

RAW MATERIAL

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL SEXUALITY

James E Miller

November, 2006

Chapter 8

Virgins, Prostitutes and Concubines

A Woman's Place

Pages 60-62

Virgins, Prostitutes & Concubines

A Woman's Place

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 often 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 recognized (Rev 14:4).

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 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 his wife (Lev 21:7). Virginity was an unmarried woman's most important commodity in the marriage market.

Virginity of women is tied tightly 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. Therefore virginity is a female-specific characteristic, fundamental to the marriage contract.

Prostitutes

Though prostitution was a legal profession, no man could market his daughter as a prostitute (Lev 19:29). Also a priest's daughter was forbidden from being a prostitute (Lev 21:9). In Israelite law prostitution was legal, but despised and sharply regulated. Prostitutes are used to indicate unclean, or at least unsavory, conditions (1 Kings 22:38).

No New Testament text warns women against becoming prostitutes, or needs to, but one text warns men from patronizing prostitutes (1 Cor 6:15-18). Paul uses 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. And Jesus was not above using the prostitute as an example of the “sinners” who, in spite of their low moral values, would yet enter the kingdom of Heaven before his righteous, religious audience (Matt 21:31-32). In spite of the surface disharmony between these two texts, 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). As a noun *zonah* almost always refers to a prostitute, but the verb *zanah* not only is used for prostitution but also for other forms of fornication, and therefore it may not be specific to prostitution in some of the passages in the prophets (e.g. Jer 2:20; 3:1). Because the verb covers sexual irregularities other than prostitution, some scholars question whether the noun *zonah* is consistently specific to prostitution. However, in every use with sufficient context *zonah* consistently indicates a woman who provides sexual gratification to male clients in return for payment.

The New Testament follows the Septuagint in its terminology for prostitution. The term for prostitute is *porne* (πόρνη), which like *zonah* is cognate to the verb for all types of fornication, *porneuo* (πορνεύω). Though the verbs are general, the nouns *zonah* and *porne* are specific to women who perform sexual favors in exchange for payment.

Concubines

Was the concubine (פילגש, *pilegash*) a form of wife or not? What exactly was the status of Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah? 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 *pilegash* seem to be full heirs along with the children of “regular” wives (Gen 22:20-24; Jud 8:30-31). The Levite of Judges 19 lived with a *pilegash*, apparently by contract with her father, which sounds almost like a marriage. Here the father of the woman and the paramour of the woman are חותן to each other, father-in-law and son-in-law. Unlike prostitution, a concubine could come from legitimate paternity.

Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah were slaves taken by their owner for reproductive services, but the Levite’s concubine apparently was not a slave. Rather she was the daughter of a free man. The

concubine role is not defined by slavery or free birth. Possibly the Levite and his concubine were of significantly different social strata, so that her position compared to the Levite was similar to that of slave and owner. Or possibly she was a non-virgin who did not marry her deflowerer, making her less attractive on the marriage market. We do not know why she was a concubine rather than a wife, but we can say that there seems to be more than one path to the position of concubine.

An odd and interesting bit of evidence is given in 2 Samuel 20:3. David left some of his concubines to keep the palace when he fled Absalom's forces. Absalom made a public show of going into the concubines' chamber. Even if Absalom had no sexual relations with any of the concubines, all were considered as sharing in this incest with Absalom because of the appearance of intercourse, for Absalom publicly entered their chamber. After David returned, these concubines were isolated and were never visited again by David. The text describes them as living as *almanot* (אלמנות), widows. Apparently the role of concubine included sufficient status to give a bereaved concubine the status of widow.

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 the veiled wife. The concubine sounds like a lower class of wife, under contract or enslaved but whose children are considered "legitimate," or at least potential heirs. The term concubine seems to be a flexible one for long-term sexual partners who do have some sort of socially recognized contract, but not a standard marriage contract. Concubine seems to be a general term for a second-class wife.