The last chapters of the book of Numbers (xxv-xxx) appear to bristle with women. From a mass of alluring Moabites to an aristocratic Midianite (Num. xxv), through the daughters of Zelophehad (Num. xxvii, xxxvi), to vow-taking Israelite daughters and wives (Num. xxx 4-17) and to Midianite virgins (Num. xxxi), the end of the wilderness wanderings brings together disparate narratives and ordinances that provide a forceful reminder of the role of women in the formation of Israelite identity.¹

In this study I cannot reclaim all the silent voices of the women of Numbers. Instead I begin with Numbers xxv and with the tale of Cozbi in a study deliberately entitled to invoke the souvenir of Genesis xxxiv and of the ‘rape’ of Dinah.² Specifically I propose to decode Numbers xxv through a comparison with the Roman foundational myth of the rape of Lucretia. In both tales, the Jewish and the Roman, the ostensible central place of the women masks profound rivalries between men. In either, the violent death of a woman heralds a far reaching transformation of the relationship between the private and the public.

Why not marry a Midianite?

As it stands, the tale of Cozbi the Midianite (Num. xxv 6-18) appears to have neither rhyme nor reason. A respectable couple, each

¹ This aspect has, however, been missed even in recent commentaries such as Dozeman (NIB 1998); Olsen (1996); Davis (1995); Sakenfeld (1995); Douglas (1993); Milgrom (1990). One exception is the episode of the daughters of Zelophehad.

² See my “Dinah Revisited: From Guest Friendship to Abduction Marriage in Patriarchal Canaan”, ḤA (forthcoming).
a member of a highly distinguished clan, is murdered in the privacy of their own bedroom by a zealous priest carrying a deadly weapon. Their murder apparently puts a stop to a general plague generated by an equally bizarre account of sex and apostasy involving an untold number of Israelite males and of Moabite women (Num. xxv 1-5). The couple’s killer becomes an arbiter of communal fate.

At first reading, the tales juxtaposed in Numbers xxv appear to underscore the necessity to eliminate the generation of Egyptian liberation on the verge of the final delivery of the promised land into Israelite hands. That such a crucial development is achieved through a confrontation between Yahweh and His mighty rival, Baal, lends support to this assumption. But the explanation fails to account for a number of features in the text. Why does the generation of liberation have to meet its end through fatal encounters with foreign women? Why does the death of a single couple who, ostensibly at least, has nothing whatsoever to do with all this, exonerate the rest of the people? Why is it necessary to elevate Phineas the priest to a position of power and authority through a murder at this point in Israelite history?

Equally transparent has been the fact that the tale of Cozbi the Midianite prepares the ground for a divine order regarding the fate of the Midianites, allies of Balak the Moabite and co-employers of Balaam the seer. The connection between Numbers xxv and the war on Midian (Num. xxxi) has been emphasized by all modern commentators. Yet again there is more than meets the eye. The survival of Midianite virgins (Num. xxxi), presumably to breed Israelite men through intermarriage, stands in a spectacular contrast with the killing of Cozbi and her Israelite partner.

In the redacted version of Numbers xxv 6-18 the identity of the chief actors is only gradually revealed, as though the redactor attempted to create a drama with mounting suspense. First, a “man of the sons...