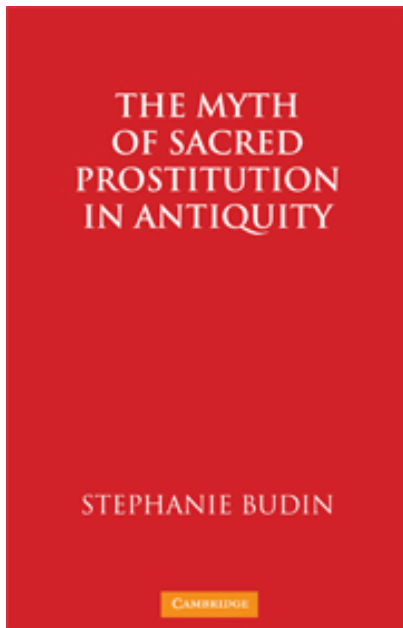


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Budin, Stephanie Lynn

The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity

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Mayer Gruber
Ben-Gurion University
Beer-Sheva, Israel

Mahatma Gandhi is alleged to have stated, “First they ignore you; then they laugh at you; then they fight you; then you win.” When I was informed that the classicist Stephanie Lynn Budin had published a book proving that, as she states on line 1 of page 1 of *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity*, “SACRED PROSTITUTION NEVER EXISTED IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST” (capitals original), my initial reaction was that indeed I had arrived at stage four of the process described by Gandhi in the proverb quoted above. Consequently, when I was asked by the editors of *Review of Biblical Literature* to review this book, I responded most enthusiastically with a chance to celebrate, as it were, the acceptance of my thesis first propounded at a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in November 1978 in a Cambridge University Press book dealing with the allegations of “sacred prostitution” in ancient Canaan, ancient Israel, and ancient Mesopotamia, as well as the Greco-Roman world.

In fact, I would never be so bold as to suggest that sacred prostitution by whatever definition never existed in ancient Western Asia for the simple reason that this would be an *argumentum ex silentio*. In my series of publications on the subject, which appeared in

the years 1983–2005,¹ I was most careful never to deny the possibility that two or more Israelites, Ugaritians, Babylonian, or Assyrians had engaged in sexual intercourse as a religious rite at some time in early or late antiquity. This is not the sort of thing that one can prove or disprove by either anepigraphic archaeology or the rereading of the published and unpublished corpora of texts in Ugaritic, Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic, Akkadian, and other languages of the ancient Near East. Nor can it be proven or disproven by rereading and retranslating Herodotus's *Histories* 1.199.

My own claims remain much more modest: First, the four biblical texts—Gen 38:21, 22; Deut 23:18; and Hos 4:14—in which many scholars have found corroboration of the belief that female sacred prostitutes were found in ancient Israel or, more precisely, in the sacred literature inherited from ancient Israel, do not support the allegation. Second, there is no evidence that either the *qadesh* (plural *qedeshim*) mentioned in 1 Kgs 14:24; 15:12; 22:47; 2 Kgs 23:7 and also in Deut 23:18 and possibly Job 36:14 were male cultic prostitutes or that the Ugaritic *q-d-sh* (etymological but not necessarily semantic equivalent of Hebrew *qadesh*) engaged in either heterosexual or homosexual intercourse or even foreplay as part of his job description, marital obligations, or leisure activities. The only specific activity attributed to the Ugaritic *q-d-sh* is that of cultic singer.² While Budin repeats this assertion (46), she seems not to know that I had made this point six years before any of the authorities she cites. However, there is no way she could not have known this, as my 1983 article is summarized on page 134 of my 1986 publication, and the latter article is, for totally unknown reasons, the only one of my studies that is cited by Tikva Frymer-Kensky in support of the thesis that cultic prostitution in the ancient Near East is a scholarly myth,³ and that is a work whose authority Budin cites in support of her thesis that “cultic prostitution never existed in the ancient Near East” and in support of

1. Mayer I. Gruber, “The *qadesh* in the Book of Kings and in Other Sources” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 52 (1983): 167–76; idem, “Hebrew *qedeshah* and Her Canaanite and Akkadian Cognates,” *Ugarit Forschungen* 18 (1986): 133–48; idem, “The *qedeshah*—What Was Her Function?” [Hebrew], *Beer Sheva* 3 (1988): 45–51; idem, “Women in the Cult according to the Priestly Code,” in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (ed. Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and Ernest S. Frerichs; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 43 nn. 9–10; idem, “Women in the Ancient Levant,” in *Women's Roles in Ancient Civilizations* (ed. Bella Vivante; Westport, Ct.: Greenwood, 1999), 137–38; idem, “Prostitute and Prostitution in the in the Biblical World” [Hebrew], *Zemanim* 90 (2005): 20–29.

2. I made this point in “The *qadesh* in the Book of Kings and Other Sources,” 171. For the benefit of scholars who do not have access to Modern Hebrew, I summarized the Hebrew article in “Hebrew *qedeshah* and Her Canaanite and Akkadian Cognates,” 133 n. 1.

3. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 276 n. 19

her contention that the book reviewed here “presents the evidence that leads to that conclusion” (1).⁴

At this stage it is inexplicable that Budin should have, as it were, reopened the question as to whether cultic prostitution is a datum in biblical Israel and Canaan and as to whether or not it is a fact that *qedeshot* were cultic prostitutes or rather, citing my “Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Biblical World,” “a myth which travels from book to book like a computer virus” (17). Far more serious is the granting of approval by Cambridge University Press and its anonymous referees to the idiosyncratic interpretations that Budin offers for the biblical texts in Genesis, Deuteronomy, and Hosea that have been seen as references to cultic prostitution. Her interpretations defy both context and lexicography. Moreover, her discussion of Deut 23:19 suffers, *inter alia*, from her failure to consider the important study by Elaine Adler Goodfriend.⁵

I was anticipated by Rashi (1040–1105), the most eminent classical Hebrew biblical exegete, who construed *qedeshah* in Gen 38:21–22 and Hos 4:14 as a synonym of *zonah* “prostitute.” This interpretation is required by the context in Gen 38, which speaks of Judah’s having engaged in an act of extramarital intercourse with a veiled lady whom he met at the entrance to Einaim in exchange for a promised *’etnan*, the technical term in Biblical Hebrew for the fee paid to a prostitute for services rendered (Gruber, “Hebrew *qedeshah*,” 135). Budin, on the other hand, argues that when Judah’s emissary returns with the young goat in payment for services rendered and asks “Where is the *qedeshah*?” he is pretending to ask for a priestess rather than a prostitute because, to use Budin’s language, “Hirah is humiliated at the thought of walking around town, carrying a goat, looking for a hooker” (40). This is totally ingenious; it is worthy of ancient rabbinic midrash, and it may even be true (if we assume that the narrative reflects history in the modern sense). However, as we shall see, contrary to Budin, this interpretation is *not* supported by Hos 4:14–15, which also juxtaposes the terms *zonah* “prostitute” and *qedeshah* and treats them as synonyms.

The principal subject in Hos 4 is the allegation that Israelite men engage in extramarital affairs and that they take advantage of pilgrimages to the Yahwistic temples at Gilgal and Beth-aven (the latter place name can mean “house of sin” and is commonly understood to

4. For citation of Frymer-Kensky in the work under review here, see Budin, 93, where she refers to Frymer-Kensky, 200, just a page before Frymer-Kensky’s reference to my 1983 Hebrew article.

5. Elaine Adler Goodfriend, “Could *keleb* in Deuteronomy 123:19 Simply Refer to a Canine?” in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Law, Ritual and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom* (ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 381–97.

be a dysphemism for the most famous Yahwistic temple in Samaria, namely Beth-El, literally “House/Temple of God”) to engage in extramarital affairs while their wives are at home, probably nursing their infant children, as suggested by the putative founder of the ancient Israelite proto-La Leche League, Hannah, who instituted the idea that nursing mothers are exempt from annual pilgrimages to sanctuaries (see Gruber, “Women in the Cult according to the Priestly Code,” 40 n. 5).

The key verses, Hos 4:14–15 read as follows:

I will not punish their daughters for fornicating
And their daughters for committing adultery;
For they themselves turn aside with whores
And sacrifice with prostitutes
And a people that is without sense must stumble
If you are a lecher [Heb. *zoneh*; i.e., a male who engages in extramarital sexual intercourse], Israel...
Do not come to Gilgal,
Do not make pilgrimages to Beth-aven,
And do not swear by Yahweh.

The well-known stylistic device commonly called *parallelismus membrorum* and referred to in medieval Hebrew biblical exegesis as *kephel ha'inyan bemillot* [*sic*; this is medieval Hebrew; it is not grammatically correct Modern Hebrew] *shonot*, that is, “saying the same thing twice in different words,” should make it clear that the terms here translated as whores//prostitutes are understood as interchangeable. The use of the pair of words *zonot//qedeshot* precisely in that order incorporates two other well-known principles of biblical Hebrew stylistics: common word before rare word; and short word before long word. Whenever and wherever either of these rules is violated, the ancient Hebrew writer used the deviation to encode additional information.⁶ There is nothing in these verses or

6. On this latter point, see Gruber, “The *qadesh*,” 175, where the sequence *qedeshah-qadesh* in Deut 23:18 rather than the expected *qadesh-qedeshah* is shown to *corroborate* the distinction between *qadesh* “paracultic functionary” and *qedeshah* “prostitute.” Contrast Joan Goodnick Westenholz, “Tamar, Qedasha, Qadishtu, and Sacred Prostitutes in Mesopotamia,” *HTR* 82 (1989): 249. She calls my distinction between the *qadesh*, who appears to be a cultic functionary with no sexual functions arising from his cultic office, and the *qedeshah*, who engages in noncultic sexual activity in both Gen 38 and Hos 4 as “contrary to reason.” According to Westenholz’s argument that it is contrary to reason to see entirely different roles for the *qadesh* and the *qedeshah*, one would have to assume that Late Hebrew *sedaqah* “charity” and Late Hebrew *sedeq* “justice” are synonyms; this claim would be totally reasonable, according to Westenholz’s logic, but contrary to fact. Likewise, Modern Hebrew usage utilizes the assumption that masculine and feminine forms of the same lexeme are not necessarily synonymous. Typical of the numerous pairs of

anywhere else in Hos 4 that refers to worship of other gods. That is not an issue in Hos 4–14. The belief that God insists on a single standard of marital fidelity for both women and men is an issue for this prophet, who insists that God says that, if men engage in extramarital liaisons while away from home on religious pilgrimage, two things ought to be done to stop it: their daughters and their daughters-in-law should be equally free to engage in extramarital sexual relations without being punished; men who so behave should be banished from Israelite worship just as, according to Isa 1, people who engage in exploitation of the poor should be banished from the temple of Yahweh at Jerusalem.

Budin, on the other hand, contends that the above-quoted passage from Hos 4 “suggests that, like their male counterparts, the *qedeshot* were also non-Yahwistic cult functionaries” (35). She adds, “There is good reason, then to suggest that the *qedeshah* is a cult functionary of some sort” (35). This is exactly what adherents of the cultic prostitution in the biblical world allegation have been saying about the *zonot* in that very same passage in Hosea. However, long before Stephanie Lynn Budin stated that sacral prostitution did not exist in the ancient Near East, numerous biblical and ancient Near Eastern scholars (some of whom are listed in Budin, 333–36) had satisfied themselves with the more limited goals of demonstrating (1) the absence of cultic prostitution in Gen 38 and Hos 4; (2) the lack of evidence that *qedeshah* and its Ugaritic and Akkadian cognates ever refer to cultic prostitution; and (3) systematic examination of the Akkadian texts referring to a female public and sometimes cultic functionary called *qadishtu*. Sadly, Budin has accomplished nothing either in the direction of challenging what has previously been achieved with respect to the first of these two goals or of reexamining the Akkadian texts I systematically analyzed in “Hebrew *qedeshah* and her Canaanite and Akkadian Cognates” (see there, 139–47). In fact, Budin’s treatment of the Mesopotamian material consists of a new translation of one Akkadian wisdom text that mentions *harimtu*, *ishtaritu*, and *kulmashitu*, one lexical text, and a discussion of secondary literature (17–33). Yet her bombastic conclusion (her term, 47) is, “There were no sacred prostitutes in the ancient Near East.”

masculine and feminine forms of the same lexeme with distinct meanings in Modern Hebrew are *hoq* “law”—*huqah* “law code”; *terep* “food”—*terepah* “nonkosher food”; *zebed* “fertilizer”—*zibdah* “yogurt”; *shemesh* “sun”—*shimshah* “window”; *seper* “book”—*siprah* “number”; *miqra* “the Bible”—*miqra’ah* “literary anthology.” As for my contention that cognate lexemes in cognate languages may have distinct meanings, we should cite also the obvious distinction in meaning between *raisin* in French and in English, between English pork and French *porc*, and between English beef and French *boeuf*. It is important to mention Westenholz’s article in this context because Budin cites the latter study on 42, 46 without having noticed Westenholz’s discussion of Gruber, “The *qadesh*.”

The remainder of this book deals primarily with two issues: (1) what prompted Herodotus to describe women who solicited sexual favors in honor of a deity named Myllita (58–92); and (2) the evidence that other ancient and later authorities who claimed that sacred prostitution existed in the ancient Near East were based upon Herodotus (93–333).

Briefly, this book offers new and highly tendentious interpretations of Gen 38 and Hos 4 that have no basis in lexicography, context, or history of religions. It attempts to assert that the author is proving something new with respect to the existence or nonexistence of cultic prostitution in the ancient Near East (so 1), which, she has to admit on the book's final page (336), has already been demonstrated and accepted by numerous scholars.

What she attempts to add is her contention that, just as evidence for sacred prostitution is not found in the *texts* (my emphasis; indeed, Budin does not distinguish between textual evidence and ancient reality) of the ancient Near East, so was there no cultic prostitution in the Greco-Roman world (see 210–59).⁷ As a specialist in Hebrew Scripture and the languages and cultures of ancient Western Asia, I disqualify myself from judging what may be Budin's highly original contribution by way of her idiosyncratic translations of several Greek and Latin texts.

For students and scholars of biblical studies, the target audience of *Review of Biblical Literature*, I cannot recommend this book because it offers nothing of value to them. It presents weird interpretations of biblical texts that defy lexicography and context and an unoriginal treatment of the Ugaritic evidence concerning *qdshm*, which creates the impression that because she possibly does not read Modern Hebrew she had no access to my extensive 1983 discussion. Evidence that she could and should have had access to that article consists of (1) her quoting extensively from my 1986 article in English, which cites and summarizes the earlier Hebrew article; (2) her references to studies by Westenholz and Frymer-Kensky, which discuss my 1983 article in great detail; and (3) her referring to my Hebrew article from 2005. Either she read that article in Hebrew or consulted colleagues who read Modern Hebrew fluently. On page ix she even lists some of these people and the help they gave her. Since she quotes my 2005 Hebrew article, it should be obvious that, had she taken the trouble, she could also have interacted both with my 1983 study concerning the *qadesh* and my 1988 study, which treats in detail the possible and

7. See also Stephanie Lynn Budin, "Sacred Prostitution in the First Person," in *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World* (ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Laura K. McClure; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 77–92; see especially her discussion of the Pindar Fragments 122 ad 123 in Budin, *The Myth*, 112–52; contrast Yulia Ustinova, "A Whore in the Temple: Prostitutes and Courtesans in Ancient Greek Religion" [Hebrew], *Zemanim* 90 (2005): 30–39.

probable identifications of the goddess Mylitta for whose glory, according to Herodotus, every Babylonian woman had to have intercourse with a stranger/foreigner once in her life.⁸

In short, Budin claims to prove what has already been proven and camouflages the evidence for her unoriginality by systematically removing from the index the names of a distinguished group of scholars (some of whose work indeed appears in her bibliography and in the body of the book) who already proved more than a quarter of a century ago that neither Hebrew Scripture nor Akkadian texts mentioning *qadishtu* refer to sacred prostitution.

8. Gruber, “The *qedeshah*—What Was Her Function?” especially 50 n. 25; for Budin’s discussion, see Budin, 91–92.