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“Bible to Mishnah to Gospel: Rewriting the Bitter Water Ritual for Successive Historical Contexts”

The biblical procedure employing “bitter waters” to test a suspected adulteress is adopted by the Mishnah, which transforms it from apodictic law to halakhic procedure. The Gospel of James further rewrites the halakhic bitter water procedure for an early Christian audience in two stages: first it describes Mary—and, in an interesting addition, Joseph—as drinking the “water of the ordeal” in a manner consonant with the Jewish procedure of the bitter waters in the sense that it has to do with establishing the truth about the couple’s sexual life.

In the second phase of the Gospel’s adaptation of the original ritual of the bitter waters, the ritual itself is not present formally, but all its essential components are recognizable. We see the principle of “measure for measure”—identified by scholars as the essential feature of the ritual—applied in narrative of the divine punishment of Salome on account of her disbelief in Mary’s continuing virginity even after giving birth, and her divine healing on account of her subsequent belief.

In both stages however, the Gospel completely reverses the ritual’s original halakhic purpose and underlying *raison d’être*, transforming it into a vehicle for Christian values and ideas regarding the very issues concerning which the original halakhic ritual was meant to legislate. The new “ritual” thus achieved is therefore both a prime example of the (twice) re-written bible, and a textual expression of the theological polemics already present in the religious landscape of the second century Land of Israel.