

Sex before Stigma: Making Sense of the Absence of Stigmatization in the Spiritual Aspect of Sacred Prostitution in the Ethical Systems of the Ancient World

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Sex, when discussed in a public setting, turns out to be a controversial subject within the context of the hypersensitive inner workings of modern society. It often touches simultaneously upon both extremes of humanity's rational disposition towards sex, namely sex being a matter of free choice on the one hand and being a cultural taboo on the other. One cannot freely talk about sex or practice sex in the public sphere in order for maintaining a sense of civic decency and public morality. This article attempts to look behind the notion of guilt associated with sex in the Judeo-Christian civilization of the West and rise above the prevailing pietistic cultural framework that came to dominate the globe after the conversion of the Byzantine Empire to Christianity. I will, therefore, treat sex as the enshrinement of the said concept in the sanctuary of human religious practice through history. Ritual sex is an artifact of the prehistoric times, which, within the fringes of pagan spirituality, wields an unprecedented influence on the religious life of historic times as well and thus needs to be investigated on a rather larger scale than the amount of scholarship typically dedicated to it to the end of understanding various strands of cultural and religious thought-processes involving sex among the ancient societies. This article will investigate the latter, for it is the ritual-sex-niche of the ancient culture that it is set to explore with maximum effort invested to keep a modern bias from entering the following pages. Besides, a point of focus in the article is the reconstruction of the phenomenology of the sacred and the spiritual articulated through the mystical expression of sexual communion, which will reverberate throughout the article.

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Introduction

There is little as appealing that draws a classical scholar's attention as the mysteries surrounding the institution of sacred prostitution in the times of antiquity. Historians agree that prostitution is one of the oldest professions in the world—if not the oldest (Ditmore 2006). The institutionalization of prostitution came about almost within the same timeframe as man's journey towards proto-civilization and acculturation progressed, because, sociologically as well as psychologically, easy access to sex has been one of the major drives of mankind

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after food and shelter in all human settings since primordial times (Lehmiller 2018). Sex is a powerful driving force, a motivation *par excellence*, in addition to being the only source of reproduction that has fundamentally played a crucial role in the development of mankind's collective consciousness, social practice, family structure, gender preference, and above all the ontogenesis and continuation of human race. Weismann's thesis, for instance, views sex as a powerful driving force, which is accepted in major biological circles. Weismann recognizes this powerful drive not only in humans, but also in all species that have evolved over time to adapt to the changes that have taken place in the environment of earth (Maxwell 2013). The global institutionalization of marriage in its various forms is a fundamental clue to man's ancient desire to mate with the opposite sex for both pleasure and reproduction, which often led members of both genders to so-called infidelity for various reasons, particularly under the sway of "physical attractiveness" and shopping for "good genes" (Barber 2009).

The institution of prostitution has offered man a niche to seek sexual pleasure beyond the normative bounds of society and without having been accountable for the obligations that come with the normative exercise of sex. From the point of view of social psychoanalysis, prostitution reflects a dystopian behavior of a society that is rebellious on the one hand and reflective of the moral corruption on the other. Things have not, however, always been the same as we perceive of the normative and the conventions in the world around us. As a matter of historical fact, prostitution is not only the oldest service-based institution of human history but also one that has never been rivaled by any other profession in terms of influence and attraction throughout the horizontal timeline of human civilization (Kingston 2014). Another driving force that, for instance, parallels—and oftentimes outweighs—sex is the socio-cultural construct of "power" itself. Power in its dynamics and end-goal, however, remains entirely different from sex, for sex is often employed to attain and retain power; contrarily, power in and of itself is the ceiling in a quest for the ultimate goal, whereas two major means to the end of achieving power happen to be sex and money (Ryken 2011).

The temple prostitution of antiquity forms an important part of the institution of prostitution, which, in fact, is a consecrated version of an originally uncontrolled greed for a consumer market that constantly creates a high demand for the product of sex, speaking in mercantile terms. In the ancient world, the temples of renowned gods and goddesses were important centers of religious, cultural, and even mercantile activity, and therefore such platforms of religious import would attract pilgrims and traders from all over the civilization within their sphere of influence. Such an activity would particularly reach its peak on the occasions of major events and festivals celebrated to honor the god or goddess of a certain temple cult (Eko 2016).

Since individuals did not always travel with their families—and if they did, spousal sex was not feasible *en route* or amidst crowds gathered for a festival—temples of antiquity frequently offered sacred space for the travelers to retire and address the bodily needs and sensual desires in exchange for holy donations to the temple. Christopher Faraone states in his book, *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World*, that the sacred prostitution was primarily an economic activity, by

which “a deity would receive the money paid to buy or rent the prostitute’s body” (Faraone and McClure 2006). The sacred temple prostitution had, therefore, earned a divinely bestowed reputation of purity and sacredness for an otherwise scandalous profession (Silver 2019).

The story of the temple prostitution was not circumscribed within the geographical boundaries of the ancient Egyptian and Greco-Roman civilizations. The institution of prostitution, for instance, had also found sacred space in the temples of the ancient, post-Indus Valley Indian civilization, which somehow continues to this day in certain remote places. This system of sacred prostitution found in India, comprising and connecting a cluster of temple cults, is called the *devadasi* temple prostitution (Eko 2016). The Sanskrit compound term *devadasi* means “maid of god,” which is a term reserved for the girl given to a Hindu temple by making an offering who later “becomes a temple prostitute for upper-class members of the Hindu community where the temple is located” (Eko 2016). Eko insists that the Indian temple prostitution was in no way linked with or borrowed from the temple cults of the ancient Near East that also practiced temple-centered prostitution, primarily, because there was ‘no wall of separation between sex and religion’ in India (Eko, 2016).

Motifs of sex-themed religious art and the holy yoke of sex and spirituality in the understanding of the sacred also existed in other eastern philosophical systems and civilizations, such as the Sinic civilizations of Asia that covered a geography extending from China to Japan (Eko 2016). It is not difficult, therefore, to ascertain and understand the importance of sex in religious life prior to the transition of the religious environment of the world that took place under the ethical revolution wrought by the Judeo-Christian religion, which derives its bedrock from the holy scriptures of the Abrahamic tradition, the Bible (Ehrman 2006).

Speaking from the Greek literary perspective, Stephanie Budin, as quoted in Faraone and McClure (2006), notes that no known “direct testimonia of sacred prostitution” survives from the ancient Greece, which puts scholars in a difficult position in terms of ascertaining the reality of the case in its original time and space relying upon much later sources. It is, therefore, hard to apply the *sitz im leben* formula granted the lack of original sources, whereas a reconstruction of the sex life of the holy prostitutes in antiquity will remain, at its best, a result of historical speculation. In some cases, in fact, the classical scholars’ references to the sacred prostitution could be, in all likelihood, intended to denigrate the practices and beliefs of other ancient cultures (Kaltner and Stulman 2004). Such biases, therefore, cannot be overlooked in a historical-critical study of the ancient practice of ritual sex in order to look at the other side of the picture and rise above the present civic prejudice towards what is understood to be the ancient relic of sacred prostitution.

Cultic Background of Fertility and Mystery Orgies

Fertility orgies are a motif of pagan cultic ritual of the ancient fertility cults based in the prehistoric and proto-historic period, particularly in the post-Bronze

Age era, whose traces through the historic period can be confirmed in the form of archaeological remains (Bonanno 1985). The central idea of a fertility cult is the invocation of, and supplication to a particular or more gods through sacral sexual intercourse to secure the fertility of both land and womb (McKenzie 1955). These cults were, to a degree, the primitive forms of what, as the historical evidence suggests, later became mythologies and religions of developed agricultural societies. Ezekiel 8:14-15, for instance, reveals the “abomination” of the worship of Sumerian vegetation god, Tammuz, by the women of Jerusalem, whereas Ezekiel 16 echoes the practice of fertility rituals. This is in addition to several other vague references to the ancient cults found mentioned in the Bible, which we will discuss at a later stage. Such a practice was not limited to one particular geography or culture, but it was, in fact, widespread having reached across the known western world of the day from Greece to Egypt (Birn 2009). In the East, moreover, such orgies existed in the ancient and medieval India and farther beyond in the Far East (Eko 2016). Various temples in south and east India, for instance, harbor erotic art in the forms of sculptures, symbols, and sacred language, and thus showcase a fine example of the worship of sex through art, festive orgies, and sacred sex rituals (Eko 2016).

The orgy festivals of the Greek god Dionysius are particularly important to understand the entire system of the enthusiastic orgies of antiquity. The worship of Dionysius was introduced in northern Greece in 8th century BCE, which took a swift hold of the mainland Greece through its utopian ritualism involving frenzied ecstasy and sexual enthusiasm in which women in particular and men in general fell into a sacred mystical communion with the god Dionysius himself (Bury 2015). Another major movement of the sanctification of wine and ecstatic sexual intermingling was that of Orphic mystery religion, which British philosopher and historian Bertrand Russell summarizes in such a succinct way in his magnum opus, *A History of Western Philosophy* (1972), that his words merit direct quotation.

The Orphics were an ascetic sect; wine, to them, was only a symbol, as, later, in the Christian sacrament. The intoxication that they sought was of “enthusiasm,” of union with god. They believed themselves, in this way, to acquire mystic knowledge not obtainable by ordinary means.

This union with god, termed as “enthusiasm” in the Orphic system, is interesting for the same reason as the sacrament of communion, i.e., with God, happens to be interesting—and important—within Christian faith. Enthusiasm involved both drinking wine and participating in sexual orgies both symbolically representing a higher form of reality that only clads itself in mysteries. Russell (1972), furthermore, explains the mystery of the enthusiastic ecstasy of the Orphic religion, quoting early Greek classicist John Burnet, in the following paragraph:

Burnet goes on to state that there is a striking similarity between Orphic beliefs and those prevalent in India at about the same time, though he holds that there cannot have been any contact. He then comes on to the original meaning of the word “orgy,” which was used by the Orphics to mean “sacrament,” and was intended to purify the believer’s soul and enable it to escape from the wheel of birth.

Orpheus, the great Greek musician, according to the myth, was an ancient reformer of the Greek asceticism and spiritual mythos. It is said that he had become a monotheist towards the end of his life worshipping only Apollo and was therefore killed for his sin of forsaking and blaspheming his primary god, Dionysius (Burkert 1985). Orpheus left a huge mark on the reformed understanding of the element of the spiritual in Greek culture in the period to follow, particularly influencing the teachings of the Ionian philosopher, Pythagoras of Samos. This subsequently turned into a profound system of mystical *sophia* enmeshed within the greater vehicle of Greek philosophy; it in turn influenced such mighty philosophers as Plato and Aristotle, especially, in terms of their philosophical approach to feminism and violent emotionalism (Russell 1972).

Some of the ancient religious cults, particularly in Mesopotamia, celebrated the rites of *Hieros Gamos*, “sacred marriage,” which were royal rituals based on the divine truth or true myth that involved the consummation of the sacred-marriage of two deities in the temple (Goodison and Morris 1998). The inception of the original divine myths happens in the primordial—or more appropriately, fantastical—times. In the marriage, the main characters are usually supernatural—perhaps metaphysical is a better word—who engage in a symbolic intercourse that serves to explain why some natural events take place with or without a sequential order (Eko 2016). The sacred marriage in principle was between the heaven and the earth, when in its original form the male “Heaven” fertilized the female “Mother Earth” with rain symbolizing the semen, and thus the procreation of the two, greenery, sprang forth from her womb (Stol 2016). Such sexually explicit descriptions of heaven and earth’s love making for procreation were not an uncommon idea in the ancient world. Stol (2016), for instance, cites an ancient Sumerian literary text reflecting the marriage of the heaven and the mother earth in primeval times; the text reads:

An, mighty heaven, impregnated broad Earth,
 He poured into her the heroic seed of Wood and Reed,
 The good seed of Heaven was poured into Earth, the faithful cow.
 Earth, rejoicing over the plant of life, was ready to give birth,
 Earth, luxuriant, sprinkling wine and syrup, carried bounty.
 When Wood and Reed had been born, she shook the wine and syrup in the barn.

The subsequent development of *Hieros Gamos* would normally involve a sexual encounter between a sky god and an earth goddess both appointing humans as proxies for their participation in the enactment of the communion ritual that would explain various natural phenomena and what fruits such a natural order of things would bear. Some scholars believe that the original aetiological function of the sacred marriage was to explain storms, for a storm itself was understood to be a sexual encounter between the two and the rain was therefore the god’s semen that would fertilize the earth goddess and thus ‘vegetation’ would grow (Leeming 2005).

The Greek mythology, as ornate as it is, moreover, also bears a similar myth that involves the sacred marriage of two important deities. In Greece, typically in the city of Athens, the *gamos* of Zeus and Hera was enacted in the month of Gamelion as

part of the Greek version of the rituals of *Hieros Gamos* (Blundell and Williamson 1998). Such a scenario, therefore, gives an idea about how common such marriages were and that it was not a regional phenomenon by any means.

Sex, historically, expressed itself in so many mystical and intuitive forms in the ancient religion and spirituality that it was virtually impossible for a contemporary mind to separate sex from the sacred—at least the ritual aspect of it. A critical analysis of the multifaceted practice of sex in the ancient world would, therefore, reveal that sex was an inbuilt organ of the ancient societies reflective of their religious trajectory and their association with peculiar mythologies. It is most probably the reason why phallic worship came to occupy an important place in various ancient mystery and fertility cults through their association with the power of creation vested in gods, whereas phallic symbols continued to penetrate deep into other religious systems of the world and survived even the monotheistic, ultra-ethical revolution of the biblical religion (Burkert 1985).

Temples of Aphrodite and Other Goddesses

In the ancient Greece, as it turns out, it was largely the temples of Aphrodite that would offer a sacred niche for the enlightening union of the pilgrim and the temple nymph in the mystery of mythical salvation. In the “Eden” of Aphrodite, bringing in the biblical metaphor, services offered through the profession of prostitution had been consecrated and ordained to be institutionalized as a path of spiritual bliss for those going through the agony of a physical journey. It was intended to alleviate the ordeal of life by paying homage to the goddess of beauty and love (Parrottet 2004). The members of Aphrodite’s sex-rite cadre would faithfully offer themselves up to such pilgrims as wandering in the quest for spiritual ataraxy, worldly pleasures, and prosperity, all simultaneously, by seeking to earn the salvific favors of their beloved goddess. It is important to bear in mind that it was not only the female prostitutes that served the pilgrims but also the male prostitutes were available to those who had a taste for either bisexuality or homosexuality, or both (Faraone and McClure 2006). References to male prostitution at the temple of Astarte, the prototype of Aphrodite, also occur in the Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomy 23:7; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; Hosea 4:14). Moreover, a common word for the male prostitutes used in the Hebrew Bible is *eunuch*, which appears to be a commonplace concept among ancient Near Eastern people (Hadley 2000). The Christian New Testament’s only real life reference to prostitution, on the other hand, occurs in connection with the Corinthian temple prostitution, whereas other references, such as those found in Matthew 21:28-32, Luke 15:13, and Revelation 17:1-18, turn out, in their entirety, to be apocalyptic and figurative in nature. Paul’s criticism of the Corinthian Church’s involvement in the low-life indulgence of Greek culture’s immorality was, in fact, a bitter strike against the Greek *cultus* in addition to building a doctrinal-ethical paradigm for Corinthian Christians. 1 Corinthians 6, for instance, is a decisive read to substantiate the evidence in this context, which is both polemical and apologetic in the author’s tendentious approach. As a matter of historical fact, the members of

the Greek society were known for their sexual indulgence in both of its orientations, i.e., heterosexuality and homosexuality, beyond any compunctions a religious society would bear on its collective conscience. The great Greek philosopher, Plato, embraces this indulgence of the Greek *cultus* as a historically developed act of true pleasure and recognizes its naturalness without giving in to the moralists' stigmatization of sex (Faraone and McClure 2006).

The environment of belief in the Hellenistic world at the time of Paul, the epistemological outlook on contemporary ontology and cosmology, was characterized by the workings of various principalities and magical powers all ascribed to, and described in various gods and goddesses of the richly ornate Greco-Roman mythology. The forces of nature, in Hellenistic metaphysics, were thus transcribed in mythical language as various divinities of various cosmic orders engaged in a struggle sometimes interpreted as an epistemology of order and theomachy (Johnston 2004). The temples of Aphrodite, being originally concentrated in Cyprus, as well as those of various other goddesses of similar characteristics, for instance, spread along the eastern coastline of the Mediterranean and further deep inland. In Homer's *Odyssey*, for instance, Aphrodite's home is in Paphos, where an archaeological expedition has unearthed a monumental Mycenaean temple dating back to the twelfth century BCE that, according to Burkert (1985), came to be ascribed to Aphrodite, allegedly, after the Phoenician colonization of the island of Cyprus.

In Egypt, on the other hand, the rituals otherwise associated with Aphrodite would also include orgies in festivals such as those taking place near or after the harvest season (Birn 2009). Aphrodite did not necessarily appear in her own personality in other parts of the world, but it was her character that made appearance in a variety of fertility cults concentrated on female divinities' temples among other nations. The supreme goddess of Canaan, Ashtoreth, for instance, can be taken as a case in point for the above study because Ashtoreth was perceived of as the goddess of all goddesses and worshipped as the female counterpart of Baal (Hadley 2000).

Beside the Egyptian cultic practice, the Semitic tradition, too, bore a similar character in its mythology that represented physical love in a vaguely deified manifestation. The Phoenician deity, Ishtar-Astarte, often confused with Ashtoreth, is said to have been the origin of the Aphrodite cult (Burkert 1985). Even though the historical picture is not clear, a suggestion can still be made at length with a relatively higher degree of certainty that it was the same deity as the Assyrians called Ishtar, the Greeks termed Astarte, and the Phoenicians named Ashtoreth in the first place (Smith 1881). Smith (1881) also suggests that it is the ideation of the same pagan deity referenced in the Old Testament under the same name, Ashtoreth (cf. Jer. 44:17, 25; 1 Kings 11:5, 33; 2 Kings 23:13; 1 Sam. 31:10). The name *Astarte* (or *Astarte*) appears to have been mentioned in Egyptian hieroglyphics, which, according to Smith (1881), is an evidence of the widespread worship of Ishtar-Astarte. He also insists that Astarte was associated with the planet Venus—as is the case in the Roman mythology as well—rather than with the moon being the moon-goddess, as many believed, and was later identified by various ancient authors with Aphrodite. Cornelius (2004) confirms the above fact listed by Smith (1881) as historical and confirms that the association of Ishtar-Astarte with Venus is

accurate. Nothing in this regard, however, can be said with absolute certainty, for such subjects of the history of mythology are relatively eclectic and depend therefore on excursus, which can easily get stretched and extrapolated between poles of interpretation with a desire for more details offering room to a stroke of imagination to those who attempt to determine a particular role for a certain mythical deity.

It is believed that the cult, along with its characteristic temple prostitution, spread westward with the Phoenician colonial expansion and the transmission of its cultic ideas influenced the existing pagan societies in the new territories. The ideal of fertility was, in fact, one of the primary motivations for the new folks to flock around it. The temple cult of Aphrodite arose in particular from the syncretism of Ishtar-Astarte cult and those local cults of the Hellenic pagan systems (Leeming 2005). The original motifs of the Ishtar-Astarte temple cult continued to be identifiable in the Aphrodite's temple orientation particularly in the doctrinal emphasis upon physical beauty, love, and sex vis-à-vis a physical manifestation of the goddess and her frontal nakedness covered with golden ornaments. Apart from various internal factors, moreover, the motif of garden and sea is equally present, that too obviously, in the exterior, which forms an important scenic part of the Ishtar-Astarte temples (Burkert 1985). Such similarities between different cults, as a matter of fact, yield a clue of the presence of some fundamental ideas in conjunction with interrelated practices that might well be traced back to a common origin.

Such cults, originally based in the agrarian societies of antiquity, helped to shape the contemporary world and its cultures around the significance of sex in the material and spiritual worldviews of mankind. As a result, therefore, the earthly abodes of the patron goddesses, the temples, became centers for offering the rationale to the followers of the cults for them to see a spiritual dimension in sex and subscribe to the holy idea of purity in sexuality.

Corinth: Heart of Temple Prostitution

Corinth was reportedly a city of immense sexual immorality in the first century when Christianity was in the process of becoming a global religious path to author the future history of mankind (Thaden Jr 2017). The city had been deeply immersed in the worship of wealth and sex for centuries before the birth of Christ. This is to clarify that the expression, birth of Christ, is employed here in a purely historical sense as a calendar denominator referring to the beginning of the modern man's calendar rather than in a religious fashion. The primary reason for the city of Corinth to have thrived in trade, commerce, and sex-market was its coastal location, at the strip of Isthmus, which the trading ships could not ignore in their both east and west-bound voyages (Diamond 2012).

When speaking of the ancient temple prostitution, it would defy reason to not speak of Corinth, the Greek port that is often depicted as the free-living "New Orleans or Amsterdam" of the ancient world (Long 2014). After landing at the Corinthian docks, sailors would apparently climb up thousands of zigzagging steps

to the top of a rock-crag acropolis called the Acrocorinth, “the upper Corinth.” Acrocorinth was the citadel of the city built in the 5th century BCE, which offered 360 degree view of the surrounding Mediterranean and was strategically designed with specifically defense functionality in mind (Murphy-O’Connor 2002). There they would pass beneath the marble columns of the Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love, within whose incense-filled confines some thousand comely girls and fine boys supposedly worked around the clock gathering funds for their deity, which, as references Murphy-O’Connor (2002), the historian Plutarch refers to as “a great army of prostitutes.” Since the Renaissance, as a matter of fact, this idea had gripped the antiquarians who liked to imagine that a physical audience with one of Aphrodite’s special servants would offer a mystical union with the goddess herself—uninhibited pagans coupling in ecstasy before her statue in the perpetual twilight of the temple. Such a classical view of Corinth still holds sway on a multitude of historians who like to portray the ancient life of the city in colorful details. This imagination of the classicists has also given birth to an English verb, namely *to corinthianize*, which means “to live a promiscuous life” and “participate in immoral sexual practices.” Thus, the verb etymologically represents the promiscuous life of the rich but immoral city of Corinth (Diamond 2012).

As a matter of historical fact, the above lusty vision of the city of Corinth was created entirely from a short report by the Greek geographer, Strabo, who is known among historians for his tendency of exaggeration. Strabo, as quoted in Murphy-O’Connor (2002), writes the following around CE 20:

And the temple of Aphrodite was so rich that it owned more than a thousand temple-slaves, prostitutes, whom both men and women had dedicated to the goddess. And also it was on account of these women that the city was crowded and grew richer. For instance, the ship-captains freely squandered their money and hence the proverb, “Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth.” Moreover, it is said that a certain prostitute said to the woman who reproached her with the charge that she did not like to work or touch wool, “Yet such as I am, in this short time I have taken down three webs.”

This particular culture of pagan religiosity that embraced mystical communion with the goddess and purgation of the soul and body through the holy ritual of sexual union with the divine maidens of the temple was so rich and profound that such devotion for Aphrodite emerged on a grand geographical scale and began being carried around by the pilgrims throughout Greece. In consequence to the widespread devotion for Aphrodite, which translates into a predictable sociological variable, the cult influenced the folk culture, arts, and literature of the ancient Greece, particularly in and around Corinth. A song associated with Pindar, for instance, is given a listing by Faraone and McClure in their book, *Prostitutes and Courtesans* (2006). The song goes as follows:

Young ones welcoming many strangers,
Handmaids of Persuasion in wealthy Corinth,
who burn amber tears, shoots of frankincense,

often flying to the heavenly mother of loves
 in thought, to Aphrodite.
 For you without blame she destined,
 O children, to cull the fruits of soft youth
 in amorous beds.

Under the Roman principality of Achaia in the first century, the city of Corinth had not changed much from its past centuries in terms of religion, demographics, and culture. It is noteworthy that, in the Christian New Testament, the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Church sheds light on the subject of sexual immorality that, according to the author's statement in 1 Corinthians 5:1-11; 6:12-20, was rampant in the city of Corinth. This statement of Paul also corroborates the pagan sources, particularly what Strabo describes about Corinth. Archaeological records substantiate the evidence, as the first epistle to the Corinthians suggest, that Paul was in Corinth in the year CE 51 when Gallio, who gave a reasonably fair judgment in a case petitioned against Paul, was the Roman Proconsul of Achaia from July 51 to June 52 (Murphy-O'Connor 2002). Paul arrived in Corinth either as an evangelist or as a tentmaker during the popular Isthmian Games when the athletes and their supporters were pouring into the city of Corinth from across the Hellenistic world. He might have, it may be conjectured, come to Corinth even before his conversion to Christianity in the capacity of a tradesman and would have already established connections in the city with business and political communities. In fact, a reference to a certain sporting activity, quite probably Isthmian Games, can also be found in 1 Corinthians 9:24-25: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever" (NIV 2011).

What is certain about Paul, nevertheless, is that he carried the message associated with the founder of Christianity, Jesus, the proclaimed Christ of the New Testament, wherever he went and in whatever capacity he traveled through the Roman world. Paul may have traveled to Corinth as a trader, but the end-goal of his mission did not disappear from his purview, namely putting an end to the immoral practice of sex inherited from the old world, as witnesses the New Testament. Based upon the new system of ethics introduced and developed by the Christian teachings of Paul, therefore, a reformed manual of morality was handed down to the members of Christian faith in Corinth that sought to preach sexual discipline emphasizing physical purity in spiritual union with Christ himself. We know from various sources including, but not limited to, those found in the New Testament that Paul visited the Jewish synagogue located on the Corinthian strip and reasoned with the Jews in there, participated in other social activities, visited temples of the local gods, preached Gospel to the crowds, and even made several individuals including the Roman treasurer of the city, Erastus, into his followers (Acts 19:22; Romans 16:23). Thus, a radical transition in the history of Corinth in particular and the Roman world in general was about to be set in motion, which would change the world of future forever, particularly in its disposition towards,

and exposition of the pagan world's conventions and practices surrounding sex. This revolution radically redefined sex and its role in human life.

Biblical References to Sacred Prostitution

The Holy Bible, quite surprisingly, is not in want of references to the so-called sacred pagan institution of prostitution in the ancient world. The Bible mentions several individuals and places that are directly or indirectly linked to such a practice of institutional prostitution that was deemed as acceptable—even blessed and honored at times—in the religious world of antiquity. The Bible, for instance, deals with the subject of prostitution in places such as Genesis 38:15, Leviticus 18:22; 19:29; 20:13; 21:9, Deuteronomy 22:21; 23:18, 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12, Proverbs 23:27-28, Isaiah 23:16, Jeremiah 3:6, Ezekiel 16:8-26, Nahum 3:4, Romans 1:24, 26, 1 Corinthians 10:14, and 2 Corinthians 6:14, 16-17; 7:1, etc. The Jewish Bible, which assumes the title of the Old Testament among Christians, houses majority of the references to the ancient Near Eastern fertility cults and the profession of prostitution associated with such pagan trajectories. Similarly, the Christian New Testament also makes allusions to the practice of prostitution, especially in the Pauline letters, as mentioned elsewhere.

There is a list of prostitutes named in the Bible, in the Old Testament in particular, which needs to be looked at in order to understand the response of the Israelite populace—as well as that of the divining oracle of Israel—to such a social process as the institutionalization of prostitution. The Bible involves *Yahweh*, the God of Israel, in the development of both its discourse and story about prostitution and sees divinity and humanity mutually interlocked on this critical subject. Gomer, for instance, was the prostitute Hosea married when God told him to pick a “whore” for a wife in the following explicit words:

When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, “Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD.” (Hosea 1:2 ESV)

The reason, as it seems, is self-evident why God commands Hosea to marry a woman from such a culturally obnoxious and looked down upon background as prostitution. The connotation in the above verse is negative and the language is symbolic, for the divine voice addresses the land and the people of Israel along the same lines as one speaks of a brothel where loyalty, dedication, and faithfulness have little room (Evans 2018). Gomer, Hosea's wife does not, however, come from a temple prostitution background and only represents foreign nations in this case. We will not, therefore, concern ourselves with the story of Gomer here.

Furthermore, the nation of Israel is collectively referred to as a “whore” by Jeremiah, the 6th century BCE prophet of doom who made prophecy around the period of Babylonian invasion of the kingdom of Judah. He does cross conventional limits to record this rebuke, quite unapologetically, in his book, the Book of Jeremiah, which turns out to be the longest prophetic book of the Bible. Jeremiah, for instance, writes in 3:3, “Therefore the showers have been withheld,

and no spring rains have fallen. Yet you have the brazen look of a prostitute; you refuse to blush with shame” (NIV 2011). Again, Jeremiah uses the metaphor of prostitute for the city of Jerusalem a little later in his book in 13:27 and finds the character of the city as repulsive and ‘detestable’ as that of an unclean prostitute. Similarly, the Prophet Isaiah also lashes out on Jerusalem in an identical manner declaring the city a “harlot” in his book, the Book of Isaiah—a human analogy in divine speech. Importantly, the more modern *New International Version* of the Bible (2011) uses the word “prostitute” instead of “Harlot” when translating Isaiah 1:21. Within the religious ethos of the ancient Near East, critically speaking, such a course of employing explicit and disparaging epithets borrowed from the vernacular associated with the society of prostitution reflects biblical prophecy’s peculiar attitude towards the city of Jerusalem. We must not forget here that the city of Jerusalem was the station of the “Holy of holies” for the monotheistic faith of Israel and ironically the insults carried in the Bible were intended for the city of Jerusalem in particular and the nation of Israel in general. In the Bible, as we can see, Israel stands for a particular land and a particular people, both merged into one identity; the said people inhabit a “promised” piece of land as, allegedly, chosen for them by the God of Israel to transmit and preserve the message of monotheism, indicates the Bible (Arnold 2014). However, the alleged treacheries of the nation of Israel, both in religious and political terms, were taken on by the Israelite prophets, a class of individuals that represented the voice of the divine versus a group of corrupt kings and their associates, the noble oligarchy, who tended to criticize them in a most vitriolic manner that remains a major theme within the good and evil dialectics of the Bible.

Other individuals mentioned in the Bible with reference to the practice of prostitution are Jephthah’s mother (Judges 11:1), Moabite women (Numbers 25:1-3), Oholah and her sister Oholibah (Ezekiel 23), Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah (Genesis 28), the two prostitutes who go to the Solomon’s court to resolve the controversy of a newborn (1 Kings 3:16-28), and the prostitutes who take a bath in the pool where Ahab’s blood is washed (1 Kings 22:38). The Old Testament indeed houses several other references to the ancient prostitution, too, declaring the profession as immoral and unacceptable in its totality, which, suffices to say, are of little significance to the present topic after having provided the above list. The biblical impression gets more obvious in the light of the above references that there was a palpable presence of prostitution in the land of Israel vis-à-vis the surrounding world, which, from the point of view of an academic critique, represents an institutionalized contour of an occupation that receives an extraordinary amount of criticism and antipathy in the religiosity of the Bible as well as in moral framework of the civilization it gives birth to (Newsom and Ringe 1998).

Interestingly enough, one of the most significant female characters of the New Testament, Mary Magdalene, is often viewed with a high degree of likelihood by various theologians, historians, and critics of the Bible as being a prostitute in her pre-Christian background (Schaberg 2004). There is, however, no direct reference in the New Testament that may confirm the report of Mary Magdalene’s past life of being a prostitute. The legend of Mary Magdalene being a “penitent

prostitute” who earned “apostleship” has indeed been around from ancient times, which plays a dialectical role of depicting a contrite journey of an adulterous woman from being the outcaste and marginalized to being elevated as one of the most venerable. As a matter of historical fact, this legend, having borne a special appeal to the Christian reason for Christianity’s salvific cause, became particularly popular in the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages (Schaberg 2004). It can be said about the overall makeup and role of the legend, nonetheless, that it has served a particular function, especially in the popular cultures of each generation, despite the reality that such assertions have taken on the form of a story that resulted from the smashing of several traditions about different women named Mary together (Ehrman 2006).

In order to comprehend the conceptualization of prostitution among the Israelites, it will be equally important to explore the semantic range behind the Hebrew concept in question. It goes without saying that both terminology and semantics play an important role in shaping a people’s worldviews and informing a culture on various social, political, and religious phenomena. It is particularly true of the Semitic languages because of the design of the languages within this linguistic family. *Qedeshah*, for instance, is an important Hebrew word in this particular context employed in the Bible, which is often taken to mean as a “sacred prostitute” or a “temple prostitute” (Raver 2005). The word *qudsu* or *quds* (q-d-s) refers to God’s holiness and transcendence, whereas *qedeshah* is derived from the same root word as that of *qudsu* (Faraone and McClure 2006). Quite probably the word in question originally referred to the “consecrated maidens” who were employed in the Canaanite and later Phoenician temples devoted to the worship of Ashtoreth. As such, the biblical writers came to associate the fertility rites of Ashtoreth worship with sacred prostitution, and the Hebrew word *qedeshah*, therefore, came to be used as a pejorative term for the “prostitute” involved in the sex rites. According to Lings (2013), the masculine version of the word is *qedesh*, which probably refers to a male prostitute or a eunuch.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1998) states that a goddess by the name of *Qedeshu* was worshipped in Egypt, who was considered the “Lady of Kadesh,” the present day Syria. This particular term and the concept associated therewith came to bear peculiar implications for the post-Exodus Hebrew culture, which evidently deviated from its original Egyptian context in the process of transmission, reception, and exposition.

A more common Hebrew word for the prostitute is *zonah*. It appears to be a more regularly used term that transmits the meaning of selling one’s body with a particularly negative connotation, whereas the word *qedeshah*, on the other hand, is not identifiable with the defilement caused by selling one’s own body for the sexual pleasure of others (Lings 2013). The latter word, *qedeshah*, almost exclusively occurs within the framework of religious vernacular.

Another relevant question, moreover, that begs attention within the confines of the debates surrounding the word *qedeshah* is: who is *Asherah*? The Hebrew word *Asherah* is an adjectival noun that means “happy” or “upright”; some even suggest “sacred place” (Faraone and McClure 2006). Another word, *qedeshim*, the plural of *qedeshah*, appears in 2 Judges 23:7 where the context seems to suggest

some association between the Hebrew *qedeshim* and the women dedicated to the job of weaving for the Canaanite goddess, *Asherah* (Faraone and McClure 2006).

The term *Asherah* appears 40 times in the Hebrew Bible, usually in conjunction with the definite article *ha*, “the.” The definite article in Hebrew is similar in function to the English definite article, which does not appear with personal names. It is, therefore, an obvious linguistic fact that *Asherah* cannot be a personal name if the definite article precedes the word. It does not, however, eliminate the possibility concerning the word in question being a category of beings, i.e., a particular type of goddesses. According to Smith (1881), there were as many *Asherahs* as *Baals* in the ancient Near East. He also argues that *Ashtoreth* was the actual personal name of the principal goddess, whereas, contrarily, *Asherah* was the name given to the image or symbol of the same goddess (Smith 1881).

This personification of the goddess *Ashtoreth* is also known from several other ancient Near Eastern cultures. As an Ugaritic goddess, for instance, she is known with the title “Lady Athirat of the Sea,” whereas another version of this title is “she who walks on the sea” (Niditch 2016). *Athirat* is a cognate name for *Asherah*, who is the mother of 70 children, the Mother Goddess, and surprisingly this mythical concept of 70 children of a royal divine mother relates to the Jewish idea of the 70 guardian angels of the nations in the Book of Daniel (Niditch 2016). Moreover, arguments have been made that *Asherah* is an important figure in the Egyptian, Hittite, Philistine and Arabic texts. Various Egyptian representations of *Qudshu* (or *Qedeshu*), which could potentially be the Egyptian name for *Asherah*, portray her as naked with snakes and flowers on her body, often standing on a lion (Hadley 2000).

In the end, it is important to understand that a discussion on *Asherah* is essentially a discussion on *Ashtoreth*, *Ishtar*, *Astarte*, and *Aphrodite*, all representing physical love, beauty, and fertility (Niditch 2016). Broadly speaking, they are all fundamentally different faces, forms, and versions of the same original mythical concept—a deity that evolved with slight variations in various parts of the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world. This female deity of antiquity is primarily responsible for the institutionalization of fertility rites and offering of sexual pleasure within spiritual environment lending sacred space to the profession of prostitution within the house of the goddess, the temple.

Conclusion

The temple prostitution cult, speaking of it as a collective movement within the alchemy of human civilization, earned legitimization, as we have seen above, under the mythical concept of an all-powerful female deity, say one out of many available goddesses to the ancient world such as *Ashtoreth*, *Ishtar*, *Astarte*, *Aphrodite*, etc. These goddesses, protectors of their female devotees, had been ascribed the sovereign powers of womanhood to—I would personally prefer the informal expression, femalehood. Such a goddess, being the embodiment of a perfect lady, would appear in control of all physically oriented passions, sexual imagery bearing elements of human feelings, and the romantic dispositions of

personality, all signifying the frailty of humanity through a natural desire for love, sex, fertility, and prosperity. Prostitution would simply emerge as a byproduct of the entire process of bringing desire and passion in meeting, which a feminist commentator of the Bible likes to call a “necessary evil” of the ancient society (Newsom and Ringe 1998). Eroticism and spiritual elation, moreover, were not divorced from each other as we see them apart in today’s world, while since the divinities and deities would often engage in incessant romance and sex, hence so would do the humans in imitation of their gods and goddesses (Stol 2016). It was, therefore, understood to be sufficient of a ground for the justification for the temples to operate and promote forms of worship that would involve sex—pilgrims’ sexual engagement with the devoted sex oracles of the temple goddess.

It suffices to say that ritual sex was, more often than not, deemed as a holy and spiritually uplifting experience and would have the same effect on the mind of a performer as would a partaker of the Christian communion feel about, and experience in the sacrament. Prostitution organized by the temple associated with a fertility goddess was, therefore, a means to earning a sense of gratification marked with the blessings of the overseeing deity that would—especially, though not exclusively—be sprinkled in the purity of devotion by her ordained devotee: the temple prostitute.

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