

# **RAW MATERIAL**

**Studies in Biblical Sexuality**

**By**

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**Chapter 9**

**Prostitutes, Israelite and Pagan**

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## Prostitutes, Israelite and Pagan

The prostitute was an important image in the classical Israelite literature preserved in the Bible. Prostitution was a legal, though despised occupation in the laws of Moses and in the culture reflected in the Biblical texts. The image of the prostitute remained a compelling image in Israelite story and metaphor. But only some of the Biblical prostitutes were Israelite, and some were characterized as pagan. The Bible writers gave distinct treatments to Israelite prostitutes and Canaanite prostitutes.

This chapter is a study of cultural attitudes as expressed in the select writings of the Hebrew Canon. This is not a historical study of prostitution itself. The material is insufficient for a historical reconstruction of the institution of prostitution. Some would call this a study of ideology, others a study of propaganda. The texts mostly allow a study of how prostitution was used by Israelite and Jewish writers and editors as a metaphor and storytelling image, but they allow for little study into how prostitution itself was practiced in Iron Age Israel and Canaan.

Remember that the literary image of the prostitute in Biblical literature is written predominantly, if not completely, by men, for an audience predominantly masculine. At times the literary use of the prostitute is reminiscent of locker-room talk and is understandably offensive to many women readers. This offensive flavor occasionally is picked up by modern commentators, sometimes — so it seems — unintentionally. In the first edition of his book *Flirting With the World*, self-confessed fundamentalist John White leans heavily on the prostitute/adulteress metaphor in the prologue and epilogue. Most important, he places the story in the mouth of a gossip, giving it a cheapness appropriate to the metaphor. Also important, the prologue and epilogue were left out of the second edition of the book for reasons unstated. Even male commentators eventually can sense the crassness of this metaphor.

### The Israelite Prostitute

Solomon's judgment between the two mothers is one of the more famous passages in the Bible, portrayed in countless cartoons and studied in a multitude of sermons. Yet, for all of its fame the very first bit of information in this story is usually ignored in these popular treatments. The first thing you know about the two women, even before you know that they are mothers, is that they are prostitutes, (*zonot*, זנות; 1 Kings 3:16). They stand before the king without a man to

speak for them. Apparently they have no male to speak for them, no father, and certainly no husband. They live together in the same house, probably for financial reasons.

Why is their profession, their social position, mentioned first in this story? This is the story which establishes the new king as judge, for dispensing judgment was one of the duties of the king. When Solomon's half-brother Absalom sought to displace their father David on the throne, Absalom began by offering judgment to those who came to his father's court (2 Sam 15:1-6). Absalom offered access to justice as well as competence in handling the disputes brought to him. In the prophets a repeat theme is providing justice to the powerless members of society, usually identified as widows, orphans and resident aliens (e.g. Is 1:17). Prostitutes probably would rank even below the widows and orphans in the social order.

The story of the king's judgment in 1 Kings 3 is the one case given to show the new king as judge. Most readers understand the second point of this story — that the king was very wise and discerning, able to uncover what is hidden and produce solid judgments. But the first point of the story is about access to justice. The king of all Israel who governs the multitude of people in Israel is sitting in judgment between two prostitutes. Prostitutes are women, they tend to be poor and have a despised profession with few rights and no access to the Sanctuary. These are the ultimate in unwed mothers. However, they do seem to have the right to justice. They seem to have the right to have their day in court, even the king's court, with neither money nor political influence to buy the king's time. They have access to the king himself (Walsh 1996, pp 79-80; Dailey, p 144; Larue, p 112).

And so the king's justice is measured by his willingness to expend his time and wisdom on a dispute between two members from the bottom rungs of society. To illustrate the king's justice we first hear that the litigants are the lowest of the low. And having established the king's justice the writer goes on to show the king's wisdom in judgment. When praising the king's justice the author tells us something about how he views prostitutes, as one of the lowest positions within Israelite society.<sup>1</sup>

But one of these prostitutes is also endowed with a basic virtue, for her maternal instincts carry the day. Whether or not the author wished to praise one of the prostitutes for her maternal

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<sup>1</sup> Likewise in Matthew 21:32-33 prostitutes are used as an example of the lowest rung of religious society, who nevertheless will have a better place in the Heavenly kingdom than the religious leaders.

values, he certainly never questioned whether these despised members of society had some basic human virtues. The losing prostitute may have wanted the child as support for her old age, but the winning litigant was willing to forego that support simply that the child be allowed to live. Indeed, the king was relying on the maternal instincts of the real mother. Prostitutes may have been despised, but they were not so despised as to be represented as lacking family values.

Nor were the customers of prostitutes always lacking in family values. Jephthah was the son of a prostitute, but apparently he was raised in the house of his father (Jud 11:1-2). It was not until his half-brothers matured and, presumably, Gilead died, that the legitimate sons of Gilead threw out their half-brother, the son of a prostitute. On the question of inheritance the sources are painfully lacking. The virginity and faithfulness of the wife is extremely important in the inheritance of legitimate children in many cultures. But how and under what circumstances could or would a man recognize paternity and grant his inheritance to a child of a woman who is not held to the standard of monogamy? How did Gilead decide that Jephthah was to be raised as his own son? Did Gilead take Jephthah's mother as concubine and hold her under contract for a significant period? We are given no details.

At the end of Dinah's story, Genesis 34:31, full-brothers Simeon and Levi declare to their father, "Shall he make our sister like a prostitute?" No funds were exchanged for sexual favors. The payment offered was a standard bride-price with a formal marriage contract. What do the brothers mean by this comment and how does prostitution enter this story?

The question is whether Dinah and her family are legitimate, that is to say patriarchal. In the judgment of Solomon there was no man to stand for either of the mothers. A prostitute in Israelite society had no man to stand up for her and avenge her honor. This is the brothers' point about Dinah. If they do not take action on their sister's behalf they are abandoning her as if she was an illegitimate child and a woman without family — like a prostitute. The targums Neofiti and PseudoJonathan pick up on this theme, equating the prostitute with a woman who has no man to avenge her. In this story the actions of the brothers were not warranted, for Dinah was dutifully passed from the protection of one patriarchal family to the protection of another. But Dinah lost her virginity before the transaction, and Simeon and Levi felt that if they did not take vengeance they were declaring their sister, and indeed the whole family of Jacob, illegitimate.

The legal texts on prostitution are few but informative. A father is forbidden to market his daughter and a priest is forbidden to marry a prostitute (Lev 19:29; 21:7-9). Deuteronomy

23:18 builds on the general principle that the pay of a prostitute cannot be accepted as offerings in the temple. In Israelite law prostitution was legal but restricted and despised. Prostitution was for those outside proper society (cf. 1 Kings 22:38).

The ban on prostitutes' offerings in the Sanctuary may be based on unspecific distaste for the profession of prostitution. However, a more defined cultic reason should not be ignored. Remember that semen produces uncleanness by contact. If a prostitute normally entertains at least one client a day, then she would be presumed to be in an almost constant state of uncleanness. However here we have one important hole in our information about ancient prostitutes. We do not know how many clients a prostitute must entertain in a given week to make her living. Was prostitution the primary source of income for these women, or one of several? Would a prostitute go on retainer for an individual customer, possibly for years at a time? How would the profession change as the population grew and became more urbanized? The seminal uncleanness factor is one possible way to understand the ban on prostitutes at the Sanctuary, but we lack significant information on the economics of prostitution.

Apparently there were women connected with the Israelite Sanctuary and its services, but in an unspecified capacity (Ex 38:8; 1 Sam 2:22).<sup>2</sup> Fearing a charge of temple prostitution, classic commentators have bent over backwards to specify that these women were **not** prostitutes. The Targums Onkelos, PseudoJonathan and Neofiti on Exodus 38:8 all specify that these women were not Tabernacle functionaries, but rather had come to pray at the entrance of the Tabernacle. They also specify that these women were chaste, and PseudoJonathan adds that they had been cleansed from their monthly impurity. Cassuto (466-467) argues a similar interpretation, stating that they were "standing in array" (in a queue) at the door of Moses' tent for the purpose of making their bronze donations. Other modern commentators, however, assume that these women were religious functionaries and speculate as to their role.

But we are not told the role of these women. They certainly are not specified as prostitutes, but neither are they specified as cooks, seamstresses, singers, worship dancers, etc. (Durham 487). In 1 Samuel 2:22 the women are not portrayed as prostitutes. Their sexual

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<sup>2</sup> The second half of 1 Samuel 2:22 is not found in the LXX or at Qumran and is usually considered a late addition. Early or late, this text describes the sexual liaisons with Hophni and Phineas as anomalous, not normative. These women are not described as sexual functionaries.

liaisons with Hophni and Phineas are treated as inappropriate and aside from the women's service. We have only two texts on Tabernacle women and probably will never know what function these women held in the Sanctuary services. If they were temple prostitutes our sources have been very careful to keep that information from us. Prostitution is bad enough, but in the Bible it is even worse to incorporate it into divine worship.

The book of Proverbs also places prostitution outside respectable society. Where the law speaks of the woman who is a prostitute, Proverbs attacks those men who resort to prostitutes (Prov 23:26-28; 29:3). But there are tempting women who are even worse than prostitutes, for an adulterous woman is seen as far more dangerous and defiling (Prov 6:26; 7:1-23). The wise (male) reader is admonished to avoid both.

On occasion the prophets speak of literal prostitutes, but also they used the prostitute as an image of Israel or Judah involved in idolatry. Sometimes the metaphor of prostitution is mixed with literal fornication (Hos 4:13-14; Miller 2009). The prophets' metaphor of prostitute (e.g. Is 1:21; Jer 2:20) tends to stay distinct from the metaphor of adultery. Even in Ezekiel 16 the prostitute is introduced as a contrast with the adulterous Jerusalem. Both were despised sexual activities, but prostitution was marginally licit while adultery was a capital crime.

Traditionally translations have indicated prostitution (or "harlotry") where fornication would be more accurate. For instance, Hosea's marriage to "a woman/wife of harlotry" which produced "children of harlotry" (1:2) is more accurately a wife of fornication who produced illegitimate children from fornication. Also in Ezekiel 16 and 23 the proper term used again and again is fornication. Likewise in legal texts fornication is often translated as prostitution (e.g. Ex 34:15-16; Lev 20:5; Num 25:1).

The metaphorical fornication, whether imagined as prostitution, adultery or some other type, comes in two forms. One is idolatry, going after other gods. The other "fornication" is military alliances with surrounding nations (Ezk 16:26; 23 *passim*). The image of political fornication was carried into the New Testament and attached to the image of prostitution. In the book of Revelation it is associated with the prostitute Babylon, who is identified as "fornicating with the kings of the earth" (17:2; 18:3,9) and drunk with the blood of the saints. Her fornication corrupts (εφθειρεν , *ephtheiren*) the earth and pollutes her hands with the blood of the God's servants (19:2). In the book of Revelation, church accommodation to the pagan imperial government (or any worldly government, c.f. Dante, *Purgatorio* 32.142-160) was seen in the

same light as alliances of Judah with the pagan nations around Judah. In Revelation the prostitute image took the place most often occupied by adultery in the prophets.

But the image in Revelation is constructed on a very strange text in Isaiah 23:15-18 (Aune 1998b, 930-931). Much of the Babylon material in Revelation is derived from various oracles against Tyre in the prophets. In Isaiah 23 Tyre is a forgotten prostitute, singing her songs in the street. But, after 70 years her business will pick up again, she will earn her pay “fornicating with all the kingdoms of the land on the face of the earth.”<sup>3</sup> And strangest of all, her hire will be brought into the Temple, in direct contradiction to Deuteronomy 23:18. What kind of prostitute is Tyre in Isaiah? Perhaps because Tyre is not Israel or Judah it is permissible that Tyre be a prostitute, and that her profits can be brought to the Temple. Perhaps there is some satire here at the ridiculous thought of Tyre bringing its profits to a holy place. Or maybe there was a copy error in the Hebrew which could have read that her hire and profit (as a *qadeshah*?) will **not** be gathered and stored unto the Lord. In any case, the prostitute Tyre in Isaiah became Babylon in Revelation, where the satire is bitter indeed. And in Revelation the trade of Tyre (with the kingdoms of the earth) became Babylon’s political maneuvering with the political leadership (the kings of the earth). Commerce was replaced with political bedfellows.

Ezekiel adds a twist to the fornication of Israel and Judah. In Ezekiel 16 there is an anomaly with the political fornication of God’s people: instead of accepting pay for their sexual favors they paid their paramours to lie with them (Ezk 16:31-34,41). It is precisely their very non-prostitute habit which brands them as the ultimate in fornication.

### **The Canaanite Prostitute**

Rahab is the famous prostitute of Jericho who was willing to betray her city to the invading Israelites in exchange for her safety — and the safety of her family. For when Jericho fell Rahab did have a family, father, mother and siblings, though apparently no children (Josh 2:18; 6:23). Rahab was a prostitute and a Canaanite. Prostitution was sufficiently respected in

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<sup>3</sup> The LXX has an interesting variant here, “be a market for the kingdoms of the whole world.” Probably “market” (*emporion*, εμποριον) was originally “brothel” (*porneion*, πορνειον), but an early copiest read *emporion* in the next line and miscopied verse 17. The writer of Revelation may have read the original Hebrew rather than being dependent on the LXX.

Canaanite society (as understood by Israelites) that the prostitute could remain part of her father's household. In the texts as we have them this is not part of Israelite culture. A woman of legitimate birth who became a prostitute would be a shame to an Israelite household.

Rahab the pagan prostitute is in direct contrast to Achan the Israelite in chapter 7 (Hamlin 19-20). Rahab betrayed her city to make a covenant with the Israelites and to hide the forbidden Israelite spies. Achan betrayed Israel by breaking the covenant and hiding the forbidden booty from Jericho, Rahab's city. Rahab hid the spies on her roof, and Achan hid the booty under his tent. As a result Rahab saved herself and her family, but Achan condemned to death not only himself but his family as well. And Rahab's saved family consisted of her parents and siblings, but no children (2:18; 6:23). Achan's family consisted of his children, not his siblings or parents (7:24). This last contrast will take on added significance as we compare Israelite and Canaanite prostitutes.

For some reason the spies tell Rahab to use a scarlet cord (*hut hasshani*, חוט השני) to signal the location of her house in the wall. The evidence is thin, but many argue that this scarlet cord signals the place of a prostitute. The cord of *shani* also occurs in Tamar's delivery of twins in Genesis 38, and Tamar was a Canaanite woman who played a prostitute to entrap her father-in-law Judah (see below). If the scarlet cord signifies a prostitute, the midwife of Tamar, who chose the cord, could be referencing Tamar's method of enticing her father-in-law.

*Shani* is one term for the famous dyes of Tyre which ranged from reddish-purple to dark bluish-purple. The term is most frequently used for expensive and luxurious items (2 Sam 1:24; Prov 31:21; Jer 4:30; Lam 4:5) including materials for the Sanctuary (e.g. Exodus chapters 25-28 & 35-39). In Genesis 38 and Joshua 2 it is used in connection with a Canaanite prostitute. In Isaiah 1:18 it is used as an indelible dye (in parallel with *tola'*, another term for red dye) which symbolizes the guilt which God offers to make white again. The red dye is used in Isaiah as the color of blood, a symbol of violence and death. The redness of the dye may also have a tradition of indicating fornication and/or be specific to (Canaanite) prostitutes. The possible connections between Isaiah 1:18 and the scarlet cords of Rahab and Tamar remain speculative, but should be considered. There is insufficient textual material to be accurate about the imagery of the scarlet cord.

The *qadeshah* (קדשה) is an important and much disputed term in the Israelite literature. In the Biblical texts *qadeshah*, which means holy one (fem.), is used as a synonym for prostitute.

The simplest translation of the term could be priestess, though it should be distinguished from the term reserved for the Israelite priest, the *kohen* (כֹּהֵן). The *qadeshah* has a male counterpart, the *qadesh* (שֹׁדֵד), who may or may not also be understood as a prostitute. There is no female counterpart to the *kohen*. The *qadeshah* and the *qadesh* should be understood as pagan, probably Canaanite priests in contrast with the Israelite priest, the *kohen*. Insofar as an Israelite is a *qadesh* or a *qadeshah*, that Israelite is represented as engaging in pagan, non-Israelite religious rites, or possibly heretical Israelite rites.

Three times, in three very diverse texts, the *qadeshah* is identified as a prostitute. In Deuteronomy 23:17-18 the *qadeshah* is prevented from bringing offerings to the Sanctuary because the hire of a *zonah* (prostitute) cannot be accepted at the Sanctuary. In Genesis 38, a J narrative, Judah consorts with a woman he takes for a prostitute (*zonah*), then sends his payment by the hand of his friend, a Canaanite named Hirah. But when Hirah asks locals about the woman, he calls her a *qadeshah* (38:21-22), and continues using the term when he returns to Judah. Finally in Hosea 4:14 the metaphor of idolatry as prostitution is mixed with literal prostitution, for the men “consort with prostitutes (*zonot*) and sacrifice with priestesses (*qadeshot*, Miller, 2009)”. In other words, they are drawn into metaphorical prostitution by visiting literal prostitutes who are also pagan priestesses. The book of Hosea, the earliest of the classical prophets, relies heavily on sexual imagery for his oracles. There is no surprise that one of these images is the *qadeshah*.

Note also that the *qadeshot* in Hosea presided over *zebah* sacrifice, a slaughtered sacrifice of an animal, which presupposes an altar and possibly a temple or shrine. The *zebah* sacrifice has parts burned on the altar, parts eaten by the priest (or priestess) and parts eaten by the worshipper(s). Perhaps the reason Hirah assumed that Judah’s *zonah* was a *qadeshah* was because Judah was sending a sacrificial animal to her in payment, a young goat. And it was Tamar the Canaanite who levied this price on Judah for her services.

The link of *zebah* sacrifice with religious sexual activity may lie behind the seduction of Israel by Midian in Numbers, chapters 25 and 31. The first sentence of chapter 25 neatly mixes literal fornication with the metaphor of fornication as idolatry, “The people began to fornicate unto the daughters of Moab.” It is the women of Moab/Midian who entice the Israelites to worship Baal Peor, and 25:6-8 and 31:15-16 are explicit about the method of enticement. The women offer sexual favors. They entice metaphorical fornication by means of literal religion-

based fornication. Though the term *qadeshah* is not used, there is fornication, literal and metaphorical, within the setting of Canaanite religion. There is *zebah* sacrifice offered by Israelites with the Midianite women. The Midianite woman who was slain while fornicating with the Israelite is identified by her father's house (25:15), implying legitimate birth. The text is graphic about the sex act between the Midianite woman and the Israelite man, for they were both pierced with a single spear thrust (25:8). This implies fornication, for sex within marriage can be assumed and does not require graphic treatment. The graphic treatment of their sex act implies fornication – as does the infinitive verb in the first sentence of the chapter, “to fornicate” (*liznot*). It is very likely that the author wished to evoke the pagan prostitute priestess whom Hosea calls *qadeshah*. The only thing missing is payment. The sacred sexual activity is lacking the one thing that separates prostitution from other forms of fornication.

The paternity of the Midianite woman is particularly interesting. She was not an anonymous member of Midianite society. She was the daughter of a Midianite chieftain (31:8). But in chapter 25 she is sexually active with an Israelite with no apparent marriage contract. The author probably meant this tidbit of information as a slur on Midianite culture. The message is that the seductive Midianites included a woman from the highest ranks of Midianite society. With good paternity, and with the apparent blessing of her family, and for religious purposes, she was sexually active with a man to whom she was not married.

Philo picks up on these clues which indicate religious prostitution in this story. In *Life of Moses* 1.296 Balaam advises that the women of Moab/Midian hire out their sexual services. Later Philo calls the women of Baal-Peor prostitutes (1.302), using the terms *porne* (πορνῆ) and *hetaira* (ἑταῖρα). But Philo's Balaam also assumes that Balak's kingdom would have laws against such licentious behavior, so he tells Balak to rescind their laws against adultery and other fornications (1.300). Philo finds no intermarriage implied in the text, only seduction and fornication by women acting as prostitutes.

Another text which seems to use the motif of the religious prostitute is found in Proverbs 7:6-27. The woman seems to be the strange woman of verse 5. Properly she is not a prostitute but rather she is pretending to be one. The narrator is a voyeur and the main character is an adulteress who masquerades as a prostitute. She dresses in a manner customary for a prostitute, but we are given no details on how she is dressed. We might suspect the author did not know precisely how to describe a prostitute, and seems to be following a standard literary motif instead

of describing a real-life situation. The woman is aggressive in seduction, but the first words out of her mouth are neither erotic nor financial. She first talks religion, describing the completion of her vow and her sacrifice (זָבַחַי שְׁלָמִים). This *zebah* sacrifice includes a ritual meal. Now, apparently, she wishes to complete what she began at the altar by seducing the young man.

Proverbs 7 gives a narrative treatment to the law in Deuteronomy 23, which bans a prostitute's hire from being a vow payment in the Sanctuary. Proverbs 7 also implies a tight link between sacrificial activity and the business of some prostitutes. As the author is describing the worst of bad women, an adulterer playing a prostitute, the author chose to describe her as portraying the ultimate in prostitutes, a religious prostitute.

In times past commentators were quick to find sacred prostitution in Proverbs 7 (McKane 337; Scott 65), but the present trend is to ignore or attack such an interpretation. Not only do some commentators deny the historicity of religious prostitution, they also deny the possibility that the writers might attribute such sacred prostitution to those deemed outsiders, pagans and heretics. Even so, the texts continue to inspire readings which understand some form of sacred prostitution in these narratives. It is understandable why. Clifford (pp 88-90) not only finds sacred prostitution referenced in Proverbs 7, but also human sacrifice, with the seduced young man as the sacrificial victim.

What is the payment, the "hire of a prostitute," mentioned in Deuteronomy 23:18? The Tamar story implies that the payment was the sacrificial animal itself. When a worshiper wanted to make a *zebah* sacrifice the worshiper would provide the animal, and often significant portions of the animal remained property of the Sanctuary and its priests (e.g. Lev 7:6-8; Deut 18:3). In Hosea 4:14 the sacrificial animals are provided by the (male) worshipers, but in Numbers 25:2 it seems the Midianites provided the sacrifices and invited the Israelites to the resulting feast. The same is true of the woman of Proverbs 7 whose vow was paid with a *shlamim* (שְׁלָמִים) sacrifice. Other payments are not implied in the texts which we have. Rahab does not seem to be represented as a priestess, so her hire need not be an animal. Judah's payment to Tamar has an ambiguity. To Judah a goat could be nothing more than currency, but to Tamar and Hirah the goat could be understood as a *zebah* sacrifice.

Were all Canaanite female priests also prostitutes? Many scholars doubt it. In fact, some scholars doubt there was any temple prostitution among the Canaanites, and blame Israelite and Jewish writers for concocting this slur against their Canaanite foes. Perhaps the sight of these

women greeting men at public places such as temples and receiving their offerings caused the Israelites to conclude that prostitution was also part of the worship. Then again, temple prostitution may have existed elsewhere in the ancient Near East (see below), which means such prostitution could also be part of the Canaanite / Israelite culture.

This brings us to the *qadesh*, the male pagan priest. Based on Deuteronomy 23:17-18, a wide variety of scholars and other readers assume that the *qadesh* is also a prostitute, just like the *qadeshah*. However, this is a logical leap, especially as no text directly connects the *qadesh* with sexual activity, much less payment for sexual activity. Also, it is important to recognize that in almost every culture some female prostitutes are associated with men who run the business and keep clients in line, but are not themselves prostitutes. This is particularly likely in strongly patriarchal cultures where women, even prostitutes, need a man to look out for their interests. If the *qadeshah* is portrayed as a religious prostitute, it is no stretch to understand the *qadesh* as a religious pimp. More broadly, the *qadeshim* may have run the temples where the *qadeshot* worked, with or without prostitution involved. This seems a far more likely role for the *qadesh* than some hypothetical prostitution practiced by males but never hinted in the texts.

### **Akkadian Texts**

Mesopotamian evidence for religious prostitution is scant and requires much interpretation. Recently there has been a strong movement in various historical disciplines to discredit reports of sacred prostitution in ancient cultures. This movement can be found among Classical, Biblical and ancient Near Eastern scholars. This movement has produced appropriate cautions in textual interpretation, though on occasion a reader might sense that the scholar is straining the sense of a text in order to avoid a sacred prostitution reading. As the relevant Mesopotamian texts are scant, understandably they are also strongly contested.

Also important, the debate over ancient sacred prostitution is heavily influenced by our culture's Israelite heritage. We are scandalized by the thought of religious prostitution because the ancient Israelite writers of the Bible were scandalized by religious prostitution. This may not have been the case in ancient pagan cultures. These ancient cultures had a variety of religious practices which the Israelites found reprehensible and defiling, and all ancient cultures for which we have relevant records had legal prostitution, including the Israelites. We lack evidence that ancient non-Israelite cultures found religious prostitution reprehensible, or even remarkable.

One additional point should be made. Almost all priestly or temple services were paid for. Sometimes the offering itself was the payment, and sometimes the payment was made for a service. Sacred prostitution can be better understood as sacral sexual activity, which like other sacral activity, was often a paid service.

An important Akkadian text is a 7<sup>th</sup> century collection of Akkadian proverbs which counsels against marrying a prostitute (*harimtu*) who has a multitude of husbands, an “Ishtarite” (*ishtaritu*) who belongs to a god (*sha ana ili*), a temple worker (*kulmashitu*)<sup>4</sup> who does not limit her sexual favors, for with such a wife your household will not do well (Counsels of Wisdom 72-74; ANET 427). The precise meaning of the *kulmashitu* is not known, but is usually understood as a type of priestess. The Ishtarite is sandwiched between two types of women described as having multiple sexual partners, so it is no surprise that some consider the Ishtarite a religious prostitute, or at least a religious worker not bound to one mate. A caution is in order here. The text may only indicate that these priestesses are not held to monogamy, but not identify these women as religious prostitutes. A few Mesopotamian texts do indicate a sexual liberality for certain female religious workers, but don’t get specific on how their sexual activity is related to their religious work.

The *qadeshah* has a cognate term for priestess in both Akkadian (*qadishtu / qadiltu*) and Ugaritic (*qudshu*). The Ugaritic term in its masculine form is sometimes paired with the masculine *khn*, a cognate to the Hebrew priest, the *kohen*. However, terms are not functions. All of these terms refer to religious functionaries, but their roles could vary widely within each culture, not to mention between cultures. The activities, or non-activities, associated with any of these terms do not necessarily provide background for understanding the activities associated with its cognates in other cultures.

The character of Shamhat in the Epic of Gilgamesh gives one possible literary source behind the Midianite story of Numbers 25. Shamhat is the prostitute (*harimtu*) who brought civilization to Enkidu by seducing him. Like the women of Midian, Shamhat worked on behalf of the state, seeking to civilize the dangerous wilderness-dweller through seduction. This story may indicate a narrative motif available in the storytelling repertoire of the ancient Near East, a

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<sup>4</sup> Unintentionally, Gruber (145) provides examples from incantation texts which place the *kulmashitu* among other religious workers, including the *ishtaritu* and the *qadishtu*. Cf. Hammurabi #181; Roth p. 118.

motif used in the story of Baal Peor. Notably Shamhat is not described as a religious worker, and even though she invites Enkidu to accompany her to the holy temple, the House of Anu and Ishtar, this is not sufficient to place her as a temple prostitute. Shamhat is presented as a secular prostitute.

In the Legend of Sargon, when read in light of the Akkadian proverb, the parentage of Sargon is suggestive but not conclusive. Sargon claims that his mother is a priestess (*entu*) and his father he does not know — though his father's clan he knows. She bore him in secret and hid him among the rushes of the river, indicating the child should not have been born. If Sargon is claiming to know the identity of his mother, he seems to be indicating that she was not married to his father, and indeed may not know which man of the clan was his father. Otherwise this legend may imply that the priestess whom Sargon claims as his mother is a type of priestess (literary type or real-life type) who often would not be able to identify the father of a child. But again, the textual evidence is slim. We do not know enough about this type of priestess, or any other class of Mesopotamian priestess, to understand the sexual nuances which may have been part of the religious life, even if we conclude that some of them, some of the time, did function as cultic prostitutes.

Though we have some comparative sources from Mesopotamia (Leick 147-156), they are few. Yet, there is no particular reason to conclude that sacred prostitution did not occur among the Canaanites and Israelites, or that they never observed it in other cultures. Whether the Biblical texts were written in Israel/Canaan or in Mesopotamia during the exile, it is possible the Israelite writers observed at least some temple prostitution in surrounding cultures, and possibly within Israelite culture. From these observations Israelite polemicists who rejected all sacred prostitution could extrapolate the practice to all Canaanite female priests.

### **Greek Sacred Prostitution**

This is not the place for a complete analysis of the Classical literature on sacred prostitution. A look at a few of these sources will round out our understanding of sacred prostitution as it was understood in the ancient world.

An often neglected figure in Plato's dialogues is Diotima in the *Symposion*, 202-210. She is a figure who was consulted by the leaders of the city and who advised a set of sacrifices. It is implied that she is a religious leader of some sort, possibly a priestess. Yet, she is an instructor

in erotics (ερωτικά), a term which includes, but is not limited to, the English term “erotic”. As she is a source for Plato’s concept of “Platonic” love, her teachings are represented as transcending physical sexuality. But sexuality is Plato’s topic, and sexuality is what his characters discuss for the purpose of transcending sexuality for a higher notion and practice.

So Diotima is part of this dialogue as a sexual figure who transcends the sexuality which she represents. Plato’s character is most effective if his original audience would think of Diotima first as sexual, so Plato could use her to transcend that assumption. This is a roundabout way of saying that Plato’s Diotima implies sacral sexuality in the culture where Plato wrote, Classical Athens.

Contemporary to Plato, in neighboring Corinth, we are told by Strabo (8.6.20) that sacred prostitution was practiced at the temple of Aphrodite. However, Strabo was not a contemporary of Plato and old Corinth. He was writing in the Roman Period about Greece in the Classical Period. Corinth had since been destroyed by the Romans, then rebuilt with a new population. Strabo was writing as a historian, using sources not available to us, and for this he has been criticized (Budin, pp 165-168). However, Corinth was not an exotic location or culture – in contrast to Babylon, Persia and Armenia. Strabo’s contemporaries knew both the city of Corinth and Strabo’s sources. Also we should note that the term *hetairai* was used in Classical Greece for women who may or may not be prostitutes, but in the Roman period the term had become limited almost solely to women who perform sex acts for pay.

In Strabo these *hetairai* are also called hierodouls (ἱεροδουλη), sacred slaves. In other words, they were sacred sex workers attached to the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth. In Strabo these *hetairai* were clearly prostitutes, whether the term is to be understood as a Classical or Roman Period term. Their employment in the temple resulted in visitors spending most of their money when visiting Corinth, making the temple rich. As they were hierodouls of the temple, their employment as sex workers was sacral. In other words, they were sacred prostitutes.

One more example is of special interest to scholars of the Bible and ancient Judaism. In the Deuterocanonical / Apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees there is an intriguing, if brief, reference to possible sacred prostitution as one of the defilements of the Temple in Jerusalem. In 2 Maccabees 6:4 we are told that under the leadership of a Greek (an Athenian elder, γεροντα Αθηναιον), gentiles (των εθνων) brought *hetairai* (ἑταιρων) into the Temple to make them available for sex there. Emissions of semen in the sacred precincts are defiling, but

also implied is sacral intercourse with these *hetairai*. The mention in 2 Maccabees is brief, and may not be trustworthy. However, the context of this text includes not only Jewish understandings of sacredness and defilement in the Temple, but also the various Greek sources on sacred prostitution. 2 Maccabees wishes the reader to understand that the Greeks introduced their sacred prostitution into the Jerusalem Temple as one of their defilements. The writer implies that sacred prostitution is part of Greek culture and religion. It is a separate question whether the accusation is historically accurate.

### **Tamar and Judah**

Though Tamar was a widow living in her father's house, she was under marriage contract to Judah, the father of her dead husband. Judah was bound by this contract to provide Tamar with a relative to impregnate her in the stead of her lost husband. However, with time it became clear that Judah had no intention of honoring his part of the contract, so Tamar set out to snare her father-in-law by playing a prostitute and thus gain her levirate rights. She posed as a prostitute, and Judah saw her as a *zonah*.

Tamar's prostitute disguise was based on her hiding her face behind a veil, an act which conveniently disguised her so that her father-in-law would not recognize her (38:14-15). Veiling was a fluid and varied practice throughout the ancient world. Earlier in Genesis, Rebekah greeted the stranger Eliezer with an unveiled face so he became aware of her beauty, but later she veiled herself to meet with her future husband Isaac (24:16,65). In contrast the Mesopotamian law codes command wives to veil themselves, but concubines, slave women and prostitutes went about bare-faced. Aside from its role as a disguise, Tamar's veil is an ambiguous clue concerning ancient prostitution.

Less ambiguous was Hirah's assumption that Judah's *zonah* was a *qadeshah*, a Canaanite priestess. As a Canaanite woman living in her father's house Judah's *zonah* was located among the Canaanites. She requested as pay and Judah sought to pay her with an animal, a young goat, and the *qadeshot* were associated with animal sacrifice. Finally there is that enigmatic scarlet cord which the midwife used during her labor. Like Rahab, Tamar remained part of her father's household, a woman of legitimate birth, but like Israelite prostitutes she is known for the children she bore to her customer, Judah.

The details of Judah's negotiation with Tamar do tell us something about how prostitutes were approached by their customers, but there are difficulties. We have this one description, and it probably was told in detail because some details were anomalous. However we have no way of knowing which parts were anomalous and which were common. In other words, the details are almost revealing, but ultimately frustrating.

Another enigma remains in this story. When Judah found out that his daughter-in-law was pregnant he ordered her to be burned. Burning is a rare form of execution and it is specified for two sexual transgressions. The first is when a man commits incest by taking a woman and her mother (Lev 20:14). The second is when the daughter of a priest defiles her father's house through fornication (Lev 21:9). Is the command to burn the daughter-in-law linked with either of these laws? Did Judah ironically and unwittingly identify his intergenerational incest with his son's wife? Was Tamar to be understood as the daughter of a priest, or possibly was she a priestess as Hirah supposed, thus subject to burning for fornication? If so, was the author attempting to hint at Tamar's priestly status, or suppress it?

## **CONCLUSION**

The distinctions between the Israelite and pagan/Canaanite prostitute can be understood as a slur on Canaanite culture, a contrast with the values of proper Israelite culture. As prostitution was despised in Israelite culture, the prostitute is rarely known by a patronym — prostitutes tended to be illegitimate. In contrast, Canaanite prostitutes tended to have patronyms or live with their fathers, something which the authors are careful to indicate. Thus one negative value applied to Canaanite culture by Israelite writers is that the Canaanite prostitutes were of legitimate birth, and their fathers would allow or even encourage their daughters to go into prostitution.

Also, Canaanite prostitutes were known for their pagan religious activity as priestesses, where Israelite prostitutes were banned from the Sanctuary. Again this may be understood as a slur on Canaanite culture where their idolatry legitimates prostitution. The Israelite spite for the institution of prostitution therefore colors the Israelite attitude toward Canaanite idolatry.

The apparent childless condition of Canaanite prostitutes is enigmatic. Though Rahab presumably was sexually active prior to the fall of Jericho, she bore no children until she was joined to Israel, and her fertility is not mentioned in the book of Joshua but rather in the New

Testament (Mt 1:5). The contrast between Rahab and Achan emphasizes Rahab's childlessness - it was an important characteristic of this Canaanite prostitute. In contrast, the Israelite prostitutes tended to bear children. Were the writers uninterested in the procreation of these pagans? Possibly they wished to imply that Canaanite prostitutes practice infertile sexual acts, or more sinister, that something happens to the inevitable pregnancies which accompany prostitution. Given the polemical nature of our texts, it is likely that suspicions of deviant or sinister behavior would receive explicit mention, so the writers probably were uninterested in the issue. Even so, the contrast remains. The texts were interested in the parentage of Canaanite prostitutes, something ignored for Israelite prostitutes, but also were interested in the children of the Israelite prostitutes, something ignored for Canaanite prostitutes. Israelite prostitutes – and by extension Israelite men – were fertile, in contrast to Canaanite prostitutes and their customers.

The literary use of prostitution in these texts tells us a great deal about the authors' constructions of gender, sexuality and culture. The culture was patriarchal, of course, and most of the texts which survive were written by men with an intended audience mostly or completely male. In this patriarchal culture the writers and readers were interested in reproduction and legitimacy, and prostitution proved a perfect vehicle for these related issues, especially in characterizing the Canaanites as a substandard patriarchal culture. The authors and the intended audience were also intent on separating themselves from outsiders, in this case Canaanites and dissolute Israelites. "Pagan" is an appropriate term as it encapsulates the attitudes of the Israelite writers towards those whose differences are to be accentuated, and possibly invented. What little we know about prostitution, religious or secular, in this Iron Age culture has been filtered through this cultural polemic and told solely from the male viewpoint.

Though the writers and editors are open about prostitution within Israel they did not want to describe or imply the existence of religious prostitution among the Israelites. However, this does not mean that Israelite culture was free of such activity. Israelites practiced a variety of forbidden religious customs. Likewise, even though the texts treat all *qadeshot* as prostitutes, we cannot be certain that prostitution was universal among the *qadeshot*. The historical value of these texts is for the history of attitudes with little recoverable about the practices and practitioners who are the subjects of these texts.