RAW MATERIAL

Studies in Biblical Sexuality

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Chapter 8

Virgins, Prostitutes and Concubines

A Woman's Place

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Women and men are treated differently in many Biblical laws, especially those which deal with sexuality. There are no Biblical texts which deal with a male's loss of his virginity. Nor can we identify with certainty a text which deals with male prostitutes. In a patriarchal culture such things are not considered. In the New Testament the gender lines are almost completely erased, but that was a different world than the Iron Age culture of the Hebrew Scriptures. Even so, only once in the New Testament are male virgins considered (Rev 14:4).   When we examine the place of women as virgins, prostitutes and concubines, we are examining important boundaries of the marriage contract.

Virgins

Deuteronomy 22:13-23 speaks of the all-important tokens of a bride's virginity which may be displayed in divorce proceedings should the husband accuse his wife of not being a virgin when they wed. An unmarried / unbetrothed maiden who loses her virginity can make demands on the man who deflowers her – at least through her father (Ex 22:16-17; Deut 22:28-29). A priest is required to take only a virgin for a wife (Lev 21:7), and a priest's daughter is forbidden from fornication (Lev 21:9). Virginity was an unmarried woman's most important commodity in the marriage market.

Virginity of women is tightly tied to the institution of marriage and the production of children – legitimate children which the husband may be sure are his own offspring. Men are not limited to one woman, but women under marriage contract are limited to one man. This makes virginity a female-specific characteristic, fundamental to marriage contracts. Of course, a divorced woman or otherwise non-virgin woman can become married, but under a contract which is clear that the husband is getting a non-virgin. Such a woman may have to be satisfied with the status of concubine (see below).

Virginity took an odd turn in the works of Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish writer and Platonic philosopher from the early 1st Century. By chance, Philo was active when a certain virgin of Nazareth conceived a child who would be named Jesus.

Philo notes that Adam "knew" his wife, and she conceived. But the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses, did not "know" their wives in the text of the Bible (*Cherubim* 40). Therefore Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Zipporah all conceived by divine seed, and "without agency of a mortal man" (*Cherubim* 47). Philo even argues that when Sarah ceased menstruating ("ceased from the way of women," Genesis 18:11), her virginity was

renewed (*Post. & Exile of Cain* 134). Philo contrasts virginity with womanhood (γυναικεια, *gynaikeia*), and calls Sarah a virgin when menopause causes her to cease being a "woman." Scattered through Philo's works are other comments of this kind.

What should we make of Philo's thoughts on virginity? We should not try to apply them directly to the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. For instance, it is Elizabeth, not Mary, who was post-menopausal, but it was Mary whose virginity was specified, and who conceived by divine seed. Rather, Philo is an example and illustration of the obvious importance of virginity in some sectors of his society, both Jewish and Greco-Roman. From this we may surmise that the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke were written and read against a backdrop in which virginity played a greater role than hinted in the text. And even more, that the early church leaders, some of whom were dedicated readers of Philo, were very taken with the notion of virginity and its place in a holy life. It is no surprise that lifelong virginity gained such a prominent place in classic Christian thought. Lifelong virginity was not a goal in ancient Israel, where virginity was something to be prized until the wedding night, but not afterward.

Prostitutes

Though prostitution was legal, no man could market his daughter as a prostitute (Lev 19:29). In Israelite law prostitution was legal, but despised and sharply regulated. Prostitutes are used to indicate unclean, or at least unsavoury, conditions (1 Kings 22:38).

No New Testament text warns women against becoming prostitutes, or needs to, but one text warns men against patronizing prostitutes (1 Cor 6:15-18). Paul used Genesis 2:24 to warn his (male) readers against becoming "one flesh" with prostitutes. Among Paul's assumptions, prostitutes are morally and spiritually deficient, and therefore should not be joined to the church through the patronage of any of its members. Jesus used the prostitute as an example of the "sinners" who, in spite of low moral values, would yet enter the Kingdom of Heaven ahead of his righteous, religious audience (Matt 21:31-32). In spite of the surface disharmony of these texts, they both use the prostitute as an example of immorality.

The social position and ideology of prostitution in the Hebrew Scriptures will be examined in detail in the next chapter. Here we will briefly examine the terminology of prostitution, beginning with the root *ZNH* (זנה). The feminine participle *zonah* acts as an independent noun which almost always refers to prostitutes. The verb *zanah*, along with the abstract nouns *zanuth* and *taznuth* are used for all forms of fornication – sexual activity

outside of the marriage contract. The verb and abstract nouns have their heaviest concentrations in Ezekiel 16 and 23. Because the verb is not specific to prostitution, some scholars question whether the participle is consistently specific to prostitution. However, in every context which is specific, the participle indicates a woman who provides sexual gratification to male clients in exchange for payment (e.g. Genesis 38:15-16; Deut 23:18). The ironic use of the term in Ezekiel 16:31-34 is possible only if the term *zonah* has a stable meaning specific to sex for payment, a meaning independent of the semantic field of its parent verb.

The New Testament follows the Septuagint in its terminology for prostitution. One term for prostitute is *porne* (πορνη), which like *zonah* is cognate to the verb for fornication, *porneuo* (πορνευω). Another Greek term for prostitute, used in the Septuagint and other Greek literature, but not the New Testament, is *hetaira* (ʿεταιρα). The masculine *hetairos* (ʿεταιρος) has the root meaning of "companion", but in the feminine it almost always is used for a type of prostitute in the Roman period.

Concubines

Was the concubine (פלגש , *pilegesh*) a form of wife, or not? What exactly was the status of Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah, who were not called *pilegesh*, but were second-class wives? Inheritance is key here. Hagar's son threatened the inheritance of Sarah's son, and the children of Bilhah and Zilpah inherited alongside the children of Leah and Rachel. Children of a *pilegesh* may or may not inherit alongside the children of "regular" wives (Genesis 25:6), for their status seems to be unsettled. When the Gibeonites demanded from King David revenge on Saul's house, they satisfied themselves with the sons of a concubine, Rizpah (2 Sam 3:7; 21:1-9), which indicates these sons of a concubine were heirs. But 1 Chronicles 3:9 implies a lower status for such sons. Variations in status may be due to regional differences, different temperaments of the writers, and changes in terminology. We have insufficient texts to get a firm grasp on the terminology and customs for the heirs born to concubines. All we can say is that they were heirs, but of a lower order.

The Levite of Judges 19 lived with a *pilegesh* who apparently was under a contract between the Levite and her father, a marriage-like status. In Judges 19 the Levite and the father were חתן to each other, father-in-law and son-in-law. Concubines had at least some of the terminology of marriage, and unlike prostitutes, concubines could have legitimate paternity.

During the rebellion of Absalom, David abandoned Jerusalem and left ten *pilagshim* to care for the palace (2 Sam 15:16). While Absalom occupied Jerusalem he functionally committed incest with them by publicly entering an enclosed space with them (16:21-22). When David re-entered Jerusalem he set aside these *pilagshim* in "widowhood" (*almanuth* / אלמנות ; 20:3). "Widow" implies the status of wife for these concubines.

Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah were slaves taken by their owners for reproductive services. Notably the purpose was the production of an heir. In contrast, the Levite's *pilegesh* was the daughter of a free man. Notably the purpose of the slaves reproductive services was for the purpose of producing a heir – a legitimate offspring. The reason for the status of the Levite's *pilegesh* is less clear. Possibly she was non-virgin which the Levite obtained for minimal dowry. Apparently there were multiple paths to the status of second-class wife.

In the Middle Assyrian Laws (ANET 183; Roth 167-169) when a concubine becomes a wife, she is veiled. But even the children of an unveiled concubine can inherit if there are no children of a full (veiled) wife. Throughout the Near East, including Israelite society, there was a status of second-class wife which could apply to some relationships, either under contract or by way of slavery. The terminology was not consistent for these relationships, however, and the exact parameters of this status likewise seems variable.

Male Concubines?

In Ecclesiastes 2:8 is a problem line. The subject is the author's pursuits of physical pleasure. Verse 7 speaks of male and female servants, and verse 8 begins with male and female singers (*sharim w-sharot* / שרים ושרות). Next are, "the pleasures of the sons of man, *shiddim w-shiddot*" (שדים ושדות). The Septuagint translates this as male and female wine-servers (οινοχοον και οινοχοας) or cupbearers (κυλικιον και κυλικια, Aq), but no modern scholar has defended this reading. Most translators and commentators admit that the meaning is not known with confidence. However, working from the meaning "companion" or "breast" and assuming that among the physical pleasures listed, one should be sexual, many commentators and translators opt for "concubines" – in **one** gender. The problem with this reading is apparent. The text clearly works with male and female sets of each class, male and female slaves, male and female singers, and males and females of whatever the *shiddim* and *shiddot* are meant to be. If the meaning is sexual, these are lovers which the author has enjoyed, male and female. They are not *pilegesh* concubines, and the meaning is not clear. But if they are sexual partners, they are male and female.