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POISON, TRIAL BY ORDEAL AND THE CUP
OF WRATH

by

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I

The case which is dealt with in Num. v 11-31, although it has partly to be reconstructed by inference, is, nevertheless, tolerably clear and does not suffer from any serious ambiguity. It is probable that the woman who is subjected to the ordeal is pregnant and that what has to be determined is whether she will lose the child whom she is carrying, in which case her guilt will be established, or whether the child will be born and survive, in which case her innocence will be established (*vv.* 27-28). We have to suppose a situation where a woman is pregnant and her husband has doubts whether he is the father of the child: this is the nature of his jealousy. He is plagued by a nagging suspicion which he cannot dismiss from his mind; he has no solid reasons for suspecting that she has committed adultery and has nothing against her which would stand as evidence in normal legal proceedings. Yet jealousy and suspicion have become permanent conditions and he is never free from intolerable suspense and unhappiness. He must, at all costs, be released from such corroding thoughts and he submits his wife to trial by ordeal in order to secure this release.

Even if this account were modified in order to make some concessions to a very different interpretation offered by G. R. Driver ¹⁾, it ought to remain intact in all important respects. Driver has urged (p. 76) that *wenixre'āh zāra'* (*v.* 28) has tolerative force ("Then she will be capable of seed"): the correct statement is then that she is condemned to sterility if she is guilty, but will be capable of bearing children in the future if she is innocent. On Driver's view the woman who undergoes the ordeal may or may not be pregnant, and he supposes that the obscure Hebrew in *vv.* 21, 22 and 27 makes provision

¹⁾ "Two Problems in the Old Testament examined in the light of Archaeology", *Syria* 33 (1956), pp. 73-7.

for these alternatives. He achieves this interpretation by associating Hebrew *šbh* with Syriac *šbā* “was dry and hot” (p. 75) and by assuming that there is a reference to a condition of dryness in the woman’s womb which will be permanent and will make her sterile. “The falling (away) of the thigh” is abortion and is appropriate to the woman who is pregnant when she undergoes the ordeal; “the drying of the womb” is the effect of the ordeal on the woman who is not pregnant. The final effect in either case, whether as a consequence of a miscarriage or because of a dry womb, is sterility.

Driver has noticed that *yārēk* comes before *beḥen* in *v.* 21 and that the reverse holds in *vv.* 22 and 27, and he has urged that since the order is not fixed, we may not suppose that stages in the development of a miscarriage are being described (pp. 74 f.). There is no doubt that *šbh* constitutes a lexicographical problem, but the form of Driver’s solution does not have a high degree of probability, and the translators of the NEB, who are much under his influence in Num. v, have not followed him in this particular regard. It is not obvious what connection there is between the “swelling”(?) of the stomach and the onset of a miscarriage, but the conclusion that what we have is indeed simply a reference to an abortion makes better, general sense than Driver’s elaboration.

Other aspects of Driver’s treatment of Num. v are entirely incompatible with the account which has been given in the first paragraph. The tendency to rationalize is so strong that what the woman drinks is not regarded as an intrinsic part of her ordeal. “Ordeal”, more or less, acquires a modern usage and the effects which it has on the woman who undergoes it are explained psychologically: *mayim qeḏôšîm* (*v.* 17) means simply clean water (LXX ὑδωρ καθαρὸν ζῶν) and dust from the floor of the tabernacle is used because it is “clean” dust (opposed to “dirty” dust) (p. 74). It is the shock of public exposure which produces sterility, and which causes a miscarriage if the woman is pregnant. In particular, nothing is said about the recurring *hamme’ārêrîm* (*vv.* 18, 19, 22, 24, 27) and *mārîm* is associated with *mrh* rather than *mrr* (pp. 73 f.). That “curse” is an important constituent of the narrative has been rightly emphasized by R. Press ²⁾, and when this is appreciated, it can be shown that “water of contention” is an inadequate rendering of *mê hammārîm*. The ordeal elicits a verdict and is a “trial” in a legal sense, but the particularity of the

²⁾ “Das Ordal im alten Israel”, *ZAW* 51 (1933), p. 125.

procedure is not preserved merely by such a general interpretation, and it is, probably, this type of generalization rather than an indication of a derivation of *mārim* from *mrh* which is the correct explanation of the Septuagint's τὸ ὕδωρ τοῦ ἐλεγμοῦ and the Samaritan Targum's *my bwrh dmb'rym*.

An ordeal administered by water is also indicated by the Code of Hammurabi and the circumstances of its employment are the same there, although there are differences of detail³). The woman is suspected by her husband of having committed adultery, but there is no mention of her guilt being established by a miscarriage. Nor is the character of the ordeal by water indicated in detail as it is in the biblical passage. It is clear, however, that drinking of water is not involved and that instead it is a question of whether or not she survives a leap into a river—if this is a correct interpretation of *ana mutiša DINGIR ÍD išaalli*, “She will leap into the river-god for her husband”. This is translated by G. R. Driver and J. C. Miles as “She shall leap into the holy river for her husband”. W. Robertson Smith⁴) has gathered together some examples of water ordeals, but it is not obvious that the concept of “holiness” which he employs can be applied successfully either to the Numbers passage or to the clauses in the Code of Hammurabi. On his thesis that holy water “receives” the innocent woman but “rejects” the guilty one, the woman who leaps into the river ought to sink if she is innocent, and this is a type of interpretation of the Code of Hammurabi clause which is rejected by Press (p. 133, n. 5) who maintains the opposite: the woman will re-emerge if she is innocent, but sink like a stone if she is guilty. On the *mayim qe dōšim* of Num. v 17 Smith says, “Unique though the expression be, it is not difficult to assign its original meaning; the analogies already before us indicate that we must think of water from a holy spring, and this conclusion is certainly correct” (p. 181). “Holy water” is a significant ingredient of the procedure described in Num. v, but rational, legal concepts are more strongly represented than Smith’s notion of “holiness” allows. In relation to the effects which are produced by guilt and innocence, it is not helpful to assert that the holy water “receives” the innocent woman and “rejects” the guilty one. The most that can be said is that the mys-

³) G. R. Driver and J. C. Miles, *The Babylonian Laws 2* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 52 f. (131-2).

⁴) *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites; the fundamental Institutions* (3rd edn, London, 1927), pp. 177-81.

teriousness of the potion is essential to the procedure and that it is in virtue of its ingredients (holy water and holy dust) that it becomes poisonous when a curse is actuated.

Hence a more important consideration in any comparison of the clauses in the Code of Hammurabi with the Numbers passage is the mode of association of oath and ordeal. This differs in the two passages: in the Code oath and ordeal are apparently two alternative methods, and a woman suspected of unfaithfulness by her husband can establish her innocence by one or the other. She can take an oath by the life of a god and return to her house or she can "leap into the holy river for her husband". The assumption of the first procedure is, perhaps, that no guilty person would be prepared to swear innocence by the life of a god. The willingness to submit to such an oath is therefore a proof of innocence and the woman's reputation is rehabilitated by it—she returns to her house. In Numbers the administering of an oath is an integral part of trial by ordeal: the priest sets out the alternatives of innocence and guilt in the form of an oath (*vv.* 19-22) to which the woman assents. The written formulation of these alternatives of innocence and guilt is washed off into the water; if the woman is guilty, the water will be the bearer of a curse and is so described as *hamme'ār'erîm*. Too much attention need not be devoted to the critical complications introduced by Press (pp. 133 f.), a Source B which relates trial by ordeal to Yahweh and a Source A which regards its operation as magical. The thesis that Num. v supplies evidence of an evolution of trial by ordeal from magic to religion is not, in fact, demonstrated by his source analysis. The circumstance that Yahweh is not mentioned in his Source A cannot have the significance which he attaches to it, when it is set against the circumstance that in the verses which are alleged to constitute Source A proceedings are dominated by a priest (*vv.* 15, 17, 19, 23).

The temptation to aim at a logically tidy account of the Numbers passage has to be resisted and it is better to err on the side of making too few assumptions rather than too many. Attention should be directed in the first instance to the different ways in which the water which the woman drinks is characterized: *mê hammârîm hamme'ār'erîm* (*vv.* 18, 19); *hammayîm hamme'ār'erîm ha'ëlleh* (*v.* 22); *mê hammârîm* (*v.* 23); *hammayîm hamme'ār'erîm lemârîm* (*vv.* 24, 27). The last of these characterizations is the most significant, for *mârîm* in these grammatical and lexical connections must mean more than "bitter" and certainly means "poisonous" (see below pp. 478-87). The phrase

should be rendered, "The water which bears a curse as poison"; it bears a curse if the woman is guilty of the adultery which she is suspected, and in that event it will have poisonous qualities which will have evil effects and will induce a miscarriage. It is doubtful whether elucidation beyond this point should be attempted. At any rate it should not be too readily assumed that the objectively harmless nature of the liquid which is drunk is an important consideration and exercises an influence on the narrative. The drink has no toxic properties, and if we are describing it scientifically, we have to say that it is harmless. Are we then to commit ourselves to the proposition that it is harmless and remains harmless if the woman is innocent? It becomes poison only if the woman is guilty⁵). This is a type of rationalization which should, perhaps, not be imposed on the text. It would, for example, be possible to adopt the opposite point of view by urging in connection with *v. 19* (*binnāqī mimmé hammārim hamm^oār^erim hā'ēlleb*) that the potion is poison and that the woman is shielded from its toxic properties only because of her innocence. Hence these questions should not be raised, because they are put into the text by us rather than exercising a genuine influence on the thinking which is deposited in it. We have to fall back in some measure on considerations of holiness, which cannot be rationalized, and recall that the potion is after all not just water and dust, but holy water and dust from the floor of the tabernacle. A scientific analysis of it is not the point; the point is that in virtue of its holiness it will produce a true verdict. It will determine whether the woman is guilty of adultery or innocent of it; it will do this by poisoning her if she is guilty and causing her to lose the child who is the fruit of adultery, or by having no ill effects on her if she is innocent—an innocence which is reinforced by the safe delivery of the child.

II

There are three passages in the book of Jeremiah which, arguably, have some connection with trial by ordeal and in which there are references to poison (viii 14, ix 14, xxiii 15). The Hebrew words which have to be considered are *rō'š* (*rō'š* at Deut. xxxii 32) and *la'anāh* and the first task is to examine some aspects of their lexicography. The

⁵ So Press, p. 128, "Es ist also nicht die Flüssigkeit, die der Becher enthält, an sich schädlich. Der Trank hat seine verheerende Wirkung, weil er voll des Grimmes Jahwes ist".

occurrences of *rô's* in the OT fall into four divisions: (a) It is employed in contexts which indicate that it is a plant or herb. Thus in Deut. xxix 17 it is coupled with *la'anāb* and both are certainly described as plants growing from roots. Hos. x 4 is to be elucidated on the assumption that *rô's* is a poisonous weed and that *mišpāt* has the pejorative sense "litigation" (so NEB). In Amos vi 12 *mišpāt* means "justice" and *h'apaktem lerô's mišpāt* means, "You have changed justice into a poisonous weed": you have perverted it and destroyed its beneficent qualities and salutary functions in maintaining the fabric of the community. In Ps. lxxix 22 *rô's* is "poison" (perhaps a poisonous herb) put in food. (b) *rô's* is apparently a general word for "poison" in Deut. xxxii 32: *'anebē rô's* are poisonous grapes. It may be that *rô's* has this general sense in Ps. lxxix 22, rather than referring to a poisonous herb. (c) *mē rô's* (Jer. viii 14, ix 14, xxiii 15) is a poisonous drink, and, probably, one which is made from a herb called *rô's*. (d) In Deut. xxxii 33 and Job xx 16 (*rô's petānim*) *rô's* is used of a particular poison—the venom of a snake.

It is, probably, a waste of time attempting to identify the poisonous herb which is called *rô's*. No help is available from the ancient versions: the pattern of translation is similar in the Septuagint and Vulgate and is dominated by *χολή* in the one and *fel* in the other. It cannot be that the Greek and Latin translators intend the particular sense "bile" or "gall" by their use of *χολή* and *fel* respectively. The correspondence of their renderings is so close that it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the Vulgate is dependent on the Septuagint. There are differences at Deut. xxxii 33 (LXX θυμός; Vulg. *venenum*) Job xx 16 (LXX θυμόν; Vulg. *caput*) and Hos. x 4 (LXX. ἄγρωστις; Vulg. *amaritudo*), but at Amos vi 12, where the Septuagint has *πικρίαν* instead of the customary *χολή*, the Vulgate has *amaritudinem*. The reason for ὡς ἄγρωστις (Hos. x 4) is that the Greek translator has supposed *mišpāt* to mean "justice" and has thereby been constrained to render *rô's* as "grass" (a beneficial provision rather than a poisonous weed). We cannot be altogether assured about the intentions of these ancient translators, but it is likely that *χολή* (*fel*) is a general type of rendering and that it indicates what is bitter (cp. *πικρίαν* and *amaritudo*) and poisonous. That they identify *rô's* with a herb of any kind in Deut. xxix 17, Hos. x 4 and Amos vi 12 is not assured and, certainly, there are no grounds for supposing that "the Lxx used it to translate the *Hebr. rôsh*, a poisonous plant, variously called *hemlock* or *poppy*"⁶).

⁶ H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 7th edn (Oxford, 1890), p. 1732; cp. 9th edn (1940), p. 1997.

The same type of conclusion would also apply to the renderings of the Peshiṭta, all of which are derived from *mrr*, except *ršʿ* (the same word as Hebrew *rôʿš*) at Deut. xxxii 33 and *yʿrʿ* “thorns” at Hos. x 4. Nor does the Targum equate *rôʿš* with a plant or herb of any kind, so far as one can judge from the periphrastic renderings which it employs. These betray a consistent tendency: *rôʿš* is poison whose toxic virulence is indicated by comparing it with the venom of a snake. This interpretation is clearly influenced by the circumstance that *rôʿš* is used of the venom of a snake at Deut. xxxii 33 and Job xx 16. It is a reasonable assumption that the renderings of the Targum give us access to a particular view of the semantic development of *rôʿš*: *rôʿš* is the venom of a snake which becomes a paradigmatic poison and *rôʿš* is then a general word for “poison”. Hence *rôʿš* is paraphrased as *byš kryšy ḥwryn*, “as toxic as a snake’s venom”. *rôʿš* is explained as a general word for “poison” (*sammu(n)*) by Ibn Janah ⁷).

The uncertainty attaching to the elucidation of *rôʿš* affects the phrase *mê rôʿš* (Jer. viii 14, ix 14, xxiii 15). Rashi is influenced by the Targum, which he cites, and he comments on *mê rôʿš*, “The poison of snakes, that is, the venom in their teeth”. Hence it would appear that he goes beyond the Targum and identifies *mê rôʿš* with the venom of a snake. Kimchi, on the other hand, describes *mê rôʿš* as a lethal poison (*sam hammāwet*) made from the compressing of herbs. In his comment on ix 14 he mentions an alternative view that *mê rôʿš* is a poison made from the venom of snakes and that this explains the presence of *rôʿš*. Thus we have two opinions, that *rôʿš* is a poisonous herb and that it is the venom of a snake. *rôʿš* is translated as “hemlock” at Hos. x 4 in the AV, and W. Lowth ⁸) observes on ix 15, “The Hebrew word which we here translate *Gall*, properly signifies an Herb, growing among Corn, which is as bitter as Gall: ‘Tis translated *Hemlock*, Hos. x. 4. and both here and elsewhere joined with Wormwood”.

The equation of *rôʿš* with “hemlock” is made by H. Venema ⁹) in his comment on xxiii 15 and B. Blayney ¹⁰) renders *mê rôʿš* “water of hemlock” and remarks, “So our translators [AV] have rendered *rôʿš*,

⁷) Abuʿl Walīd Marwān ibn Janāh (ed. A. Neubauer), *The Book of Hebrew Roots* (Oxford, 1875), p. 674.

⁸) *A Commentary upon the Prophecy and Lamentations of Jeremiab* (London, 1718), p. 92.

⁹) *Commentarius ad Librum Prophetiarum Jeremiae* (Leeuwarden, 1765), p. 583.

¹⁰) *Jeremiab and Lamentations: a new Translation; with notes critical, philological and explanatory* (Oxford, 1784), p. 58.

Hos. x. 4. Amos vi. 12. And it is evident from Deut. xxix. 18. [17 Hebrew] *šōreš pôreb rōš wela^anāb* that some herb or plant is meant by it of a malignant or nauseous kind at least, being there joined with *wormwood*, and in the margin of our Bibles explained to be ‘a poisonous herb’” (on viii 14). Blayney’s statement that *rōš* is rendered as “hemlock” in the AV at Amos vi 12 is wrong—it is *la^anāb* which is rendered as “hemlock” in that verse. Apart from this detail his assessment of the significance of *χολή* as a translation of *rōš* is similar to the one which has been ventured above: “I am induced to think that *χολή* and perhaps *rōš*, may be used as a general name for whatever is exceedingly bitter; and consequently, where the sense requires it, may be put specially for any bitter herb or plant, the infusion of which may be called *mê rōš*”. Blayney is tentatively supporting the view that *rōš* is a general word for poison, and that it is particularized and applied to a poisonous herb, namely, hemlock (cp. E. W. Nicholson¹¹), “A poisonous herb the juice of which may have been the ‘hemlock’ poison drunk by Socrates”).

W. Gesenius¹²) rejects three identifications of *rōš*: not *cicuta* “hemlock”, nor colocynth nor *lolium* “darnel”, “tares” (probably the identification indicated by Lowth), but *papaver* “poppy”, *rōš* referring to the head of the poppy (Liv. i 54, *papaveris capita*). *mê rōš* is *succus papaveris venenosus*, the juice of the poppy—opium. The sense of *rōš* is generalized and it is applied to any poisonous herb (Hos. x 4; Amos vi 12; Ps. lxxix 22). It then comes to signify poison of any kind: hence it is the venom of a snake in Deut. xxxiii 33 and Job xx 16 and is a general word for poison in Deut. xxxii 32. The conclusion that *mê rōš* means particularly “juice of poppy heads” is not one which should be adopted. It is an attempt to explain the presence of *rōš* in the phrase *mê rōš*, but the identification of *mê rōš* with juice from the heads of poppies is a leap into the dark. The subsequent lexicography is determined by the solution of the phrase *mê rōš* which has been adopted.

Two different attempts to account for *rōš* in the phrase *mê rōš* have been mentioned: *rōš* is the venom of a snake (Rashi) or it is the head of a poppy. We have seen that the Targum associates all the occurrences of *rōš* with the venom of a snake. The only other place in the ancient versions where *rōš* is associated with the sense “head”

¹¹) *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 95.

¹²) *Thesaurus Philologicus Criticus Linguae Hebraeae et Chaldaeae Veteris Testamenti* 3 (Leipzig, 1853), p. 1251.

is in the Vulgate at Job xx 16, where $rô^{\prime}š$ $pētānīm$ $yīnāq$ appears as *caput aspidum suget*, “He sucks the head of asps”. Venema (pp. 236 f.) has related $mē$ $rô^{\prime}š$ to $rô^{\prime}š$ “head” in yet another way, and with reference to Jer. viii 23 ($mē$ $yittēn$ $rô^{\prime}š$ $mayim$) has rendered $mē$ $rô^{\prime}š$ (viii 14) as *aquis capitis*. $mē$ $rô^{\prime}š$ then means “tears” and the verse can be compared with Ps. lxxx 6 ($he^{\prime}kaltām$ $leḥem$ $dim^{\prime}āb$ $wattašqēmō$ $bid^{\prime}mā^{\prime}ōt$ $šālīš$). That $rô^{\prime}š$ $mayim$ in Jer. viii 23 is a reference to the head as a reservoir of tears is shown by the parallelism ($we^{\prime}ēnī$ $mēqōr$ $dim^{\prime}āb$), but another contextual consideration (v. 17) might be thought to indicate that $mē$ $rô^{\prime}š$ in v. 14 is a reference to snakes’ venom. Venema reckons with both possibilities: *tum lacrymarum imbre, tum potione venenata, quia caput serpentis pro felle ac veneno sumitur*. It will be noted, however, that he also associates $mē$ $rô^{\prime}š$ “venom” with $rô^{\prime}š$ “head”—the head of the snake is the reservoir of the venom.

The more interesting of these two contextual indications is the one in Jer. viii 17, although if one is content simply to say that eating $la^{\prime}anāb$ and drinking $mē$ $rô^{\prime}š$ is symbolic of sorrow and tribulation, the approximation of these passages (Jer. viii 14, ix 14, xxiii 15) to Ps. lxxx 6 and 1 Kings xxii 27 (*leḥem laḥaš ūmayim laḥaš*) may be thought an adequate treatment of them. The suggestion that viii 17 is the key to the lexicography of $mē$ $rô^{\prime}š$ raises more difficult matters of appreciation. This verse arrives somewhat unexpectedly after an account of an invasion which envelopes the entire land of Judah (v. 16). We may explain v. 17 by saying that the poisonous snakes which cannot be charmed and which will bite lethally are the invaders against whom no effective resistance is possible, but the simile is an exotic one. Or we may suppose, as Press does (p. 127), that the figure of poisonous snakes is to be elucidated as an allusion by the prophet Jeremiah to Num. xxi 6, where snakes were sent against the rebellious Israelites. This is unlikely to be the correct explanation, but it perhaps acquires more probability in the framework of interpretation used by Press, where another Pentateuchal passage (Exod. xxxii 19-35) is thought to provide a model for $mē$ $rô^{\prime}š$ (see further below). The probability is that the figure in v. 17 is generated by an interpretation of $mē$ $rô^{\prime}š$ (v. 14) of the same kind as the one which features in the Targum and Rashi, namely, “the venom of a snake”. It is $mē$ $rô^{\prime}š$, taken in this sense, which has triggered the reference to snakes with deadly bites in v. 17. What then remains to be determined is whether this is a correct understanding of $mē$ $rô^{\prime}š$, and a negative answer should be given for the following reasons: (a) $rô^{\prime}š$ refers to a plant or herb in

Deut. xxix 17, Hos. x 4 and Amos vi 12, and in two of these passages (Deuteronomy and Amos) *rôʾš* is associated with *laʿanāb* which thereby is also shown to be a herb. (b) In that case the likelihood is that a combination of *mê rôʾš* and *laʿanāb* (Jer. ix 14 and xxiii 15) is one of poisonous herbs and not of a poisonous herb and snakes' venom, *mê rôʾš* being a potion made from the herb *rôʾš*. (c) In the passage where *mê rôʾš* occurs without *laʿanāb* (Jer. viii 14) it is improbable that it has a different sense from the one which it bears in ix 14 and xxiii 15. The implication of this line of reasoning is that the author of Jer. viii 14 was not responsible for viii 17, the latter verse being contributed by someone who wrongly understood *mê rôʾš* in v. 14 as snakes' venom.

The description of *laʿanāb* as a poisonous herb is one which requires justification. The supposition that *laʿanāb* refers to "wormwood" rests on shaky foundations and, perhaps, derives principally from the Vulgate's *absinthium* (Amos v 7, vi 12; Jer. ix 14, xxiii 15; Lam. iii 15; Prov. v 4). It must remain uncertain what the Latin translator intended by *absinthium*, but it should be observed that the renderings of *laʿanāb* in the Septuagint have a general character. It is, perhaps, not an overstatement that the Septuagint interprets the figurative language rather than offering a translation of it: *laʿanāb* is symbolic of bitterness and suffering, and it is what *laʿanāb* symbolizes that appears in the renderings of the Septuagint (Amos vi 12, εἰς πικρίαν; Jer. ix 14, ἀνάγκας; xxiii 15, ὀδύνην; Lam. iii 15, πικρία; Prov. v 4, πικρότερον χολῆς—χολή being the word which the Septuagint uses to render *rôʾš*). It may be that the Vulgate's *absinthium* is to be similarly evaluated and that rather than denoting a particular herb it is a paradigm of bitterness and suffering. If it is urged that the Peshitta's *gddʾ* and the Targum's *gydʾ* mean "wormwood", there are features in both these versions which throw doubt on such an identification. The Peshitta uses the same word to render *laʿanāb* as it used for *rôʾš* in three places (*mrrʾ*, Amos v 7; Jer. ix 14, xxiii 15), and it is arguable that *gddʾ* is used at Amos vi 12 and Deut. xxix 17 only because *mrrʾ* and *mrtʾ* respectively have been pre-empted for *rôʾš*. The Targum's intention at Jer. ix 14 and xxiii 15 is similar to that of the Septuagint, except that it preserves both the figure and the interpretation by constructing a simile (*ʿqʾ mrr kgydyn*). The assumption that the Targum denotes "wormwood" (a bitter but medicinal herb) by *gydʾ* (*gydb*) at Amos v 7, vi 12 and Prov. v 4 is contradicted by these contexts which require a reference to a herb or weed whose effects are entirely bad.

A more particular consideration is that Pseudo-Jonathan (*'gdn' dmmv'*)¹³) and the Fragment Targum (*l'nt' dmmv'*)¹⁴) certainly regarded *la^anāh* at Deut. xxix 17 as a poisonous herb. This is also the view expressed by Rashi in his comment on Jer. ix 15, "He likens tribulation to *la^anāh* and *rwš* which are deadly poisons". The interpretation of *mē rō'š* and *la^anāh* as "tribulations" (*šārôt*) appears also in Kimchi and in Ibn Janah (pp. 354 f.) who equates *la^anāh* with Arabic *'lqm* "colocynth" (an identification which is rejected by Gesenius) and who remarks that *la^anāh* is symbolic of bitter experiences, afflictions and anxieties. Gesenius (op. cit. 2 [1840], p. 758) describes *la^anāh* as *herba quaedam et perquam amara*; it is apparently poisonous (Deut. xxix 17) and is associated in several passages with *rō'š* which (as already noted) he identifies with "poppy". *la^anāh* is symbolic of a hard fate (*ad sortem acerbam*).

It must be said of *la^anāh* as it was of *rō'š* that there is no firm foundation for an identification with a particular herb (cp. Rashi on Jer. ix 14, *'ēteb mar*), but that it refers to a poisonous herb and that "wormwood", so far as this indicates a bitter plant with medicinal virtue, is an inappropriate rendering. Calvin's¹⁵) observations on "wormwood" (ix 14) are thus well judged, "The word *la^anāh* . . . is rendered 'wormwood', but as this is a wholesome herb, I prefer to render it 'bitterness'. It is never found in a good sense and is therefore unsuitable to the nature of wormwood". Although "wormwood" prevails in the AV as the rendering of *la^anāh*, the awareness that *la^anāh* is poisonous finds expression in Amos vi 12 on which Lowth remarks, "In this last text the word *Laanah*, commonly rendered *Wormwood* is translated *Hemlock*" (p. 92).

We have reached the conclusion that both *rō'š* and *la^anāh* are to be elucidated as poisonous herbs and the matter which requires further investigation is the precise reference of the metaphors in Jer. viii 14, ix 14 and xxiii 15. The general interpretation that they are symbols for tribulations and bitter experiences, which are a form of retribution, has already been noted. "I will turn their Plenty into Scarcity of all Things" (Lowth, p. 92) is a more particular variant of the same exe-

¹³) M. Ginsburger (ed.), *Pseudo Jonathan (Thargum Jonathan ben Usiel zum Pentateuch)*. Nach der Londoner Handschrift (Brit. Mus. add. 27031) (Berlin, 1903).

¹⁴) M. Ginsburger (ed.), *Das Fragmententargum (Thargum jeruschalmi zum Pentateuch)* (Berlin, 1899).

¹⁵) *Praelectiones in Librum Prophetiarum Jeremia et Lamentationes* (3rd edn, Geneva, 1589), p. 76.

getical trend. At this point in the discussion there is need to pay special attention to Jer. viii 14.

The turn which viii 14 takes at *weniddemāb šām* (or *weniddammāb*, if the Niphal is read) is entirely unexpected, but it is clear that the shock has been deliberately administered: we are in the presence of an artistic device and not a simple lack of coherence. We have no reason to doubt that the advice given in the first part of *v.* 14 is honestly intended. The plain sense of it is that an invasion is about to be launched against Judah and that it is not a time for dithering and indecision. It is of paramount importance that the defence of the country should be organized effectively with speed and resolution and that it should be concentrated in the places which will give the defenders the maximum tactical advantages. What we might expect to follow this is something like “and there we shall do all in our power to resist the invader”. It is a shock when, instead of this, we encounter an expression of immutable doom—a predestined, hopeless outcome. To say, as B. Duhm¹⁶) and A. Weiser¹⁷) do, that this part of *v.* 14 joins on to what precedes it in a perfectly ordinary way requires us to suppose that the verse is permeated with defeatism from beginning to end and that there is no shock reversal of sentiment. The meaning of the verse is then, “Let us go through the motions of organizing our defence, although we know that it is a pointless exercise, since we are foredoomed to defeat, for defeat is the punishment which Yahweh will exact”. Both Jerome¹⁸) and Kimchi suppose that *v.* 14 expresses the view of the people (*vox populi*), but this does not relieve the harshness of the transition, unless, like Calvin (p. 69), we urge that the first part of the verse expresses a popular confidence in Judah’s ability to defend herself, and the second part a cold douche administered by the prophet Jeremiah. But this latter interpretation rests on the unacceptable assumption that the prophet makes his entry with *kī YHWH ʾelōbēnū ḥadimmānū* and that *weniddemāb šām* means the opposite of *ḥadimmānū*. The people say, “Let us organize our defence in the fortified cities and there we shall be secure”, and the prophet retorts that disaster has been foreordained by Yahweh who has given his people *mē rôʾš* to drink as a punishment for their sins. The prophet is dealing seriously with two different levels of

¹⁶) *Das Buch Jeremia* (Tübingen and Leipzig, 1901), p. 91.

¹⁷) *Das Buch Jeremia* (6th edn, Göttingen, 1969).

¹⁸) Hieronymi Sancti Eusebii (ed. S. Reiter), *In Hieremiam Prophetam*, CSEL 59 (Vienna, 1913), pp. 113 f.

reality, one political and the other theological, but he can do this only by bringing the verse to a destination which is the reverse of what its opening leads us to anticipate. To rally to the defence of their land is what the Judaeans must do and they would be fools and cowards if they acted otherwise. Yet there is an impending theological event which will nullify their courage and military competence, and the defeat and disintegration which they are about to suffer is nothing less than Yahweh's judgement on his people.

Being given *mê rô's* to drink (viii 14) or being given *la'anāh* to eat and *mê rô's* to drink (ix 14, xxiii 15) is brought into an immediate connection with the guilt of those who suffer. This is done in viii 14 and xxiii 15 by means of *kî* clauses: "For we have sinned against Yahweh" and "For from the prophets of Jerusalem defilement has extended throughout the land". In ix 14 the threat of *la'anāh* and *mê rô's* is linked to the charge of wilfulness and apostasy by *lākēn*. Hence in all these passages the poison which is consumed is associated with a condition of guilt. This thought has to be pressed further and we should say that the poisonous effect of what is consumed is a demonstration of guilt. When it is asserted of viii 14 that the circumstance that the drink is poison is a demonstration of guilt, what is being suggested is that the reference of the figurative language is trial by ordeal. This is not a new idea, but it needs a greater refinement than is given to it by either Duhm (p. 91) or W. Rudolph¹⁹). It is not enough to say that the imagery probably derives from a *Trankordal* (Rudolph) or to state that the people are given poison to drink (Duhm and Rudolph). If we say simply that the people are given poison to drink, this might mean no more than death by poisoning, or poisoning as a method of capital punishment. The Targum's paraphrase of *mê rô's* ("A cup of curse as toxic as a snake's venom") in viii 14 (ix 14, xxiii 15) shows that the Targum has established a connection between *mê rô's* in these passages and *hammayim hamme'ārērîm* in Num. v 18, 19, 22, 24, 27 (Targ. *my' mlty*'). According to the Targum the reason why the cup contains poison is because it incorporates a curse, and it incorporates a curse (cp. Num. v) because those who drink it are guilty. If they were innocent, their innocence would be demonstrated by the circumstance that the cup did them no harm. The meaning of viii 14 is that Judah is not simply in a situation where she faces a threat of invasion and has to organize herself for a life or death struggle against

¹⁹) *Jeremia* (3rd edn, Tübingen, 1968), p. 59.

an external enemy. She is also at a juncture where her guilt in relation to Yahweh will be demonstrated by defeat and disintegration. It is as impossible to escape from this as it is to evade the outcome of trial by ordeal; because Judah is guilty, the cup which she must drink will certainly poison her.

The drinking of poison is not indicative of ineluctable fate: it is both a legal verdict and the exaction of a penalty. Of course, this is not an actual trial by ordeal; no more is being attempted than the elucidation of a metaphor, the finding of a particular reference for the striking expression *wayyaškēnū mē rō'š*. The metaphorical usage is far removed from the limited area of trial by ordeal indicated by the Numbers passage and the clauses in the Code of Hammurabi, and Press (p. 127) has supposed that the connections of viii 14 are with Exod. xxxii 20. The link is then "apostasy", but the reference to the drinking of the powdered residue of the golden calf is obscure and the supposition that *wayyiggōp* (v. 35) connects with v. 24, and is a reference to the effects of the ordeal, is dubious. No doubt v. 20 contains a vestige of trial by ordeal, but in the present form of the narrative there is no occasion for Moses to resort to trial by ordeal in order to discover the guilty parties (cp. vv. 21 ff.). Another way of bridging the gulf would be to suggest that adultery is regularly a metaphor of apostasy in the prophetic literature, but this temptation should be resisted. There is nothing in the vocabulary of viii 14 (ix 14, xxiii 15) to support it and it would be an overworking of the line of interpretation which has been pursued.

III

On Jer. viii 14 Venema comments (p. 237): *opposite itaque ad pocula laeta computationis* and this thought of a macabre feast or anti-banquet, applied to Jer. viii 14, ix 14 and xxiii 15, finds expression in Rudolph's remarks on xxiii 15 (p. 139)—Yahweh is a demonic host, providing poisonous food and drink instead of wholesome food and wine which cheers the heart. This line of thought has suggested to some commentators that there is a relationship between these passages and another group (Isa. li 17, 22; Jer. xxv 15 ff., li 7; Ezek. xxiii 31 ff.; Obad. 16; Hab. ii 16; Zech. xii 2; Ps. lxxv 9)²⁰ which may be

²⁰ According to H. Schmidt, this is not a metaphorical application of trial by ordeal, but a survival of an old ritual of ordeal which was practised in the Jerusalem cult. *Die Psalmen* (Tübingen, 1934), p. 144.

conveniently described as “Cup of Wrath” passages. Thus on Jer. viii 14 Lowth says (pp. 85 f.), “A bitter Cup means a severe Judgment; which is often expressed by the *Cup of God’s Wrath or Displeasure*”; commenting on the same verse Duhm (p. 91) refers to Yahweh’s *Zornesbecher*. In view of considerations of space and in order to concentrate the discussion, attention will be focused principally on Jer. xxv 15 ff. It should be noticed, however, that the idea of an anti-banquet (the reverse of Isa. xxv 6), advanced by H. Gressmann²¹) has not found favour with H. A. Brongers²²), but there are questions raised by “wine” as a symbol of Yahweh’s anger which Brongers does not answer.

Why should a cup of wine become a cause of death and a means of enforcing Yahweh’s judgement? In other connections the redness of wine may symbolize the redness of blood and so “grapes of wrath” may be a suitable figure for retribution and slaughter. This is illustrated admirably by Isa. lxiii 1 ff.: “Why is your clothing all red, like the garments of one who treads grapes in the vat? I have trodden the winepress alone; no man no nation was with me. I trod them down in my rage, I trampled them in my fury; and their life-blood spurted over my garments and stained all my clothing. For I resolved on a day of vengeance” (*NEB*). This association of the flowing of the juice of the grape and the shedding of blood does not help us when we encounter a figure of an entirely different kind involving wine, where the wine is contained in a cup or chalice and is offered, as if by a host, to assembled guests. Brongers’s point (p. 187) that it is misleading to speak of a feast or a meal, where the only ingredient on view is wine, does not make a deep impression. The alleged confusion does not awaken concern, because wine is a perfectly adequate symbol of a banquet, and the Hebrew word for banquet (*mišteb*) is formed from the verb “to drink”. Hence this particular caution or objection does not carry weight and should be discounted. There is no obfuscation involved in the supposition that the cup of wine would in normal circumstances be associated with a festive setting, whether social or cultic, and that where it becomes a “cup of wrath” we are in the presence of a grotesque and macabre reversal.

Not only does Brongers exclude the thought of a feast of death from the interpretation of the “cup of wrath” passages, but he also assumes that the wine has been poisoned, and that “seasoning”

²¹) Ἡ κοινωλία τῶν δαιμονίων, *ZNW* 20 (1921), pp. 227-9.

²²) “Der Zornesbecher”, *OTS* 15 (1969), pp. 177-92.

(*meseke*—only in Ps. lxxv 9) refers to a poisonous additive (p. 181). But there is no justification for the assumption that *meseke* is indicative of the addition of poison; it is more probable that it is a spicing of the wine, perhaps with a view to increasing its alcoholic strength, and certainly there is no nuance of “poison” attaching to *mimsāk* in Prov. xxiii 30 and Isa. lxxv 11. It is, probably, best not to pursue any one interpretation of the “cup of wrath” passages too obsessively with a view to excluding all other possibilities. Tidiness and logical simplicity are not necessarily indications that one has a nose for the text and is concerned to do justice to it, even if it means incorporating into an interpretation ideas which do not make a perfect blend. Intoxication, drunkenness (*šikkārôn*, Ezek. xxiii 33; *mešakkeret*, Jer. li 7; *tiškeri*, Lam. iv 21), and the self-destructive irrationality which it produces is part of the complex of ideas which are in play and I have explored this fully in another connection²³).

Nevertheless, Brongers is right to insist that the “cup of wrath” passages are not adequately explained in terms of strong wine and an advanced state of intoxication, but he is wrong in supposing that because the wine is simply “poison” there is no possibility of relating the “cup of wrath” to the thought of “test” or “ordeal”, to a method of discriminating between guilt and innocence, of arriving at a verdict and consummating a judgement. He urges that since the wine is poison and all must drink it, we have rather to employ the thought of ineluctable fate or destiny. The passages involving the “cup of wrath” do not represent a trial by ordeal; there is no such element of discrimination, there is death in the cup and all must drink it (p. 183). This idea of inevitability, of the assignment or determination of fate, also occupies an important place in H. Ringgren’s account²⁴) and influences his selection of extra-biblical material. Brongers’s negative attitude to Ringgren’s treatment of the “cup of wrath” passages is, on the whole, justified. This is not said out of any desire to exclude a cultic interpretation of these passages: this is already present in Gressmann’s view that the doom prophets have perpetrated a grotesque reversal of what was originally a clan communion meal (1 Sam. i 21, ii 19, xx 6, 29) and later a cultic festival (Amos vi 3-6), a sacred *σὺμπόσιον*, involving eating, drinking, merrymaking and sexual love.

²³) W. McKane, “Jeremiah 13:12-14: a problematic Proverb”, *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (Missoula, 1978), pp. 107-20.

²⁴) “Vredens kalk”, *SEA* 17 (1952), pp. 19-30.

The thought that a chalice of blessing has been changed into a cup of curse may be present, but this is a cultic interpretation with a "trial by ordeal" component and Ringgren's thinking takes a different route. He concentrates on intoxication rather than poison, describes intoxication as a "Chaos motif" which is embedded in the rites of the New Year festival, finds a reference to the intoxication of a "god-king" in Ps. lxxviii 65, and a connection between intoxication and the judgement or fate of enemies in the "cup of wrath" passages (pp. 27 ff.). It is, perhaps, his intention to relate the "cup of wrath" passages to the ritual of the New Year festival, but it is not clear that he achieves this. The exegesis of Ps. lxxviii 65, on which the hypothesis of the intoxication (humiliation) of the "god-king" rests, must be regarded as very dubious, but in any case the connection between this and the "cup of wrath" passages, in which fate is apportioned to enemies, is not obvious. If we suppose that Hos. vii 5 is intended to be the link, we find that this in fact is not a source of illumination. Even if it were thought to demonstrate that the drinking of wine in association with a determination of fate, reduced *šārīm* to a state of intoxication, and we further assume that the fate of enemies was being determined, this does not explain passages where it is enemies who have to drink the wine and who are "intoxicated". There does not seem to be anything in Ringgren's reasoning which achieves a convincing transition from an intoxicated (humiliated) "god-king" to intoxicated (humiliated) enemies, and his cultic interpretation fails to make an impact on the "cup of wrath" passages.

Concerning Jer. xxv 15 ff. it can be said categorically that it is a representation of the judgement of Jerusalem and of the other nations which are listed. The relation of Jer. xxv 15-29 to the oracles against foreign nations in the book of Jeremiah is a matter of complicated, critical debate in which we must not become too deeply involved. There is no doubt that a connection exists between this passage and the oracles against foreign nations and it comes at the conclusion of these oracles in the arrangement of the Septuagint (xxxii). The cup of wine which the nations must drink symbolizes Yahweh's resolve to consummate his judgement against them. It is not then a question of the allocation or determination of fate: the guilt of these nations is established, their sins are catalogued, their ripeness for judgement is demonstrated. From whatever other source themes are appropriated in order to elucidate the "cup of wrath" representation in Jer. xxv 15 ff., it is above all the portrayal of a judgement, it is the eliciting of

a verdict, a proof of guilt, and the imposition of a penalty. The metaphor of the cup of wrath, like the figurative language in Jer. viii 14, ix 14 and xxiii 15, is founded on trial by ordeal procedure. That this is so is the view of Targ. which paraphrases xxv 15 as *ks' dḥmr lwṭ' ḥdyn*, and so creates for this passage, as it did for Jer. viii 14, ix 14, and xxiii 15, a framework of interpretation which derives from Num. v. But it is not only to this passage that it accords such treatment, for the "cup of wrath" is described as *ks dlwṭ* or *ks' dlwṭ'* in Ps. lxxv 9, Isa. li 17 and Hab. ii 16; and as *ks pwr' nwt'* in Ezek. xxiii 32. According to the Targum the cup of wine becomes a "cup of wrath" and a "cup of retribution", when it bears the curse which operates in the event of the guilt of those who drink it. The contents of the cup are not poison in an objective regard. The notion of the holiness or mysteriousness of the wine is, perhaps, preserved in the representation that the cup is given to the prophet by Yahweh; it is then the prophet's task to administer the test and elicit the verdict (Jer. xxv 15 ff.). The effects which it has on those who drink it is a demonstration of their guilt. The figure turns not so much on the intoxicating effects of wine and the paralysis of drunkenness as on the guilt which is proved by the cup which turns to poison. This suggests that "vomiting" (so NEB) rather than "reeling" is the correct understanding of *wḥitgō'a šū* (cp. *ūqeyū*, v. 27). The poison has physical and mental consequences: it destroys the rationality of those who drink the cup and sets them on the path of self-destruction.

The "trial by ordeal" model does not of itself constitute a sufficient interpretation of the "cup of wrath" passages, because it does not explain why the contents of the cup should be wine. This, as has been noted, is highly paradoxical: not *mē rō' š* nor *la'anāb* but wine. This might be met to some extent by recalling the suggestion that we should abstain from making assumptions about whether, in the context of trial by ordeal, a harmless liquid becomes toxic (cp. n. 5) or a toxic liquid becomes harmless (Schmidt, p. 144). Nevertheless, there is in the cup of wine the suggestion of a banquet of death, and we have to employ the anti-banquet theme, the gruesome reversal of the benevolent host and wholesome hospitality, in order to elucidate the "cup of wrath" metaphor²⁵). The nations are gathered for a banquet,

²⁵ In "Der Festbecher", *Sellin-Festschrift* (Leipzig, 1927), p. 61, H. Gressmann notes that Babylonian gods are represented as holding a cup or a bowl in the right hand (cp. Hab. ii 16, *kōs yemin YHWH*). The cup or bowl is in the hand of the god who apportions fate, and just as Gudea receives a *Schicksalsbecher* from

but the wine which is supplied will not gladden their hearts; instead of reaching a climax of good cheer it will end in sickness, madness and destruction.

It is a particular pleasure to do honour to Professor P. A. H. de Boer, to celebrate his scholarship and his personal qualities. In St Andrews we have valued his friendship and the closeness of his connections with the University.

the hand of a cosmic god, so Jeremiah receives it from Yahweh (Jer. xxv 15 ff.). This, however, is a movement towards an interpretation in terms of fate (life or death) rather than judgement (guilt or innocence).