, and again in v. 27. In the present analysis, therefore, it is more likely that the effect of the ordeal, “swell the womb”, means pregnancy, and “fall of the thigh” means abortion. In fact, according to v. 13, if another man “laid on her a layer of semen”, then there was a complete relationship, which would possibly result in pregnancy. In this case, the expression “fall of the thigh” is a euphemism for abortion caused by toxic waters. Bitterness and malediction are the first result of the drink. Metaphorically, they mean suffering coming from within the body, a physical, psychological and moral suffering that will last.

The term “swell the womb” seems to be the probable “description of pregnancy instead of any other misfortune” (FRYMER-KENSKY, 1984, p. 20). Therefore, it does not seem to be a sign of some form of sterility, as interpreted by Ashley (1993, p. 133), since the text states: “if the woman not contaminated herself, she will be innocent and will conceive a descendant” (v. 28). If the pregnancy resulted from the woman’s relationship with another man, the pregnancy would be evidence of the woman’s guilt. However, the man who raises suspicion of his wife’s infidelity is not aware of her pregnancy, and is also uncertain whether it was caused by himself or by another man (FRIEDMAN, 2012, p. 378-379). The husband has no arguments to prove the suspicion of his wife’s adultery. What attracts our attention is the woman’s dramatic situation. Whether she is guilty or innocent, she will suffer the effects of ingesting the bitter waters and will have her image maligned by the charge of adultery.

4.3 The woman will bear the guilt

The trial by ordeal reaches its climax with the demonstration of the woman’s possible guilt or innocence. Harrison (1992, p. 115) highlights the harmful effects: “[...] even for an innocent woman, the prospect of physical affliction and spiritual condemnation would have been far from being pleasant to endure, reflecting as it did upon her moral integrity”. It would be a damnation! The maligned woman “will become a curse in the midst of her people” (v. 27). This violence is triggered by the performance

¹⁵ The [female] authors Nissim Amzallag and Shamir Yona base their claims on recent medical research: ROYCHOUDHURY, S. et al. Copper-induced changes in reproductive functions: in vivo and in vitro effects. *Physiological Research*, n. 65, v. 1, p. 11–22, 2016; and SAVARU, K. et al. Acute Ingestion of Copper Sulphate: A review on its Clinical Manifestations and Management, *Indian Journal Critical Care Medicine* Luknow- India, n. 11, p. 74-80, 2007.

of the ordeal ritual, with the response of the woman compelled to say “Amen! Amen!” before the priest (v. 22). This repetition emphasizes the seriousness of the oath (ASHLEY, 1993, p. 133) and, especially, the assent of the submissive woman who accepts what will happen as appropriate.¹⁶

V. 31b applies only if she is guilty of adultery. Sarah Shectman (2010, p. 488-490) notes that we would expect an assertion that she could be innocent. However, the text indicates that “she will bear her guilt”, as it seems implied in v.15, in the offering as a memorial of the guilt. It is possible that this addition refers to the taking of the oath and to the effects of the water ingested from the ordeal. Thus, v. 31 reiterates the idea that the woman will carry her guilt through the physical punishment and, in addition to the physical punishment, the woman will also carry her guilt in the future (SHECTMAN, 2010, p. 488).

An examination of the phrase “carry the guilt” in the larger priestly context determines its use in this text. “Carry the guilt” appears 20 times in the Pentateuch, mainly in priestly material, possibly meaning “culpability”, and is often used for involuntary sins as in the case collection in Lev 5. In some of these cases, if the woman had not become impure, she would be innocent. She would be free from guilt and conceive a descendant. The expression refers to sins for which there is no later punishment or act of atonement, meaning that it is not a full guilt. However, this interpretation ignores the repercussion of the accusation against the woman, the irreparable offense of her honor for having been led by the man before the priest, and for having been subjected to the ordeal rite and the oath under imprecation. The point of view of the final editor of Numbers is to safeguard the man’s honor. According to Budd (1984, p. 65), this verse asserts that man is free from guilt even if his suspicion has been proved false.

4.4 Ordeal ritual becomes Torah (v. 29-30)

The presentation of the ritual is concluded by reaffirming that it is an “instruction of the jealousies” (v. 29) to be followed by the priest (v. 31). The formula “this is the Law” is characteristic of the priestly writer and normally used to introduce a Law (Num 6:13,21; Lev 6:2,7,18; 7:1,11,37; 11:46) (BOSCI, 1976, p. 69). From a feminist perspective, the ritual’s concern with highlighting the rite as “Torah” aims to “compensate for the lack of evidence of the accusation and provide a justification for the prescription of the jealousy ritual” (BRITT, 2007, p. 3). It seems, therefore, this is also clear evidence that discredits the praxis of the ordeal ritual. Furthermore, how is the woman’s innocence or guilt proved through a judgment rite that can cause serious physical harm and expose the person being jud-

¹⁶ “Amen, Amen” (Num 5:22) does not seem “a solemn determination of the woman to declare her innocence”, as affirms *Mishna, Sotah* (2,5).

ged to serious danger of life? The concluding text is parallel to v. 14,15, summarizing the reason for the ritual: the suspicion of infidelity and the jealousy. The man, in this case the husband who subjected the woman to the ordeal, does not bear any guilt, even if his suspicion of the woman's adultery is proved to have no foundation. This differs from the writings from Mari, for example, where a husband who made a false accusation, slandering his wife, would be burned (DAVIES, 1995, p. 57).

Judging according to Deut 19:15-21, the husband who raised false suspicion should be punished for false testimony! Certain issues are raised: for example, in Deut 22:13-31, punishment is foreseen for the husband for slandering his wife, saying that she was not a virgin when she married. If his accusation was true, the woman would be stoned. The Code of Hammurabi (no. 131; apud BOUZON, 1987, p. 141) provided that the accused woman's oath, without being caught in the act, was sufficient to settle the doubt. The woman's word could be accepted, and the husband would forgive her. However, there is also the law that allowed the husband, in case his woman was accused of adultery, even without proof, to have his woman subjected to the ordeal by the waters, being thrown into the river (Hammurabi, no.132; apud BOUZON, 1987, p. 141). In Num 5:11-31, we have the combination of the oath and the ordeal¹⁷ with no option for the woman, an aspect which characterizes the violence of the judgment. As Kakenfeld (1995, p. 35) highlights, such strict legislation in this case is focused only on the man's rights and his prerogatives. The ritual highlights that, in Israel, the presumption that any sexual relationship outside of marriage is an offense against the man only. Yet, if the husband has a relationship outside of his marriage, there is no legal recourse for the wife to complain. However, if the husband is caught in adultery with a married woman, and both are caught in the act, the two of them must die (Deut 22:22; Lev 20:10).

Final considerations

As result of the present study, we highlight how inconsistent and irrational the application of the law of the ordeal is, in Num 5:11-31. The main reasons are:

1st — The entire structure of the account legitimizes the man's authority and is aimed at solving the jealous husband's doubts, so that his image is preserved, while the woman carries the guilt upon her. She alone is maligned in the midst of the community.

¹⁷ Jeon (2007, p. 181-207) claims that the text is an original norm on the ordeal with water, put together with a more recent redaction stratum that would deal with the rite of the imprecatory oath. Diachronic studies are based on certain breaks in the text (v. 21), what led to the conclusion that at least two accounts were brought together. As Noth comments (1966, p. 45-46), "they are judgments of God, difficult to separate". Therefore, it is better to approach the text in its final form.

2nd — The trial becomes almost an execution; yet, the woman is only suspected of infidelity. With no evidence against her, she is coercively led before the priest and is forced to ingest a mixture that puts her own life at risk. The mixture ingested can cause abortion, sterility and even death.

3rd — The ritual of the ordeal serves as a control over the wives' bodies by the husbands. This ideology is reinforced by the purity rules that came from God himself, through Moses. In this view, infidelity is considered an impurity, and any doubt about the guilt or innocence of the accused woman must be solved in view of purification. Added to this is the fact that the woman must submit to the ordeal and the oath. Furthermore, this ritual is liturgical, performed by the priest in the sanctuary.

The hermeneutics of the text goes beyond the contextual sense of the account, with the objective of purification according to the Book of Numbers. This perspective deconstructs the traditional view that interpreted the ordeal in its strict sense in order to resolve a dispute or clarify a doubt. The ordeal is, in reality, a sacred ritual that legitimizes practices of violence against the woman. It will become a memorial, a warning to women not to betray; and, in favor of the husbands, an instruction on what to do in case of suspected adultery (Num 5:30). From the perspective of suspicion, this is the meaning and objective of the account. The analysis of characters, actions, and reactions, as well as the hermeneutics, reveal more evident forms of violence against the woman. Physical violence stands out: drinking the bitter waters of the malediction and their abortion and sterility consequences; moral violence: defamation of the name of the woman who will bear the guilt; and, psychological violence: when summoned to appear before the priest and take an oath.

The ritual applied presupposes the woman's guilt and impurity: "She will bear her guilt" (Num 5:31). This subtle detail reveals the perspective of the priestly author. Certain stylistic elements of the text characterize it as narrated violence. They increasingly emphasize the punitive character of the ritual: "bitter waters", then "bitter waters of malediction"; also, the offering that invokes the memory of iniquity, followed by the oath, the public exposure of the woman who "will become a malediction in the midst of her people" (Num 5:27). These details, with the analysis of actions, characters, reaction, followed by hermeneutics, are the contribution of the present study to the interpretation of the ordeal in the Book of Numbers. The androcentric character of the ritual stands out, in the action of the husband and the priest throughout the whole ordeal, while the woman remains passive. She submits to ingesting the bitter waters without knowing their composition. Mention is made of the fact that the husband who raised the suspicion bears no guilt, even if the suspicion against the woman is proved unfounded. In fact, there was no instruction in the case of suspected adultery by the husband. These findings help to understand the context of the ritual and the consequences of its application in the case of suspected adultery of the woman.

In conclusion, the trial of the bitter waters ordeal, to settle a doubt, is as severe as the death penalty prescribed for adulterers caught in the act (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22). The violence of the ordeal, finally, is revealed in the method of judgment: it lies in blaming the woman in a trial based on suspicion and not on facts. Violence is embedded in the law of the ordeal, instituted as a memorial. In Judaism, the Mishna treatise in the “Sotah” was interested in preserving the lost memory of this rite; but it adds that, in the end, it was abolished and declared impracticable.¹⁸

However, even if the criticized rite of the ordeal was abolished, the forms of violence against women are perpetuated: discrimination, psychological violence, physical violence and, more serious, femicide. Even in countries that claim to be more “evolved”, violence, if not so explicit, remains veiled: it is endemic and underlies a culture that is still androcentric and sexist in many regions. Violence cannot be silenced and needs to be denounced, since the people are supposed to have knowledge and awareness of the dignity and rights of human beings: that everyone is “image and likeness of God”.

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Article submitted on Oct. 02, 2020, and approved on Nov. 03, 2021.

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Translation (except abstract): Monika Ottermann. Portuguese Translation of “original”.