

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Sacred Prostitution in the Story of Judah and Tamar

BAR STAFF

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*Edward Lipiński on the influence of Canaanite Ashtoreth worship in
ancient Israel*



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. In most translations of the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38), Tamar is described as a cult prostitute. As Edward Lipiński argues, however, there is nothing in the story of Judah and Tamar to suggest sacred prostitution was involved. While temple prostitutes were part of Canaanite Ashtoreth worship, they were not a feature of Israelite religion.

Sacred prostitution was common throughout the ancient world and was particularly associated with Ashtoreth worship, one of the chief Canaanite goddesses. While many scholars have assumed sacred prostitution was practiced in ancient Israel, too, the **BAR** article [“Cult Prostitution in Ancient Israel?”](#) by Edward Lipiński reveals that neither the Bible nor archaeology provides any clear evidence that Israelite religion incorporated the sexual rites of Ashtoreth worship.

Some Biblical scholars, for example, have interpreted the story of Judah and Tamar as a case of sacred prostitution. According to Genesis 38, [the unsuspecting Judah mistook his](#)

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[daughter-in-law Tamar for a veiled “prostitute”](#) (Hebrew *zonah*). For her services, [Judah promised Tamar a sheep](#) and gave her his seal as assurance the debt would be honored. 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”). As Lipiński argues, however, there is nothing in the story of Judah and Tamar to suggest sacred prostitution was involved; rather, it seems that *zonah* and *qedeshah* were synonyms and that the latter has simply been misinterpreted by translators.

Qedeshah likely originally referred to “consecrated maidens” who were employed in Canaanite and later Phoenician temples devoted to [Ashtoreth worship](#). As such, the Biblical writers came to associate the fertility rites of Ashtoreth worship with sacred prostitution, and the word *qedeshah*, therefore, came to be used as a pejorative term for “prostitute.”

Indeed, archaeology has shown that Ashtoreth worship and associated rites of sacred prostitution were common throughout the ancient Mediterranean. At the Etruscan site of Pyrgi, excavators identified a temple dedicated to Ashtoreth that featured at least 17 small rooms that may have served as quarters for temple prostitutes. Similarly, at the site of [Dura-Europos on the Euphrates](#), archaeologists uncovered a temple dedicated to Atargatis, the Aramaic goddess of love. Fronting the entrance to the temple were nearly a dozen small rooms, many with low benches. Although the rooms were used primarily for sacred meals, they may also have been reserved for the sexual services of women jailed in the temple for adultery. Such a situation prevailed at the temple of Apollo at Bulla Regia, where a woman was found buried with an inscription reading: “Adulteress. Prostitute. Seize (me), because I fled from Bulla Regia.”

Sacred prostitution, therefore, existed in much of the ancient world and reflected the ritual practices of Ashtoreth worship. In ancient Israel, however, sacred prostitution was simply a synonym for [harlotry](#). Modern translations often unfortunately give another impression.

© Biblical Archaeology Society, *Bible History Daily*, February 25, 2024. Retrieved March 19, 2024.
<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-israel/sacred-prostitution-in-the-story-of-judah-and-tamar>

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