

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Cult Prostitution in Ancient Israel?

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Contrary to the claims of some 20th-century scholarship, the Hebrew Bible never refers directly to cult prostitutes. Many modern Bible translations are simply misleading in this respect. Much of the confusion results from a misunderstanding of a few Biblical texts that mention *qedeshot*, the plural of *qedeshah*, which is related to *qodesh*, “holy place.” Originally *qedeshah* referred to a “consecrated maiden,” but Biblical authors used it in the sense of “harlot.”

In the ancient Near East, women could in fact be dedicated by their fathers or their masters to a deity. Women could also devote themselves to the service of a god or a goddess in order to secure their living. This was done mainly by young widows without grown children, by repudiated wives, by female slaves sent away (like Hagar, Abraham’s concubine in *Genesis 21*), by lonely women, etc. These “consecrated” persons performed tasks in the sanctuary, provided domestic help in temple annexes, perhaps provided musical entertainment and possibly sexual services, remitting their fees to the temple. However, *qedeshot* in the Bible never appear as performing religious sexual rituals, which is the key attribute of a cult prostitute. Women on duty at the entrance to Israelite

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sanctuaries are mentioned in *Exodus 38:8* and *1 Samuel 2:22*, but their tasks are not described, and they are not called *qedeshot*.

The Hebrew meaning of *qedeshah* as harlot possibly derives from the perception that some “consecrated” maidens employed in Canaanite temples were also prostitutes in the context of fertility cults, especially of the goddess Ashtoreth. Indeed, the simple fact that such women served a heathen deity may have led to the understanding of the word *qedeshah* by outsiders in the sense of “harlot” and to its use in Biblical Hebrew as a synonym of *zonah*, “prostitute.” In short, in the Hebrew Bible, *qedeshah* (and its plural) simply refers to a prostitute, not to a cult prostitute in particular.



The earliest Biblical attestation of *qedeshah* is found in the story of Judah and Tamar in *Genesis 38*. Judah’s son Er, married to Tamar, died. Judah then gave his second son Onan to Tamar. Onan also died. Judah was reluctant to give his third son Shelah to Tamar, as was required when a brother died without children. Later, Judah himself was widowed. He saw a woman on the road, assumed her to be a harlot (*zonah*), and slept with her. He gave her his seal as assurance that he would pay her with a sheep from his flock (*Genesis 38:15–18*). The *zonah* turned out to be none other than his daughter-in-law Tamar, who had dressed herself in a veil and sat by the road because Judah had refused to give her his third son as a husband. When Judah’s friend went to redeem the pledge, he inquired of the people of the town where he could find the assumed prostitute. They replied that there was no *qedeshah* in the area (*Genesis 38:20–21*). Obviously the two words (*qedeshah* and *zonah*) are used as synonyms. And there is no indication whatever that cult prostitution is involved. There is no cultic context here. Yet many Bibles (e.g., Jewish Publication Society [JPS], Revised Standard Version, Revised English Bible, New American Bible, New International Version, but not the New Jerusalem Bible) translate *qedeshah* as “cult prostitute” (see “*Qedeshah: A Mistranslation*”). As used here, *qedeshah* seems to have been simply a less derogatory term for prostitute than *zonah*.

The same situation occurs in Deuteronomy 23:18–19 (English 23:17–18; I will use the Hebrew numbering and JPS translation in this discussion; see also “*Qedeshah: A Mistranslation*”). As before, many English Bibles translate *qedeshah* here as “cult prostitute” or “temple prostitute”: “No Israelite woman shall be a cult prostitute.” However, this is simply an Israelite injunction against idolatrous cult services in general, not against cult prostitution in particular. The usual English translation of the Biblical text

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goes on to state: "Nor shall any Israelite man be a cult prostitute (*qadesh*).” This, too, is incorrect, but it takes an additional explanation.

Deuteronomy 23:19 states: "You shall not bring the fee of a whore (*zonah*) or the pay of a dog into the House of the Lord your God in fulfillment of any vow, for both are abhorrent to the Lord your God." "Dog" here is generally agreed to refer to a male prostitute, but not necessarily a cult prostitute. This verse, like all the other prohibitions in this chapter (*Deuteronomy 23*), is in the second person: "You shall not ... " The exception is Deuteronomy 23:18. This verse is in the *third* person. The difference alerts us to the fact that this verse was added by a redactor, a later Biblical editor. He saw that in verse 19 the proceeds of prostitution were not to be brought into the Temple, even in fulfillment of a vow (*Deuteronomy 23:19*). He extended the prohibition, however, to include a general prohibition (*Deuteronomy 23:18*) against Israelite prostitution either in the proper sense or as participation in illegal cult practices. No Israelite shall be a prostitute (a prohibition expressed in the third person): "There shall be no prostitute (*qedeshah*) among the daughters of Israel; there shall be no *qadesh* among the sons of Israel" [my translation]. The word *qedeshah* here is a synonym of *zonah*, which is used in the prohibition in verse 19. This is the same situation we have seen in the story of Judah and Tamar. However, the Septuagint translators in Alexandria who translated the text into Greek understood the *qadesh* and *qedeshah* of this passage in the Hellenistic sense of "initiates" who participated in heathen esoteric "mystery" rites. In fact, the word *qdšm* might have this meaning in a neo-Punic inscription from Mactar (Tunisia), dated to about the first century B.C.E.^{1 ii}



A further explanation is needed concerning the *qadesh*. In the well-known cuneiform texts from Ugarit (on the Mediterranean coast of modern Syria), which date to about 1200 B.C.E., *qdšm* (= Hebrew *qedeshim*) are often mentioned with the *khnm* (= *kohanim*, "priests") and seem to be cultic servants assisting the priests. There is no indication that they were male prostitutes. They were simply priestly assistants. The *qdšym* of older Biblical psalms may have exercised a similar function, but the word was later understood in the sense of "holy men" and vocalized accordingly. In fact, the priestly assistants got a

¹ Karel Jongeling, *Handbook of Neo-Punic Inscriptions* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), p. 116, no. 64, line 2.

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bad reputation in the seventh century B.C.E., as shown by *2 Kings 23:7*, possibly indicating that prostitution did occur in the Temple, even a kind of cult prostitution. In the time of Josiah, the Biblical text tells us, the king “pulled down the houses of the *qedeshim* in the House of the Lord, where women were renting² cubicles as a shrine (*asherah*)” (*2 Kings 23:7*, my translation). There is no evidence, however, that the *qedeshim* were male cult prostitutes. As at Ugarit, the *qedeshim* were priestly assistants. In *2 Kings 23:7*, Josiah is said to have torn down the cubicles (literally, houses) of the *qedeshim* (male) in the Temple precinct. The *qedeshim* are thus said to have been renting houses in the Temple precinct to some women, possibly for prostitution. Perhaps the men were also acting as pimps.

Note that the women who rented their houses (or cubicles) are not called *qedeshot*. Whatever the women were doing in the cubicles (the JPS translation suggests they were weaving coverings for the shrine), it had something to do with a shrine, as indicated by the term *asherah*, which designates a shrine, a sacred grove or a tree under which an illicit cultic ritual is performed.

A widespread modern misunderstanding of the term *asherah* as a pagan goddess has led some to conclude that cult prostitution was involved in this passage, i.e., *2 Kings 23:7*. It thus becomes important to unpack this reference to *asherah* and explain how it became confused with a Canaanite goddess, either Ashtoreth or Ashratu. The conclusion, however, as we shall see, is that *asherah* in the Bible refers to a shrine or sacred grove, not to a goddess.

The confusion can be easily recognized because in several West Semitic languages (Assyro-Babylonian, Phoenician, Aramaic, Hebrew), the common word for shrine (*aširtulešertu* in Assyro-Babylonian, *ʿšrt* in Phoenician, *ʿtrt* in Aramaic and *ʿšrh/šyrh* in Hebrew) is similar to Ashtoreth (*ʿštrt*) and to the name *Atrt* of the Ugaritic goddess *Rabbatu Atratu Yamma*, “The Lady Who Treads upon the Sea.” The similarity of Biblical *asherah* to these terms in other related languages led modern mythographers to invent a goddess Asherah in the Bible. Modern translators followed suit.

It is clear, however, that *asherah* in the Bible cannot refer to a goddess. In the Bible, *asherah* has a plural, *ʿšrym*,³ sometimes *ʿšrwot*.⁴ This would hardly be the case if *asherah* were a

² Hebrew *ʿrgwt* is a metathetic variant of *ʿgrwt*, “renting.”

³ Exodus 34:13; Deuteronomy 7:5, 12:3; 1 Kings 14:15, 23, 16:33; 2 Kings 13:6, 17:10, 23:14; Isaiah 17:8, 27:9; Jeremiah 17:2; Micah 5:13; 2 Chronicles 14:2, 17:6, 24:18, 31:1, 33:19, 34:4, 7.

⁴ The feminine plural ending is found in Judges 3:7, where it is a scribal error, then in 2 Chronicles 19:3, 33:3; Temple Scroll (11Q19) 51:20; Mishnah Abodah Zarah 3:7; Tosefta Abodah Zarah 6:8. In Judges 3:7, a few Hebrew manuscripts and the Vulgate, based on a manuscript from the fourth century C.E. or earlier,

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goddess. Moreover, in the Bible *asherah* sometimes occurs with the article *ha-* (“the shrine”)⁵ and with the pronominal suffix (“his shrine”), as in the well-known Hebrew inscriptions from Khirbet el-Qom, near Jerusalem (*yhwh w’šrth*, “Yahweh and his shrine”), and from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud in the Sinai (*yhwh šmrn w’šrth*, “Yahweh of Samaria and his shrine”; *yhwh tmn w’šrth*, “Yahweh of the South and his shrine”).ⁱⁱⁱ This proves that *asherah* cannot be a proper name. In addition, *asherah* could be “built” (1 Kings 14:23), “made” (2 Kings 21:7), “set up” (2 Kings 17:10) or “installed” (2 Chronicles 33:19), again showing that *asherah* cannot be a goddess. *Asherah* was no deity but simply a grove or a shrine that eventually became a small construction.⁶

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Provincial shrines, like those referred to at Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, were prohibited after the centralization of religious observance in Jerusalem by King Josiah in the seventh century B.C.E. (2 Kings 23), but the prophet Jeremiah in the seventh–sixth centuries B.C.E. still refers to the *asherim* (in the plural), the sacred groves or shrines in the shade of spreading trees. In other texts, such as *Jeremiah* 2:20 and 3:6–10, the metaphors of prostitution and adultery are used as poetic descriptions of Judah’s infidelity to the Lord.

These passages do not allude to cult prostitution performed by young Judahite women, although the existence of fertility cults in Canaan was certainly known.^{iv} They were even exported by Phoenicians to the western Mediterranean and appear in Phoenician and Carthaginian colonies. Cult prostitution is recorded by Strabo at the western extremity of Sicily, where people worshiped Ashtoreth, identified by Strabo with Aphrodite.⁷ Strabo’s information is confirmed by Diodorus of Sicily.⁸ However, the value of such literary reports is questionable, since they were based on unproven sources and were written when the referenced sanctuary no longer



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⁵ Judges 6:25, 26, 28, 30; 1 Kings 18:19, 2 Kings 18:4, 21:7, 23:6; Tosefta Abodah Zarah 6:9.

⁶ Pertinent Biblical texts are analyzed by Edward Lipiński, “The Goddess Athirat in Ancient Arabia, in Babylon, and in Ugarit,” *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 3 (1972), pp. 101–119, esp. 114, and in a concise but updated way in “Athirat,” Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan, 2005), pp. 589–592. My latest synthesis on the subject, “Cult Prostitution and Passage Rites in the Biblical World,” appeared in *The Biblical Annals* 3 (2013), pp. 9–25.

⁷ *Geography* 6.2.6.

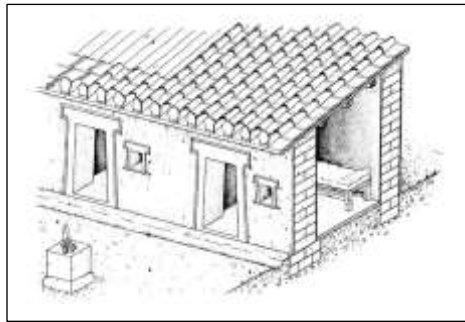
⁸ *Library of History* 4.83.4.

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functioned. Moreover, Strabo's terminology is somewhat confusing and imprecise.⁹ Punic inscriptions, however, do attest to the presence of two generations of *hierodouloi* ("sacred prostitutes"), a mother and her daughter, at Eryx (in Sicily).¹⁰ Sicca Veneria (Le Kef) in Tunisia was renowned in Roman times for the sexual rites performed by "Punic women" in the magnificent temple of Venus, as Ashtoreth was then called in Latin.¹¹



Archaeological excavations also provide evidence



of possible cult prostitution in the wider world. At Pyrgi, north of Rome in what was Etruria, archaeologists uncovered a temple (Temple B) from about 500 B.C.E. A bilingual inscription found in the excavation records the dedication of a "holy place" to the Etruscan goddess Uni (Latin Juno), called Ashtoreth in her Phoenician version.¹² v The

archaeologists

uncovered a series of at least 17 small rooms or cells along the temple's *temenos* wall. Each of these cells measured only about 6 by 9 feet.^{vi} Excavator Giovanni Colonna interpreted them as quarters where cult prostitution was practiced.¹³ In this he is probably correct. His conclusion is consistent with the Latin satirist Lucilius's reference to the "Pyrgi harlots."¹⁴ This satirical qualification reflects the moral tone of ancient Romans. No surprise, since Lucilius was of a rich and noble Roman family.



⁹ He applies the term *hierodouloi* also to the harlots of Corinth (*Geography* 8.6.20), although cult prostitution was unknown in Greece.

¹⁰ *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, vol. 1, no. 3776.

¹¹ This is recorded in the first century C.E. by Valerius Maximus in his *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 2.6.15.

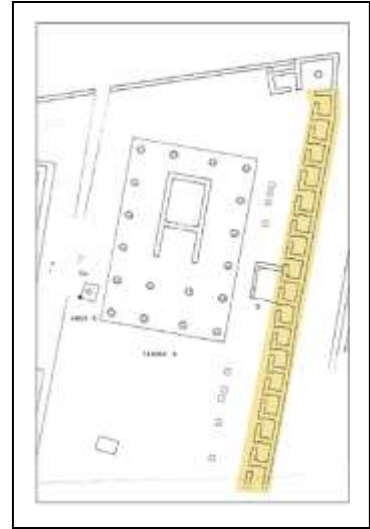
¹² The inscription with a translation and a commentary can be found in John C.L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 3: *Phoenician Inscriptions* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), no. 42.

¹³ Giovanni Colonna, "Novità sui culti di Pyrgi," *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia* 57 (1984–1985), pp. 57–88; Giovanni Colonna, *Santuari d'Etruria* (Milano: Electa, 1985), p. 128.

¹⁴ Friedrich Marx, *C. Lucilii Carminum reliquiae* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1904–1905), fig. 1271.

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A similar series of small rooms was also discovered, of all places, at Dura-Europos, a wealthy walled caravan city in Syria on the Euphrates. Dura-Europos is best known for its synagogue with walls covered with scenes from the Bible.^{vii} Next door to the synagogue was a temple dedicated to Adonis and the Aramaic goddess Atargatis, whose Greek counterpart is Aphrodite. Flanking the temple proper were nine small rooms, each about 13 by 16.5 feet.¹⁵ Eight of the nine rooms have low benches a little over 3 feet wide. Dedicatory inscriptions date to the second century C.E. Amphorae partially sunk into the floor and a jar-stand uncovered in these rooms indicate they were used for sacred meals, taken with wine by men reclining on the benches.¹⁶ Later in the second century, a cellar was added, probably for wine, reflecting the importance of wine for the quasi-ritual sanctuary-related activities that occurred in these rooms. They may well have included the sexual services of women jailed for adultery, as suggested by the presence of a “jailer” on the temple staff. Similar circumstances might explain the remains of a woman found in the precinct of the Apollo temple at Bulla Regia (Tunisia) with an iron collar bearing the Latin inscription: “Adulteress. Prostitute. Seize (me), because I fled from Bulla Regia.”¹⁷ ^{viii}



Cult prostitution should be clearly distinguished from rites of passage that include sexual acts.^{ix} The essential point of a passage rite is that it is a once-in-a-lifetime performance, something modern writers seem to overlook, thus misleading readers. Such rites concern not only women, but men as well. Circumcision is certainly such a rite.^x One Old Kingdom Egyptian relief depicts a boy being circumcised by a priest.¹⁸ In a well-known Egyptian inscription a man reports that he was circumcised along with 120 others.¹⁹ This suggests a group circumcised at the same time as part of a puberty ceremony. Such group

¹⁵ These are rooms 4, 5, 37, 38, 43 ff. in the plan of fig. 42 in Michael I. Rostovtzeff, Frank E. Brown and Charles B. Welles, eds., *The Excavations at Dura-Europos. Preliminary Report of the Seventh and Eighth Seasons of Work, 1933–1934 and 1934–1935* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1939), and reproduced on p. 54.

¹⁶ Rostovtzeff et al., *Excavations at Dura-Europos*, pp. 156–157.

¹⁷ *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, vol. 8, no. 25006.

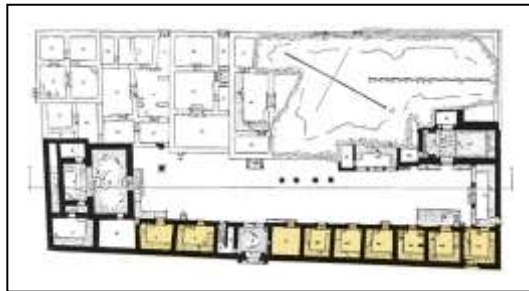
¹⁸ James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), no. 629.

¹⁹ James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts (ANET)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 326.

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circumcision may be an example of the “circumcision festival” mentioned in a tomb at Saqqara, near the pyramids of Giza.²⁰

In the Bible, Ishmael, Abraham’s son by his concubine Hagar, was circumcised at 13 years of age (*Genesis 17:25*). In Jewish tradition, the circumcision occurs when the boy is only eight days old (*Genesis 17:12*), but the passage rite still survives in the *bar mitzvah* (*bat mitzvah* for girls) ceremony that marks the passage of Jewish children from infancy to puberty at age 13 (and 12 for girls). Female circumcision, when performed at puberty, must have belonged to rites of passage as well. It is possibly older than the rite of the *ruptura hymenis*.



There was apparently an ancient superstitious fear that a man would somehow be endangered by his bride’s virginity.^{xi} Causing her bleeding was probably regarded as a bad omen; hence the practice of recurring to a stranger or a priest in the service of a divinity, generally a goddess, to proceed

to the *ruptura hymenis*. This is shown by ethnographic studies conducted in the 19th and 20th centuries, also among still-existing aboriginal tribes, and these recorded practices serve to explain the widespread rituals of the *ruptura hymenis*.²¹ A “laicized” form of this customary or religious duty is thought to have developed in medieval Europe into the *jus primae noctis* vested in the local lord or priest.²²



²⁰ Jean Capart, *Une rue de tombeaux à Sakkarah* (Brussels: Vromant, 1907), vol. 2, pl. LXVII; W.

Wreszinski, *Atlas zur altägyptischen Kulturgeschichte* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1936), pt. 3, pp. 25–26; ANET, p. 326, note 2.

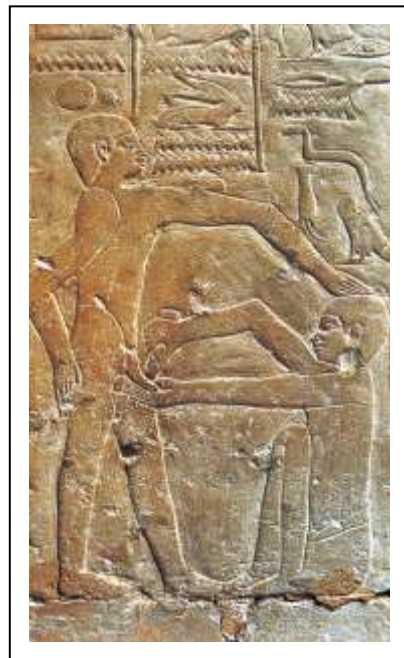
²¹ Baldwin Spencer and Francis J. Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1904), pp. 94ff.; Theodor Reik, *Probleme der Religionspsychologie* (Leipzig: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1919); Ernest Crawley, *The Mystic Rose: A Study of Primitive Marriage*, vol. 1, new ed. by Theodore Besterman (London: Methuen, 1927), pp. 168ff.; Arnold van Gennep, *Rites de passage* (reprinted Paris: Picard, 1992), pp. 48–49. A summary presentation is provided by Gerardus van der Leeuw, *La religion dans son essence et ses manifestations* (Paris: Payot, 1955), p. 225.

²² Raymond D. Jameson, “Jus primae noctis or droit du seigneur,” in *Standard Dictionary of Folklore*, vol. 1 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1950); Karl Schmidt, *Jus primae noctis: Eine geschichtliche Untersuchung* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1881); Karl Schmidt, “Der Streit über das jus primae noctis,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 16 (1884), pp. 18–59; Wilhelm Schmidt-Bleibtreu, *Jus primae noctis im Widerstreit der Meinungen: Eine historische Untersuchung über das Herrenrecht der ersten Nacht* (Bonn:

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A somewhat puzzling Old Babylonian custom is known as the *rēdūtum* rite.^{xii} It was performed only by women and apparently only once in a lifetime.²³ In the temple of Ishtar-Annunītum at Sippar, the *rēdūtum* women are mostly wives, but considering that very young girls were often married and thus legally wives, the rite may refer to the time when they were supposed to have sexual relations with their husbands. The rite may thus refer to the sacrifice of their virginity. If this interpretation is correct, we have here another rite of passage.

The *rēdūtum* rite seems to have given rise to the Babylonian custom reported by Herodotus in which every woman, rich or poor, is required to sit in the temple of Mylitta (Ninlil) and have intercourse with a stranger, who signified his choice by throwing a silver coin onto her lap.²⁴ The woman then had to accept the coin, which thus became sacred. But she had intercourse with the stranger outside the temple. Once the rite had been observed, the woman was absolved from her obligation to the goddess and then, according to Herodotus, money could in no case purchase her again.^{xiii}



A similar custom in Phoenicia is reported in Lucian's *Syrian Goddess* (Section 6).²⁵ The women "stand for a single day in readiness to expose their person for hire. The place of hire is open to none but foreigners, and out of the proceeds of the traffic of these women a sacrifice to Aphrodite is paid." The custom of submitting to a stranger in the service of a goddess clearly points to a rite of passage,^{xiv} performed only once, not "for a single day," as Lucian has misunderstood his informant.

Cult prostitution existed in some parts of the Near East as well as in the Phoenician colonies of the western Mediterranean. It reflected the ritual practices of the

Röhrscheid, 1988); Jörg Wettlaufer, *Das Herrenrecht der ersten Nacht: Hochzeit, Herrschaft und Heiratszins im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit*, Historische Forschungen 24 (Frankfurt: Campus, 1999).

²³ Michel Tanret and Karel Van Lerberghe, "Rituals and Profits in the Ur-Utu Archive," in J. Quaegebeur, ed., *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East*, OLA 55 (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), pp. 435–449, esp. 438–443.

²⁴ *History* 1.199; Jerrold Cooper, "Prostitution," in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, vol. 11 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), p. 19.

²⁵ Harold W. Attridge and Robert A. Oden, eds., *The Syrian Goddess (De Dea Syria) Attributed to Lucian* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), pp. 12–15.

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Canaanites surrounding ancient Israel and Judah. Its faint reflection recorded in the Hebrew Bible serves as a metaphoric allusion to Israel's infidelity to God or as a synonym of harlotry. Modern translations of the Hebrew Bible often unfortunately give another impression. There is a single passage (*2 Kings 23:7*, discussed above) that may contain an obscure reference to cult prostitution; it mentions a shrine rented to women in the precinct of the Temple and destroyed by King Josiah. But that is all.

Cult prostitution should in any case be clearly distinguished from passage rites performed once in a lifetime. Rites of passage accompanying the sacrifice of a woman's virginity belong to this category of ritual practices, but they are not attested in the Bible.

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Endnotes

ⁱ © ERICH LESSING. The fateful encounter between Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar is depicted in this 17th-century painting by Dutch artist Gerbrand van den Eeckhout. According to *Genesis 38*, the unsuspecting Judah mistook Tamar for a veiled "prostitute" (Hebrew *zonah*) sitting beside the road. For her services, Judah promised Tamar a sheep from his flock and gave her his seal and staff as assurance the debt would be honored (both items are shown being exchanged in the painting). Later, when Judah's friend returned to redeem the pledge, he asked in a nearby village where he could find the *qedeshah* (a Hebrew word most Bibles translate as "cult prostitute"), to which the townspeople replied, "There has been no *qedeshah* here."

While Judah ultimately learns the identity of the woman he slept with in a dramatic reveal (verses 24–26), there is nothing in the story to suggest Judah thought he was sleeping with a *cult* prostitute.

ⁱⁱ © ERICH LESSING. GODDESS OF LOVE. The Biblical writers as well as later Greek and Roman authors often associated cult prostitution with the fertility rites of the Canaanite and Phoenician goddess Ashtoreth, perhaps represented by this 8-inch-tall, silver-plated bronze statuette from Syria. Identified with Aphrodite and Venus, the sexually charged goddess was worshiped throughout the Mediterranean world in temples that often employed sacred prostitutes.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Among the many articles dealing with these inscriptions, often in a problematic way, one can mention: Ephraim Stern, "[Pagan Yahwism: The Folk Religion of Ancient Israel](#)," **BAR** 27:03; "[Yahweh and His Asherah: The Debate Continues](#)," Sidebar to Uzi Avner, "[Sacred Stones in the Desert](#)," **BAR** 27:03; André Lemaire, "[Who or What Was Yahweh's Asherah?](#)" **BAR** 10:06; Ze'ev Meshel, "[Did Yahweh Have a Consort?](#)" **BAR** 05:02.

^{iv} ZEV RADOVAN/WWW.BIBLELANDPICTURES.COM. THE SHRINES OF YAHWEH. References to Yahweh and "his *asherah*" in the famous Khirbet el-Qom (shown here) and Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscriptions have led many scholars to postulate that the Israelite God had a divine consort named Asherah. This goddess, however, is little more than a scholarly invention, resulting from the confusion of the Canaanite goddess Ashtoreth with the similar-sounding word *asherah* (plural, *asherim*), a common West Semitic noun meaning "shrine" or "sacred grove." Evidence that *asherah* was not the name of a goddess is also found in the Bible, where *asherim* are described as being "built," "made," "set up" and "installed."

As such, these inscriptions refer not to God's wife, but rather to "his shrine," presumably holy places beneath large trees, or small constructions that had been dedicated to Yahweh. Thus, the Khirbet el Qom text, which reads, "Blessed be Uryahu by Yahweh and [blessed be] the boundaries of his estate by his *asherah*," commemorates a provincial shrine built to Yahweh on the author's lands. A similar shrine dedication is likely reflected in the Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscription, which reads, "I have blessed you to Yahweh of Samaria and his *asherah*."

^v DR. ZE'EV MESHEL AND AVRAHAM HAI. References to Yahweh and "his *asherah*" in the famous Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet 'Ajrud (shown here) inscriptions have led many scholars to postulate that the Israelite God had a divine consort named Asherah. This goddess, however, is little more than a scholarly invention, resulting from the confusion of the Canaanite goddess Ashtoreth with the similar-sounding word *asherah* (plural, *asherim*), a common West Semitic noun meaning "shrine" or "sacred grove." Evidence that *asherah* was not the name of a goddess is also found in the Bible, where *asherim* are described as being "built," "made," "set up" and "installed."

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^{vi} GIOVANNI COLONNA. Colonna interpreted the rooms, each of which measured about 6 x 9 ft, as quarters for temple prostitutes, perhaps validating the comment of the later Roman satirist Lucilius that Pyrgi was well known for its "harlots."

^{vii} See Stephen Goranson, "[7 vs 8: The Battle Over the Holy Day at Dura-Europos](#)," *Bible Review* 12:04

^{viii} FROM M. TORELLI, *THE ETRUSCANS* (RIZZOLI, 2001). TEMPLE PLEASURES. At the coastal Etruscan site of Pyrgi, north of Rome, excavator Giovanni Colonna identified two temples dating to c. 500 B.C.E., the smaller of which (labeled Temple B in photo) was dedicated to the Etruscan goddess Uni (Phoenician Ashtoreth) and featured at least 17 small rooms along the temple's southern *temenos* wall. Colonna interpreted the rooms, each of which measured about 6 x 9 ft, as quarters for temple prostitutes, perhaps validating the comment of the later Roman satirist Lucilius that Pyrgi was well known for its "harlots."

^{ix} COURTESY GIOVANNI COLONNA. The complex featured at least 17 small rooms along the temple's southern *temenos* wall (highlighted on plan).

^x See Philip J. King, "[Circumcision: Who Did It, Who Didn't and Why](#)," **BAR** 32:04.

^{xi} YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, DURA-EUROPOS COLLECTION. SLAVES TO THE TEMPLE. Only steps from the main synagogue of the important trading town of Dura-Europos on the Euphrates was a temple dedicated to Adonis and the Aramaic goddess of love, Atargatis. Fronting the entrance to

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the temple were small rooms (highlighted on plan), many with low benches lining their walls and wine amphorae and jar-stands sunk into the floors. The rooms were used primarily for sacred meals and ritual drinking but may also have been reserved for the sexual services of women jailed in the temple for adultery.

^{xiii} *YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, DURA-EUROPOS COLLECTION*. Fronting the entrance to the temple were small rooms (the entrances to the rooms can be seen in the photo), many with low benches lining their walls and wine amphorae and jar-stands sunk into the floors. The rooms were used primarily for sacred meals and ritual drinking but may also have been reserved for the sexual services of women jailed in the temple for adultery.

^{xiii} *FROM A. MERLIN, LE TEMPLE D'APOLLON À BULLA REGIA (LEROUX, 1908)*. A similar situation prevailed at the nearly contemporaneous temple of Apollo at Bulla Regia in North Africa, where a woman was found buried with an iron collar around her neck with a Latin inscription reading: "Adulteress. Prostitute. Seize (me), because I fled from Bulla Regia."

^{xiv} *WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, N.Y. RITE OF PASSAGE*. In this relief from the Old Kingdom tomb of Ankhmahor, vizier of Pharaoh Teti (ruled 2345–2333 B.C.E.), in Saqqara, Egypt, a seated priest is shown circumcising a standing youth during a ceremony marking the boy's passage into manhood. For ancient Egyptians and many Semitic peoples, male circumcision, whether performed at puberty or eight days after birth as in the Biblical tradition (*Genesis 17:12*), was a once-in-a-lifetime rite, sometimes carried out in large groups and typically accompanied by celebrations and festivals.