The affair of Baal-peor (Num. xxv) is "a paradigmatic example" of Israelite apostasy, second in gravity only to the worship of the golden calf at Mount Sinai. In an incident of such import, it is surprising that a Midianite woman—Cozbi—is implicated by name (verses 15, 18), particularly since in the Hebrew Bible fewer than one name in ten is a woman's. The question therefore arises: why, in this context, this name? Mention of Cozbi's rank as daughter of a Midianite tribal leader is generally understood as a transition to and justification of the subsequent war against Midian. But mention of her name may serve an entirely different purpose. It is suggested here that the name Cozbi acts as a metaphor which fuses several meanings, and that drawing out those meanings may contribute to understanding the fragmentary account of the incident at Peor.

The ancient epic (Num. xxv 1-5) is a tale of idolatry. While encamped in Moab, Israelite men had sexual relations (of possible cultic significance) with local women, shared their sacrificial meal, and bowed down to their gods (of whom only Baal is named). The punishment for this cultic infidelity was plague (although the order may have been the reverse, with resort to pre-Yahwistic ritual reflecting the attempt to end a plague) (Mendenhall [n. 1]). The Priestly source (Num. xxv 6-15) (Cross [n. 2], pp. 201-2) added a vivid vignette. The plague came to an end when, as punishment for an unspecified act (Noth [n. 4], p. 198 = German, p. 173) (interpreted as sexual from early sources on), an Israelite man and Midianite woman were slain: Phinehas "went after the Israelite man into the tent, and pierced the two of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the [her] belly" (verse 8) (early sources reading "through the genitals"). But Cozbi's role and the true nature of her unnamed crime are still debated.

The context of "the affair of Cozbi" may have been cultic, rather than sexual. The words for "tent" (qubbâ) and "belly" (qōbātâh) may actually be one and the same word, meaning "tent-shrine" (Cross [n. 2], p. 202, n. 32; Noth [n. 4], p. 194 = German, p. 173). If so, then verse 8 should read: "he ran them both through, the Israelite and the woman in her shrine" (Reif [n. 5], p. 206), (or perhaps "in the shrine"). The qubbâ, known from at least the 5th (Reif) (or perhaps even 7th) cen-
tury B.C.E. was, at various historical times, “attended by a female priest; occupied by women from the noblest family of the tribe; set up next to the tribal chieftain’s tent; used for divination in times of crisis” (Reif, p. 204). The biblical context corresponds in part to these uses of the qubbā. Cozbi entered the tent-shrine, located next to (Reif, p. 205) the tent of a Simeonite tribal leader (cf. verses 6, 14), at a time of crisis, i.e., plague. She may have been a local diviner (prophetess) or priestess, called upon to help end the plague, but slain in the tent-shrine either because of the implicit cultic infidelity (Reif, p. 205), or as symbolic slaying of the deity the priestess served.9

The West Semitic name Cozbi is not a neutral one; it has both sexual and religious connotations. The Semitic root kzb has two related10 forms (possibly antonyms): I “to lie, deceive, disappoint, fail (water)11 and II “to be voluptuous, luxuriant, abundant (including water)”,12 “to be magnificent”.13 Cozbi derives from kzb II (KBL [n. 10]; Mosis [n. 13], p. 104 = German, cols 111-12; Hutton [n. 6]),14 as do other West Semitic (KBL [n. 10]) and Akkadian names (and elements in Akkadian names), (CAD [n. 12]).

The Akkadian equivalent kužbu (kzb II) means “voluptuousness, luxuriance, abundance, attractiveness, charm, sexual vigor” and, euphemistically, “sexual parts” (CAD [n. 12]). That early commentators construed Cozbi’s alleged crime and alleged punishment in sexual terms suggests that the sexual connotation of the name was understood in Hebrew as well. In the Hebrew Bible, the sexual allusion of the name Cozbi may also have had a religious meaning, referring figuratively to idolatry, which is often likened to “whoring” and adultery. The name may also have had other religious overtones, as kušbu was an attribute of several Mesopotamian deities (CAD), including, significantly, Ishtar and Asherah (the latter known by the Sumerian equivalent hili).15 (Asherah’s “sexual vigor” is apparent in the myth recounting her attempted seduction of Baal).16 Thus the name Cozbi may have evoked Astarte, Ishtar’s West Semitic counterpart, and/or Asherah, the West Semitic goddess whose name is most closely associated with the early Israelites.

The root kzb I, like kzb II, has theological ramifications. Its basic meaning is ontological rather than ethical, i.e., “(objectively) untrustworthy, false, worthless” (Mosis [n. 13], p. 109 = col. 117), like a delusion, rendered ψεῦδος in Greek. In the Hebrew Bible, “falseness” is the basic accusation against idols.17 While the “true God” is faithful, fulfilling promises and satisfying needs (Isa. lviii 11; Num. xxiii 19; Ps. lxxxix 35; Hab. ii 3), “false gods” and their false prophets (diviners, sorcer-