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## Semeia

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*Semeia* and *Semeia Studies* are sponsored by the Society of Biblical Literature as part of its research and publications program.

*Semeia* was published irregularly in issues numbered consecutively from 1974 to 1979. Since 1980-81 it is published quarterly in August, November, February, and May, but still in issues numbered consecutively. Subscription units consist of four numbers and cost \$25 for SBL or AAR members (\$20 if *Semeia* subscription is paid at the same time as AAR or SBL membership dues); \$35 for non-members and institutions. Members and subscribers outside the U.S., Canada, and Mexico are requested to add a \$5.00 postal surcharge. All payments should be in U.S. currency or its equivalency. Single issues are \$14.95 (\$9.95 to members). Subscriptions should be sent to Scholars Press Membership Services, P.O. Box 15288, Atlanta, GA 30333. Orders for single issues (including multiple-copy orders) should be sent to SCHOLARS PRESS CUSTOMER SERVICES, c/o CUP Services, P.O. Box 6525, Ithaca, NY 14851.

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SEMEIA 46

**NARRATIVE RESEARCH  
ON THE HEBREW BIBLE**

Guest Editors:  
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# THE HARLOT AS HEROINE: NARRATIVE ART AND SOCIAL PRESUPPOSITION IN THREE OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS

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## ABSTRACT

The narrator as artist works within a historically determined social world in which shared understandings of language, gestures, roles, etc. create the repertoire of symbols and senses employed in literary creation. Full appreciation of narrative art consequently requires both literary and social (historical) criticism. This essay attempts to combine the two methodologies by examining the interrelationship of narrative art and social presupposition in three texts having a harlot, or assumed harlot, as a major actor (Gen 38:1-26; Josh 2:1-24; 1 Kgs 3:16-27). Two questions guide the investigation: (1) What is the image of the harlot assumed in the text? and (2) How does that image or understanding affect the construction or narration of the story? The study argues that each of the texts requires as its presupposition a view of the harlot as a marginal figure in the society, tolerated but despised, and that fundamental ambivalence toward the harlot's role is not resolved by any action of the harlot, either in literature or life.

A desire for brevity and alliteration in the title has led me to overextend the meaning of the term "heroine." It is intended here as a cover term for three cases in which a harlot (or assumed harlot) plays a major role in a biblical narrative. My aim in this article is to explore the role of social presupposition in narrative construction or story telling, using the case of the harlot, or prostitute,<sup>1</sup> as an example. I am convinced that literary art and social presuppositions are so interrelated in any literary work that adequate interpretation requires the employment of both literary criticism and social analysis. Neither alone suffices. Each makes assumptions about the other, often leaving them unrecognized and uncriticized. Here I want to focus on their interrelationships.

Narrative art, in whatever form and whatever degree of sophistication,

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depends upon highly selective and purposeful use of language and images. The narratives of the Hebrew Bible, especially those contained within the Pentateuch and Deuteronomistic History, represent a particularly compressed and selective form of story-telling art, in which individual terms or figures must carry far more weight of suggested meaning than in the more expansive and nuanced prose of the modern novel, or even of the novella (ancient or modern). Thus, when a designation such as *zônâ* is attached to a name or a figure, a picture is called up in the reader's or hearer's mind and a range of meanings, attitudes, and associations on which the narrator may draw in constructing or relating the story. The twofold question I want to address in this article is (1) what was the image and understanding of the *zônâ* assumed in each of the narratives? and (2) how was that image or understanding employed by the narrator, or how did it influence the construction or narration of the story?

In my analysis I have set aside the question of historicity, insofar as this was possible without violating the terms of the narrative. That is, I have not made a judgment about the historical claims made by any of the narratives. Each of the narratives I shall examine is presented as the account of a historical event, and historical experience may dictate much of the terms of each narrative. But each is also clearly a literary work that has been shaped in its presentation by social and literary considerations. It is to these that I wish to direct my attention.

In the space allotted to me I can neither give a full literary analysis of each narrative nor a complete portrait of the harlot as she is presented in the biblical texts and other relevant records from the ancient Near East. While I will draw from time to time on a broader study in progress,<sup>2</sup> I will concentrate my attention in this article on the information supplied by the three texts or required for their understanding. My procedure will be to comment on those features of the portrait of the harlot that have significance for the particular text under consideration and thus to compose and develop the picture as I move through the three texts. I will begin, however, with a brief preliminary sketch, summarizing those traits or elements that are essential to the portrait of the prostitute in Israelite society. My treatment of the individual cases will attempt to explain and defend that sketch.

First, definition and terminology. A prostitute, or harlot, is a woman who offers sexual favors for pay (Gagnon:592; cf. Gebhard:75-81).<sup>3</sup> In the Hebrew Bible she is normally designated by the single term *zônâ*, a Qal participle from the root *znh*, used either alone, as a substantive, or attributively.<sup>4</sup> Her social status is that of an outcast, though not an outlaw, a tolerated, but dishonored member of society. She normally has the legal status of a free citizen; where she is a slave, or is otherwise legally dependent, it is not because of her occupation. As a free citizen she may seek the legal protection of the state, and as a woman who is not under the authority of a husband, she may have rights of legal action (e.g., signing contracts) not possessed by

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other women, except hierodules and widows without male guardians. She is typically contrasted to the "normal" woman, i.e., the married woman, from whom she is separated spatially and symbolically, through distinctive dress<sup>5</sup> and habitat. The places and times of her activity maintain distance between her and the married woman. She is a woman of the night, who appears on the streets when honorable women are secluded at home. She approaches strangers and businessmen by the roadside and in the public squares, and she lives in the shadow of the wall, on the outskirts of the city, where the refuse is dumped.<sup>6</sup>

Prostitution is not a universal phenomenon, nor can it properly claim to be the world's oldest profession (Gebhard:76). But it is characteristic of urban society, and more specifically of urban patriarchal society. It is a product and sign of the unequal distribution of status and power between the sexes in patriarchal societies, which is exhibited, among other ways, in asymmetry of sexual roles, obligations, and expectations. This may be seen in the harlot's lack of a male counterpart. Female prostitution is an accommodation to the conflicting demands of men for exclusive control of their wives' sexuality and for sexual access to other women. The greater the inaccessibility of women in the society due to restrictions on the wife and the unmarried nubile women, the greater the need for an institutionally legitimized "other" woman. The harlot is that "other" woman, tolerated but stigmatized, desired but ostracized.

A fundamental and universal feature of the institution of prostitution wherever it is found is an attitude of ambivalence. The harlot is both desired and despised, sought after and shunned. Attempts to show changes in attitudes toward prostitutes over time or from one culture to another founder on this point. Despite considerable historical and cultural variation in attitudes, the harlot is never a fully accepted person in any society.<sup>7</sup> What a man desires for himself may be quite different from what he desires for his daughter or wife. One of the earliest and clearest expressions of that fundamental attitude of ambivalence toward the harlot is found in the Gilgamesh Epic. As Enkidu is about to die, he looks back over his life in the civilized world, recalling its pain, and he curses the harlot who initiated him into that world from his former carefree life among the beasts of the steppe. The curse is an aetiology of the harlot as outcast and despised.<sup>8</sup>

Come, prostitute,<sup>9</sup> I shall establish (your) status,<sup>10</sup>  
a status that shall not end for all eternity.

....

May [your lovers] discard (you) when sated with your charms,  
[May those whom] you love [despise(?) . . .] your favors(?).

....

[Dark corners] of the street shall be your home,  
The shadow of the city's wall shall be your station.  
[Men shall piss there in front of] your feet,  
The drunken and thirsty shall slap your face.

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But Shamash, overhearing Enkidu's curse, chides him, reminding him of the fine clothes and food that he had enjoyed and of his companionship with Gilgamesh. All this was the harlot's gift, for which he should be grateful. Enkidu acknowledges the right of Shamash's argument and counters his curse with a blessing. The blessing is an aetiology of the harlot as desired.

May [your lover(?)] (always) return(?) (to you) [even from far away places]  
[Kings, prin]ces, and nobles shall love [you].  
No one shall slap his thighs (to insult you)  
[Over you the old man will] shake his beard.  
[. . . the young(?)] will unloose his girdle for you.  
[So that you shall receive from him(?)] lapis and gold.  
[May he be paid] back (who) pissed in front of you,  
[May his home be emptied(?)], his filled storehouse.  
[To the presence of] the gods [the priest] shall let you enter.  
[On your account] a wife will be forsaken, (though) a mother of seven.

I. Genesis 38:1-26

Let us turn now to the biblical narratives. Genesis 38 stands as an independent tradition unit within the Joseph story. It recounts a complex story concerning Judah, with a number of aetiological motives. The centerpiece of the chapter, however, and the bulk of the narrative is a fully developed story in itself with its own internal dynamics in which aetiological elements are lacking or play a minor role (cf. Skinner; von Rad; Speiser; Westermann).

The scene is set in the Judean Shephelah in the period before the Israelite settlement, a time when Israel's ancestors lived side by side with the people of the land and intermarried with them, apparently without censure. "At that time," the narrator informs us, "Judah went down from his brothers" and sojourned with an Adullamite named Hirah, marrying a Canaanite woman, who bore him three sons (vv 1-5). For the eldest, Er, Judah selects a wife named Tamar,<sup>11</sup> a woman of the region. But Er dies at the hand of God as does the second son, Onan, who refuses to fulfill the duty of the levirate toward his brother's widow (v 8). Judah, now fearful of losing his only remaining son, sends Tamar home to her father's house, instructing her to remain a widow until the third son, Shelah, grows up. And as a dutiful daughter-in-law she goes, a widow, yet "betrothed" and therefore not free to remarry. Judah in his anxiety has sealed her fate, for he intends her widowhood to be permanent.

With Tamar's dismissal, attention is turned to Judah. Years pass and his wife dies. And when his mourning is over, he sets out with his friend Hirah to attend to the shearing of his flocks at Timnah in the hill country (v 12). The report of Judah's journey is a signal to Tamar, who has perceived her father-in-law's design and is unwilling to accept the fate he has determined

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for her. His journey provides an opportunity for Tamar to act. But the meaning of her action and her intention in it is not spelled out by the narrator, who simply reports as an observer and thus elicits the reader's speculation. "She put off her widow's garments," he says, "covered herself with a 'veil' and wrapped herself in it (*wattēkas baššā 'îp wattit 'allāp*) and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah" (v 14).<sup>12</sup>

The language is deliberately opaque and suggestive. The narrator does not say that Tamar dressed as harlot. That is the inference that Judah makes—and is intended to make—but the narrator leaves it to Judah to draw the conclusion. "When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a harlot because she had covered her face" (*wayyahšēbehā lēzônâ kî kissētâ pānē(y)hā*) (v 15).<sup>13</sup> His action is presented as following naturally from that inference: "[So] he went over to her by the roadside" and propositioned her. And Tamar, in keeping with her assumed role, asks what her favors are worth to him (v 16). Judah offers her a kid from his flock, but Tamar demands a pledge until he is able to send it, specifying his signet, cord, and staff, which he gives her. With the essential negotiation completed, the critical action begins: "He lay with her and she conceived by him" (v 18b). The scene concludes with the note that she departed, removing her veil and resuming her widow's garments (v 19). How are we to understand this scene of entrapment and why does it succeed? Tamar, the victim of her father-in-law's injustice, has been denied the means of performing her duty toward her deceased husband and for achieving a sense of womanly self-worth in bearing a child. Her bold and dangerous plan aims to accomplish that end by the agency of the man that has wronged her.<sup>14</sup> It satisfies both duty and revenge. It is not a husband she wants, but an heir for Judah, and so she approaches the source. It is intercourse she wants, not marriage. Her plan works because of the role she has chosen to accomplish this end. The features of the story that make it work involve commonly held presuppositions concerning the prostitute, some peculiar to the Israelite/Canaanite setting of this story, others widely shared.

First, Judah is needy and therefore vulnerable. At the point where the critical action begins, he is depicted as recently bereaved and hence in need of sexual gratification or diversion. The notice about his wife's death is certainly meant to provide this motivation. He is also a traveler, away from home, desiring entertainment and free to seek it in a strange place. Prostitution is typically offered (and often organized) as a service to travelers, a tourist attraction. Attention is directed to the activity rather than the actor(s). The act is basically anonymous; anyone can provide the service. In this case, that common aspect of anonymity is reinforced by a custom of concealment of the face—at least in public—and apparently also in the execution of the encounter. (A dimly lit room would have aided concealment, though it is unclear from this account just where the union took place). The harlot's veil is a specific feature of this story and an essential prerequisite for the construction of the tale, or at least for this plan of action. It cannot be universalized,



never.<sup>15</sup> Tamar's position is probably just as telling as her garb. A lone woman sitting by the road without apparent business would probably be enough to suggest the wares she was selling.

The climax of the narrative comes, as the text says, "about three months later" (or, at the end of the first trimester), when it is reported to Judah that his daughter-in-law Tamar has "played the harlot" (*zānētā*) and "moreover . . . is with child by harlotry" (*hārā lizēnūnīm*, v 24). Now the English translation which I have quoted from the RSV contains a word play that is absent in the Hebrew, or it sharpens a word play that is not focused in the original. The translation of the verb *zānā* as "play the harlot" is, I think, mistaken (Bird, 1981), but it points to an important socio-linguistic consideration in the language employed to describe Tamar's disguise and her crime. The English translation acknowledges that Tamar "played the harlot" when, in fact, no one but the reader knows that that is literally true. What the Hebrew means in its use of the verb and the qualifying noun *zēnūnīm* is that Tamar, who is bound by her situation to chastity, has engaged in illicit intercourse, the evidence of which is her pregnancy. The Hebrew word *zānā*, like its Arabic cognate, covers, I believe, a wide range of extramarital sexual relations, including both fornication and adultery, although its biblical usage appears focused on the activity of the unmarried woman.<sup>16</sup> In any case, when Judah hears this report of his daughter-in-law's unfaithfulness, his response is an immediate unconditioned sentence: "Bring her out and let her be burned!" (v 24).

If the word play in the English translation is overdrawn, the Hebrew use of the common root *znh* in two critical scenes of the narrative is still worthy of note and explanation. A striking contrast is created through use of the same root to describe two situations which occasion very different reactions from Judah. When he perceives that the woman by the road is a *zōnā*, his response is a proposition; when he hears that his daughter-in-law has *zānā*-ed, his response is a sentence of death. He embraces the whore, but would put to death the daughter-in-law who "whored." The irony on which the story turns is that the two acts and the two women are one, and the use of etymologically related terms as the situation-defining terms strengthens the irony. The essential difference between the two uses is the socio-legal status of the woman involved. In the first instance, the term *zōnā* describes the woman's position or profession (prostitute) as well as the activity on which it is based. Thus, it serves as a class or status designation. In the second instance, the verb describes the activity of one whose socio-legal status makes it a crime. The activity is the same in both instances, as the common vocabulary indicates, namely, non-marital intercourse by a woman. In one case, however, it appears to be licit, bearing no penalty; in the other it is illicit, bearing the extreme penalty of death.

This anomaly is explained by the differing social positions of the actors. What is outlawed for the one by her status as a "married" woman is allowed

to the other by her status as an unmarried but non-virgin woman, but not without penalty. The harlot's act is not penalized, I would argue, because her role or occupation is. The harlot is a kind of legal outlaw, standing outside the normal social order with its approved roles for women, ostracized and marginalized, but needed and therefore accommodated.<sup>17</sup> A stigma is always attached to her role and her person, however desired and tolerated her activity. But she does not bear the stigma alone, although only she is legally ostracized; she passes a measure of it on to her patrons. The cost to the man is admittedly slight and may be understood in different ways, from contamination to humiliation or intimidation. For the harlot not only demands a price, she controls the transaction, as is so well illustrated in our narrative (is this to be understood as a reversal of the normal sex roles?). There is a degree of opprobrium about the whole affair, and a degree of risk for the man, who may be trapped, duped, or "taken." Thus, ambivalence pervades the whole relationship and is, as I argued earlier, a fundamental feature of the institution.

In my analysis of the narrative plot and of the harlot's role within it I omitted a scene which has heavily influenced most discussions of this chapter and is frequently made the central point. The scene is important to our understanding of the narrative, and of the harlot, but it has been over-interpreted and misinterpreted, I believe, precisely because insufficient attention has been given to narrative art in its analysis.

When Judah sends back the kid by his friend the Adullamite and attempts to reclaim his pledge, the friend cannot find her and so inquires of the men of the place (MT: "her place"): "Where is the *qēdēšâ* who was at Enaim by the wayside?" They reply, "There has been no *qēdēšâ* here" (v 21). Hirah then returns to Judah, repeating their answer verbatim.

What are we to make of this shift in terms? Have we misread Tamar's action? Did she intend to represent herself as a hierodule, a cultic "prostitute," who might be understood to have some particular association with festivals of the yearly cycle such as sheepshearing? I think not, though it is conceivable that at some stage in the development of this story such an association might have been made. The substitution of terms in this passage is not accidental, and the interchange must indicate some kind of association between the two figures. But there is no justification for the common collapse of the two nor for assuming that the word hierodule is the determining designation for understanding Judah's action.<sup>18</sup>

The term *qēdēšâ* is confined to the interchange between Hirah the Adullamite and the men of the place. Two possible factors might affect this usage: first, the designation of the woman as a hierodule<sup>19</sup> might reflect the narrator's view of Canaanite usage, for it occurs only in the conversation of non-Israelites; second, it is language used in public speech. Judah's original action was prompted by a private assessment: "he thought her to be a harlot" and acted accordingly. But the search for the shady lady requires public

inquiry. The decisive clue to the substitution of terms is given, I believe, in Judah's response to Hirah's report. "Then let her keep the things as her own," he says, "*lest we be laughed at*" (lit. "lest we become an object of contempt"). But what might be the reason for contempt or ridicule? A sacred act of love-making with the hierodule of a Canaanite cult? Hardly, for the people of the place are understood to be Canaanites and would find no cause for contempt in that. Being outwitted, and more specifically "taken," by a common prostitute? Surely.

Here the issue of opprobrium surfaces. Judah, a man of standing, who has surrendered his insignia to a prostitute in a moment of weakness, does not go back in person to retrieve his goods, but sends a friend, a man of the region, to inquire discreetly of the local inhabitants. Hirah knows how to handle the situation; he uses a euphemism—comparable to our substitution of the term "courtesan" for the cruder expression "whore"—(a substitution of court language in the latter instance, cult language in the former). Here we have an example, I think, of a common contrast between private, or "plain," speech (which may also be described as coarse) and public, or polite, speech (which may also be described as elevated).<sup>20</sup> Such an interchange of terms does not require that the two have identical meanings, especially since euphemism is a characteristic feature of biblical Hebrew usage in describing sexual acts and organs. A foot or a hand is not a phallus, though both terms are used with that meaning. And a *qēdēšâ*, I would argue, is not a prostitute, though she may share important characteristics with her sister of the streets and highways, including sexual intercourse with strangers.<sup>21</sup>

## II. Joshua 2:1-24

The story of Rahab in Joshua 2, like the story of Tamar in Genesis 38, is a distinct literary unit, with its own tradition, clearly set off from the surrounding material. While the history of the Rahab story, in both its literary and pre-literary stages, is more complex than the Tamar story, and while an attempt has been made to integrate the tale into the now dominant account of the miraculous fall of Jericho, the narrative in Joshua 2 can still be analyzed as a discrete literary unit, and the apparent duplication or displacement in the narrative which has taxed many interpreters does not substantially affect my analysis. Only the Deuteronomistic editing, which is both obvious and limited, constitutes a reinterpretation of the tradition that represents a significant literary variant.<sup>22</sup>

The account opens with the sending of two spies from the Israelite camp at Shittim and closes with their return. The spies are instructed by Joshua in the first verse of the chapter to "see the land"<sup>23</sup> (i.e., the land West of the Jordan), which Israel is poised to attack. In the concluding verse, the returned spies report that "Yahweh has given the whole land into our hands; and moreover all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted because of us"

(RSV; NEB "panic stricken," v 24). That language, augmented by the Deuteronomistic editor in the reference to the peoples' response,<sup>24</sup> presupposes the institution or ideology of holy war, in which an assurance of victory is required from Yahweh before the battle can take place. But the assurance which the spies offer is given without consultation of a priest or other oracle, by spies whose mission has been simply to spy out the land. We might assume then that the assurance of victory is an inference from what they have seen. But what lies between the opening and closing sentences is no account of a secret reconnoitering of the land, as commissioned, but the account of a single encounter in Jericho, the spies' first stopping place across the Jordan, an encounter from which they escape only by the skin of their teeth, or more precisely, by a lie and a cord. The key figure in their escape and in their knowledge of the land and its inhabitants is the harlot Rahab. In the present form of the story, she is both savior and oracle.

Commentators invariably discuss the role and reputation of Rahab. Two questions shape that discussion: (1) was Rahab a hierodule? and (2) why would the Israelites consort with a prostitute, who is portrayed as a heroine, without apparent censure of her profession or role? Some commentators claim to find a cult legend at the root of the tradition, an aetiology of a sanctuary or of a class of sacred prostitutes which persisted in later Israel (*inter alia*, Gressmann, 1922:136; Hölscher:54-57; Mowinckel:13-15). Even those who can find nothing in the present story to support a cultic identification feel constrained to observe that the term *zônâ* may designate either a sacred or a secular prostitute and is thus ambiguous, leaving either interpretation as a possibility (e.g., Soggin:36; Boling:144; Miller and Tucker:31). The question of Rahab's profession is prompted in part by wonder at her role in the tradition, in which the stigma normally attached to prostitutes is perceived as lacking. Either, it is argued, she cannot have been a common prostitute, or the status of the prostitute must have been higher in Canaanite society, for she appears in the story as a fully accepted member of the society.

In contrast to these opinions, I shall argue that nothing in the story suggests a hierodule and that, conversely, an understanding of Rahab as a harlot is essential to the story. I shall also argue that her portrayal as a heroine in no way cancels the negative social appraisal attached to her role as a harlot.

The narrator begins the account of the spies' mission with a deliberately suggestive lead sentence. "Go, view the land," the spies are instructed, and the report of their action immediately follows: "and they went and came to Jericho<sup>25</sup> and entered the house of a harlot (*bêt- 'iššâ zônâ*), whose name was Rahab, and slept there (*wayyiskēbû šāmmâ*)."<sup>26</sup> The place should probably be understood as an inn or public house, but the narrator clearly wishes to focus attention immediately on the connection with Rahab and especially on her occupation. Thus the designation *'iššâ zônâ* precedes the name as the determining expression following the noun "house." The language is obviously

meant to suggest a brothel, and the following verb, *šākab*, reinforces that suggestion.<sup>27</sup>

The association of prostitutes with taverns or beer houses is well attested in Mesopotamian texts,<sup>28</sup> and it may be surmised that a similar association is assumed in our passage.

As a prostitute he took her in from the street (and) supported her, as a prostitute he married her but gave her back (as separate property) *her tavern* (*Ana ittisu* VIII ii 23–25 [CAD, H:102a]).

When I sit at the entrance of the tavern I (Ishtar) am a loving prostitute<sup>29</sup> (SBH 106:51–53 [CAD, H:101b]).

Indirect testimony to this association comes from §110 of the Laws of Hammurabi, which decrees death for the *nadītu* who enters a tavern.<sup>30</sup> Since the *nadītu* belonged to a class of hierodules who were bound by a rule of chastity and normally cloistered, the kind of activity associated with the place is apparent. In our passage, the “house” is identified as Rahab’s and is clearly not her family home, since her parents and siblings must be brought into *her* house in order to be saved (v 18).<sup>31</sup> In view of her profession, then, it is reasonable to view the house as her place of business.

The narrator’s words about the spies’ approach to their task tantalizes the reader and elicits speculation about the spies’ motive and plan. How is this action meant to serve their mission? What exactly do they think they will do there? Do they hope to obtain information by sleeping with a loose, and presumably, loose-tongued woman? Do they mean to bargain for intelligence from a business woman who will sell anything for a price? Or do they simply hope to overhear the talk of local citizens and travelers who have gathered there or engage them in unguarded conversation over a pitcher of beer? Whatever their precise plan of action may be, they have chosen a natural place to begin their reconnaissance of the land. For the inn, or public house, or brothel, provides them both access and cover. It is a resting place for travelers and a gathering place for all sorts of persons seeking diversion and contacts; strangers will not be conspicuous here and motives will not be questioned. The proprietor’s status also makes the harlot’s house a logical point of entry, for, as an outsider in her own community, the harlot might be expected to be more open, perhaps even sympathetic, to other outsiders than would her countrymen.

But if the spies have chosen their point of entry wisely, they have not gone unobserved. The king of Jericho has been informed of their entry and whereabouts and sends immediately to Rahab, requesting that she hand over the men who have entered her house. Instead, she hides the spies and shrewdly diverts the king’s men with a false report. Here again the ambiguous language of entry/intercourse is employed, first by the king’s messengers who command: “Bring out the men who were going in to you (*habbā’im ’ēlayik*), who entered your house (v 3)”; and then by Rahab, who acknowledges:

“They did indeed come in to me (*bā’û ’ēlay*, v 4).”<sup>32</sup> Thus sexual innuendo is not confined to the opening verses but pervades the whole first scene as an element of narrative intention. Rahab’s action, however, contradicts the expectations aroused by the suggestive language, leaving the reader to speculate about her intentions.

At the end of the opening sentence the reader is meant to ask: why did the spies go to a harlot’s house and what did they do there? At the end of the first scene the reader is left with the question: why did Rahab do what she did? The story has given us no reason to believe that there was any previous relationship between the two parties. What then can explain her action? The reader must speculate—and is invited to do so by the construction of the narrative. But the modern reader must speculate without the “feel” for the situation possessed by the ancient audience. Multiple motives and factors may be involved, either originally or as the result of editorial reinterpretation. Rahab’s response may represent hostility to the king and his cohorts. Perhaps she has been harassed before about her establishment and its clients. If dangerous aliens are found on her premises, she will surely be penalized. Her action may then be interpreted as self-interest, an effort to save her own neck, and/or her business and reputation. Or is a connection to be seen in class affinity or class interest? Are we to understand her act as that of a social outcast among her own people protecting the representatives of an outcast people, an outcast people on the move, that may offer her a new future? I must admit that I find no element in the story to suggest the latter understanding, but I will leave the matter open. In the present form of the narrative, the question of Rahab’s motivation is answered in the following scene. In an eloquent speech, enhanced by the Deuteronomist, Rahab reveals to the spies, whom she has concealed on the roof, the meaning and purpose of her action. She has come to strike a bargain, and now she presents her terms; *hesed* for *hesed*, she requests, my life for yours. By her act of protection, here described as an act of *hesed*, she has established a bond of obligation with the spies. Now she seeks their protection when they shall be in a position to give it, an act of *hesed* on their part, since they are now morally obligated, though not legally bound (Sakenfeld:64–70). Her speech begins with a confession of Yahweh’s mighty acts toward Israel and concludes with a request for an oath of assurance from representatives of Yahweh’s people.<sup>33</sup> The scene ends with the spies’ oath.

In the final scene, Rahab enables the spies to escape by letting them down through a window in the wall, in which she ties a scarlet cord as a sign to the attacking Israelites, so that they will recognize and spare her house. The outcome of this encounter—viz. the saving of all who were in the harlot’s house—is reported in chapter 6, with the aetiological note that Rahab “dwelt in Israel to this day” (6:25).

This account supplies us with further information about the harlot in Israel’s understanding and corroborates features noted in other ancient Near

Eastern texts and in comparative studies. She lives on the outer periphery of the city, where other outcast and low caste groups or professions are commonly located in the ancient city. Her house in the wall (near to the city gate?) would be readily accessible to travelers and easily located. Was the red cord a permanent sign of an ancient red light district, or only specific to this narrative?<sup>34</sup>

It has been argued on the basis of this story that no censure or stigma was attached to the harlot in early Israel—or in Canaanite society—in contrast to later Israel. But this argument misreads the story. The entire account depends upon Rahab's marginal status, in both Canaanite and Israelite societies. Her descendants, persisting in later Israel, form a distinct group, the strange tolerance of which is "explained" by the aetiology of the harlot's loyalty. And it is only because she is an outcast that the men of Israel have access to her (an "honorable" woman would not meet alone with strange men). The narrator has drawn upon popular understanding of the harlot's profession and reputation in the construction of the story and deliberately elicits that understanding in his opening words which place the whole of the subsequent action in a harlot's house. The associations that operate in this story are many and complex, and may never be fully determined by the modern reader, but understanding requires some attempt at specification.

The prostitute's low social status and low reputation are essential, and related, features. The reader does not expect anything from her, or at least not anything of moral strength, courage, or insight. For she is the lowest of the low, and, as Jeremiah's search illustrates, Israel did not expect much from the lowly (Jer 5:4–5). The harlot is viewed as lacking in wisdom, morals, and religious knowledge. Her low status and despised state must be due either to unfortunate circumstance or personal fault, and neither, I think, would elicit much sympathy or charity from an ancient audience. The harlot may be a victim, but she is commonly viewed as a predator, preying on the weakness of men, a mercenary out for her own gain, an opportunist with no loyalty beyond herself, acknowledging no principle or charity in her actions.

These attributes in an enemy may serve the Israelite spies well, though the game they would play with her is a risky one. The story requires no positive assessment of the harlot, no counter to the common portrait, to explain the initial action of the spies, nor, I have suggested, to explain Rahab's action in saving them. For although the harlot lacks wisdom in the popular view, she lives by her wits. She is a shrewd and calculating operator, and men must beware her tricks. Self-interest (here broadened to include her kindred) still plays an important role in the final form of the story and may have played a larger role in the pre-Deuteronomistic version. But while essential to the construction of the tale, it is not the decisive motive. The present form of the story builds on a reversal of expectations. The negative presuppositions are required precisely for their contribution to that reversal.

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Rahab does not act as we expect her to act when she protects the spies. Self-interest alone cannot explain her commitment, for the risk of siding with an unknown force against one's own people is too great to ascribe solely to that motive. Either faith or discernment, or both, is required to explain such unproved loyalty (*hesed*), and for that there is no place in the ruling stereotype of the harlot. But if the harlot as heroine involves a conflict of expectations, it is also a recognizable subtype of the harlot in literature (and presumably also in life), a romantic antitype to the dominant image: the whore with the heart of gold, the harlot who saves the city, the courtesan who sacrifices for her patron.<sup>35</sup> Her action, which is praiseworthy in itself, is the more so for being unexpected and unsolicited. In her display of loyalty, courage, and altruism, she acts out of keeping with her assumed character as a harlot and thus reveals her true character as a person. But this does not normally lead to a change in her status, or a change in attitudes toward harlots. The determining negative image of the harlot is not fundamentally challenged by the counterimage, but maintained. For the harlot is never allowed to become a good wife, but only a good harlot, a righteous outcast, a noble-hearted courtesan, the exception that proves the rule—just as Robin Hood does not define the type of the bandit, but only the antitype.

Rahab is a heroine because she protects the Israelite spies and, as a consequence, contributes to Israel's victory. If the LXX preserves an original variant, she may have been credited originally with enabling the Israelites to breach the wall and hence with handing over her city to the invaders, a motif which is closely paralleled in two classical texts pointed out by Hans Windisch (189–198).<sup>36</sup> In the present form and setting of the story, the deliverance of the city to Israel is attributed to Yahweh's miraculous action, and Rahab's role is that of an oracle rather than an instrument of that action (her deliverance of the spies may be taken as a kind of proleptic sign of Israel's victory). The Deuteronomistic redaction of the chapter has made Rahab's speech the center of the story. Rahab is here the pagan confessor, the one who discerns what others fail to see, and the one who commits her life to the people of Yahweh. She is wiser than the king of Jericho, and also more clever. Like the lowly Hebrew midwives, she outwits the king. Like them, she is bold in rejecting an unrighteous command. Like them, she is given a house and a name in Israel and a story to perpetuate her memory, while the king she opposed remains nameless and forgotten.

The Israelite author has made of the harlot of Jericho a heroine of faith and a friend of Israel. I have assumed that the story depends on a reversal of expectations. Others have argued that it could also be explained by unnoted affinities, by positive expectations that might serve to qualify the predominantly negative expectations of the harlot. A parallel might be drawn by the narrator—and an affinity recognized—between the low or outcast estate of the harlot of Jericho and the low and outcast estate of the band of escaped slaves beyond the Jordan. While Israel's petition to the kings in the



ansjordan was met only by uncomprehending belligerence, their approach to the harlot of Jericho elicits immediate reception and a pledge of support. Rahab knows what the kings do not know, that the Lord is with this outlaw band and no power can stand against them. And so the wise harlot sides with the outcasts whose day is dawning on the Eastern horizon. I find that construction theologically appealing, but I cannot now find historical or literary evidence that would convince me of its plausibility.

The story of Rahab depicts a figure identified with a Canaanite milieu, and a group identified by her name, persisting, anomalously, in later Israel. I find no suggestion of cultic identification either in the narrative of Joshua 2 or in the aetiological note of Joshua 6. It is a clan legend, not a cult legend, memorializing an individual and her family, not a sanctuary or cultic institution. An Israelite lineage, not a class of hierodules, traces its ancestry to this heroine. The harlot designation of its eponym suggests an outcast status for the group, which requires explanation. The story provides the explanation: it was because of the *hesed* of Rahab toward our ancestors that her clan dwells among us today.

### III. 1 Kings 3:16-27

If the harlot of Joshua 2 and the supposed harlot of Genesis 38 are depicted in Canaanite settings, the existence of prostitution as a recognized institution in Israel is also well attested.<sup>37</sup> Relative incidence is impossible to judge and so are changes in attitudes. If Israelite religion censured the institution, it was still accompanied by the same attitudes of ambivalence displayed in cultures more open to its acceptance. And the basic stereotypes and presuppositions still hold, as we can see from various biblical witnesses. An instructive example from the period of the monarchy is found in the famous story of Solomon's judgment (1 Kings 3:16-27).<sup>38</sup>

The story concerns a case of rival claims brought by two harlots (*nāšîm zōnôt*, v 16) who are described as living together in one house, probably to be understood as a brothel because of the reference to "strangers" in v 18.<sup>39</sup> Both give birth, according to the story, within three days of each other. The women are alone at the time with no others<sup>40</sup> in the house — an unlikely situation in a normal household, but one essential to the story and the case it presents; for as they are harlots and as they are alone, there are no witnesses to the incident they describe, and no husbands or kinsmen to defend the claims of the women or to arbitrate for them. Thus it is a case of one woman's word against another and, more specifically, one harlot's word against another, that is, the words of women whose word cannot be trusted. For the harlot is characterized in the ruling stereotype as a woman of smooth and self-serving speech. One does not expect truth from such as these. And so the case that is presented to Solomon is a case to test the wisest judge. The harlot plaintiffs assure that.

As the case is laid out before the king, the child of the one dies and she substitutes the child of the other for it. Each now claims the living child as her own, and Solomon must judge whose claim is true. Here Solomon's wisdom is displayed, for he does not attempt to discern the truth through interrogation—a hopeless approach with habitual liars. His wisdom lies in recognizing a condition that will compel the truth. The story—and Solomon's action—appeals to another stereotype of the woman, that of the mother, who is bound by the deepest emotional bonds to the fruit of her womb. That bond will not lie. And so Solomon orders a sword to be brought and the child to be divided between the two claimants. At this the true mother reveals herself by relinquishing her claim in order to spare her child.

Again I would argue that the story does not reveal a generally accepting attitude toward harlots, as some have argued, but depends, rather, on their marginal status and their reputation for lying and self-interest. It is these commonly shared presuppositions about the harlot that make this case an ideal test, one by which extraordinary wisdom might be demonstrated. For the audience is meant to see only two prostitutes, but Solomon in his wisdom sees what is hidden by that stereotype, namely, a mother. In this case two counter images operate, which are normally distinct but are here combined in a single figure. The case is built on the one and resolved on the other.

What I have tried to do in these three examples is to draw out the picture of the prostitute that was operative in each and show how it functioned in the narrative. The author has reckoned in each case with the attitudes and presuppositions that would be called forth from his audience by the use of the term *zônâ*. These presuppositions are, for the most part, subtle and complex and are commonly missed or misread by modern readers who mistake narrative interest for social status, and role in the story for role in life. The harlot heroine, or protagonist, remains a harlot. She is lifted for a moment, as an individual, into the spotlight by the storyteller, but her place remains in the shadows of Israelite society.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I use the terms interchangeably, adopting "harlot" because of its use by the RSV (on its misuse, see below). Cf. Setel (89–91) for a usage that distinguishes the terms.

<sup>2</sup> I am currently engaged in a book-length study of the harlot and the hierodule in Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern literature and society. (I use the term hierodule as a provisional class designation for all types of cult-related women, without regard to their particular duties, activities or status.) While the two figures, or classes of women, are commonly identified and even exchanged in interpretive literature, beginning with the Old Testament's polemical treatment of Canaanite religion and culture, there appears to be little or no evidence of confusion or interchange in the primary ancient texts. In her popular treatment of the origins of prostitution, Gerda Lerner rightly criticizes the confusion of the two classes by most authorities as well as the attempt to derive secular prostitution from sacred sexual service (238–45); but she falls

they to the same confusion in her own treatment of the Mesopotamian *harimtu* ("prostitute") (244-46). This essay does not permit discussion of the important but complex question of the relationship between the harlot and the hierodule or assessment of Lerner's arguments, which are based on secondary sources and misconstrue critical Mesopotamian texts.

<sup>3</sup> Male prostitution, which was homosexual, appears to have been a limited phenomenon and is poorly attested in our sources (cf. Gebhard:80). It is not considered in this article.

<sup>4</sup> I have discussed the problems of the translation and use of this term and the related verbal forms in an unpublished paper (Bird, 1981). Some of the issues are treated in the discussion of the Tamar story below.

<sup>5</sup> See Gebhard (76); cf. also the following texts:

She is not a wife, she is a *harimtu* [prostitute] (JEN 666:14, Nuzi [CAD H:101b]).

A *qadištu* [hierodule] whom no husband has married (must go) bareheaded in the street, must not veil herself.

A *harimtu* [prostitute] must not veil herself (KAV I v 66, Ass. Code § 40 [CAD H:101b; cn. G:152b]\*).

In the latter case, both the harlot and the unmarried hierodule are prohibited from wearing the veil, which is the distinguishing garb of the married woman. The preceding clause requires the married hierodule to veil herself on the street.

\*CAD H:101b mistakenly connects the two clauses cited, understanding the *qadištu* as a class of *harimtu*. Cf. Meek (183).

<sup>6</sup> On the harlot's habitat, note the following:

If a man's wife has not borne him children but a harlot (from) the public square (Lipit-Ishtar Code §27 [Kramer 1955:160]; cf. §32).

If someone regularly approaches a *harimtu* at a streetcrossing (CT 39 45:30, SB Alu [CAD H:101b]).

Cf. also Sjöberg (133-37) and Oppenheim (41).

<sup>7</sup> Attempts to compare attitudes and incidence of prostitution in Canaanite and Israelite society or in different periods of Israelite history are futile, because the data do not permit statistical comparison and because the different literary genres in which the references are preserved display quite different pictures of the harlot and attitudes toward her (e.g., Proverbs offers practical advice to men, stressing the pocketbook, while Priestly legislation is concerned with the harlot as ritually unclean and her contacts as defiling).

<sup>8</sup> The translation and interpretation of the following texts from the Gilgamesh Epic (VII, iii, 6-22 and iv, 1-10) is based on Oppenheim (40-41) and Speiser (1955:86-87). Cf. Tigay (170-72).

<sup>9</sup> The term *šamhatu*, which is interchanged with *harimtu* ("prostitute") in the texts relating to Enkidu and the harlot, is treated as a proper noun by Tigay (171). Speiser translates "harlot-lass" (1955:74-75) or simply "lass" (86), noting the etymological meaning "pleasure girl" (74 n. 23).

<sup>10</sup> Oppenheim's rendering of the phrase *ši-ma-tu lu-šim-ki*, conventionally translated "I will decree (your) fate."

<sup>11</sup> Heb. "Palm," a fertility symbol. The symbolism in the text is far richer and the literary art more subtle and complex than my limited analysis is able to convey.

<sup>12</sup> The location is uncertain (cf. ancient Versions, and commentaries), but unnecessary for our analysis.

<sup>13</sup> The "veil" may have been understood immediately by the hearers as a harlot's apparel, but it is more likely that the term is meant to be more general in its application and more ambiguous in the author's use. By suggesting, but not specifying, a harlot's garb, the narrator makes of her act both an act of concealment and an act of invitation.

<sup>14</sup> Tamar is legally helpless; therefore she must move outside the law to accomplish what duty (for her the higher "law") demands of her.

<sup>15</sup> It is useless to argue from the Middle Assyrian Laws (cf. n. 5) to practices in Canaan/Israel, since dress is a matter of local or regional custom. Restrictions or prescriptions in dress are generally meant to distinguish the married or betrothed woman from all other classes of women, saying, in effect, "hands off!" That the harlot was not always veiled in Israel is suggested by Jeremiah's reference to the "harlot's brow" (Jer 3:3).

<sup>16</sup> According to Wehr, Arabic *zanā* has the meaning "to commit adultery, fornicate, whore." Cf. *zīnan*: "adultery, fornication;" *zīnā*: "adultery, fornication;" *zānin*: "fornicator, adulterer;" *zāniya*: "whore, harlot, adulterous." See Mernissi (24–25). While the activity designated by this root is usually understood as illicit, that description does not give adequate account of the differences in attitudes and sanctions related to the sex and status of the actors. See below.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Niditch has explained this anomalous position of the prostitute by using the term "liminal," as employed by Victor Turner: "That which is liminal is that which is betwixt and between nearly (*sic*) defined categories. A harlot falls between the two allowable categories for women. She is neither an unmarried virgin, nor a non-virgin wife" (147 n. 13). As a liminal character, outside the social order, Niditch argues, the harlot "belongs to a special class of women who can 'play the harlot' without being condemned." "In effect," she continues, "one could fall between the proper categories and survive, once that outside betwixt-and-between status was itself institutionalized and categorized" (147).

While Niditch's analysis of women's roles and of the harlot's status in ancient Israelite society corresponds closely in substance to my own (made independently in an unpublished paper [Bird, 1980]), I have retained my original characterization of the harlot as a "legal outlaw," because I want to emphasize the ambivalence or conflict in attitudes toward the prostitute and the fact that she is both freed and constrained by her position.

<sup>18</sup> Von Rad's interpretation is, unfortunately, typical of this type of reasoning, which invariably appeals to Herodotus: "Tamar . . . does not pretend to be a harlot as we think of it, but rather a married woman who indulges in this practice [sacrifice of chastity in the service of the goddess of love], and Judah too thought of her in this way" (354–55). Cf. Astour (185–96).

<sup>19</sup> There is no justification for RSV's translation of "harlot" here.

<sup>20</sup> Speiser (1964:300) is one of the few commentators who has recognized this. See now Alter (9).

<sup>21</sup> Whatever the reasons for the identification of these two marginal classes of women, it is essential to maintain the linguistic distinctions made in the Hebrew. See n. 2 above.

<sup>22</sup> Noth's analysis (1953) remains basic. See also Boling; Soggin; Gray 1967; and Hertzberg. On the question of sources, see further Tucker (13–14) and Mowinckel (33–34).

<sup>23</sup> Omitting "and Jericho" with LXX, Noth (1953:24) and NEB, as displaced from the following clause (where LXX reads it) or secondarily introduced to explain the following account, which concerns only Jericho.

<sup>24</sup> *wēgam-nāmōgū kol-yōšēbē hā'āres mippānēnū* (24b) is a Deuteronomistic phrase that picks up the words of Rahab's speech: *wēkī nāmōgū kol-yōšēbē hā'āres mippēnekem* (9bβ), the main piece of Deuteronomistic composition in the chapter (Tucker:70).

<sup>25</sup> See n 23. Cf. LXX, which reads Jericho here, but also has a longer text.

<sup>26</sup> There is no justification for RSV's "lodged," which eliminates the double entendre in the Hebrew. It rests, however, on ancient precedent; the Old Greek eliminated the sexual intimation by employing *kataluein*: "lodge" (Liddell-Scott), a verb that normally represents the Hebrew root *lwn/lyn* in LXX and is used only here to translate *škb* (Hatch-Redpath).

<sup>27</sup> *Bêt zônā* may be a technical term for a brothel. Cf. Jer 5:7, "they committed adultery and trooped to the harlot's house (*bêt zônā*); Ezek 16:41, *wēšārēpū bāttayk bā'ēš . . . wēhšbattik mizzônā*: "they shall burn your houses . . . ; I will make you stop playing the harlot" (the whole section, beginning in v 35, is addressed to Israel as a harlot). If *bêt zônā* is a technical term, then the insertion here of the word "woman" into the construct may represent a weakening of the term in the direction of an individual's house: it was the house of a woman who was a harlot—or a promiscuous woman. It is difficult to judge the force of *'iššā zônā*, which appears as a frequent

variant of *zônâ* used alone. But however the compound term is interpreted, its use to identify the house can only be understood as provocative. See vv 3 and 4 and n. 31 below.

The qualifying term *zônâ* is not used again in chapter 2. This is in keeping with the author's style in describing the roles of the main figures when they are first introduced (*'ânâšim mērag-gēlim* and *'iššâ zônâ*, v 1) and thereafter referring to them simply as "the men" and "the woman." The qualifying role designations are employed again in chapter 6, where the characters are reintroduced.

<sup>28</sup> See Jacobsen and Kramer 1953:176, l. 106, and 184 n. 68. Cf. also Bergmann:2-3; Falkenstein:118-19; and CAD A 473 (*aštammu*).

<sup>29</sup> *ḥa-ri-im-tum ra'imtum*. A variant, written as a gloss, *šarraqitum*: "a female thief," gives testimony to the low repute of the place and of the classes associated with it.

<sup>30</sup> The term here is *Ē-KURRUN(NA)* = *bit-kurrunim(?)*: "tavern, ale-house" (cf. Driver and Miles), which may be distinguished from the *Ē-EŠDAM* = *aštammu* "inn." Jacobsen and Kramer (1953:184-85 n. 68) argue that the latter should be understood as "Gasthaus mit Herberge" rather than "bordello," even though it was typically frequented by and owned by the *ḥarimtu* ("prostitute"). They see it as "the social center of the state or village . . . a place in which the inhabitants would typically gather for talk and recreation after the end of work" (185 n. 68).

<sup>31</sup> I take the references to her *bēt-āb* in 2:12, 18 as ancient expansions of the basic story, belonging to the aetiological motif that comes to expression now in 6:17, 22-23, 25. A distinction must be made between her house and her "father's house" (= family or lineage). The latter survives, the former does not.

<sup>32</sup> The Old Greek lacks the suggestive first clause in v 3. MT may be conflate, but the echoing language of v 4 is assumed by all of the Versions and thus is firmly fixed in the tradition.

<sup>33</sup> The oath has been commonly understood in recent literature as a covenant oath (e.g., Boling:147 n. 12). But there is no reference here, or in chapter 6, to a covenant, despite recognizable similarities between this story and the story of the Gibeonites. The oath here functions as a guarantee that the spies will honor their promise to Rahab to spare her family when they take control of the city.

<sup>34</sup> The initial reference to the cord in the phrase, "a strand of *this* scarlet cord" (v 18), suggests that it is already known and associated with the house (though it could also be understood as something brought by the spies). One may surmise that a sign, originally associated with the house in one capacity, has been reinterpreted in the story, giving it a new meaning and function.

<sup>35</sup> The motif is widespread. I have been given examples from Chinese as well as European literature. For a parallel from Classical literature, see below.

<sup>36</sup> Windisch argued that the Rahab story should be seen as one example of a type in which a city is delivered from its enemies (external or internal) by a prostitute and the memory of her action is perpetuated by aetiological legend. His two Classical parallels include a Roman and a Greek legend, the former concerning a prostitute of Capua who remained loyal to Rome when the city fell to Punic invaders, the latter a hierodule of Abydos (referred to as both *hetaira* and *pornē* in the account) who enabled her countrymen to retake the city from enemy occupation.

Windisch notes a common attitude displayed in the transmission of the two stories that honor a common prostitute. As Christian and Jewish interpretation have traditionally shown embarrassment over Rahab's profession and the absence of censure in the biblical narrative, a similar attitude is evident in the Roman tradition in which wonder was expressed at the Senate's action (granting freedom and restoration of possessions) on behalf of a woman of low repute. In the case of Rahab, tradition elevated her by suppressing knowledge of her occupation or making her a convert, allowing her to be a heroine only as an ex-harlot (Windisch:188-192).

<sup>37</sup> The term *zônâ* is used in the following texts relating to the period of the monarchy or later: Lev 21:7, 14; Deut 23:19; 1 Kings 3:16; Isa 1:21; 23:15, 16; Jer 3:3; 5:7; Ezek 16:30, 31, 33, 35, 41; 23:44; Hos 4:14; Joel 4:3; Micah 1:7, 7; Nah 3:4; Prov 6:26; 7:10; 1 Kings 22:38; Prov 23:27; 29:3.

<sup>38</sup> This story has long been recognized as having the character of popular tradition or folk tale and constituting a distinct literary unit. See Gressmann; Gray, 1970:114-16, 127-29; Noth, 1969:44-48; and Montgomery:108-10.

<sup>39</sup> Presumably prostitutes withdrew from active work during advanced stages of pregnancy. Unfortunately, we know virtually nothing about the working conditions of prostitutes in ancient Israel, means of contraception that may have been employed, or arrangements for raising (or disposing of) children. From the story of Jephthah we learn that although he was the son of a harlot, he was apparently raised in his father's household or was at least recognized by his father as a son and potential heir (Judg 11:1-2). The prohibition of priests from marrying harlots (Lev 21:7, 14) implicitly recognizes the practice by others. One may surmise that a man might marry a harlot who had borne him a child, especially a son.

<sup>40</sup> The Hebrew is *zār* (v 18), meaning "stranger," one outside the family. It may be assumed from the fact that they were harlots living together that there would be no husbands present, or other members of a normal family. The use of the word "stranger" here refers, presumably, to clients.

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