

A Critical Response to Karin Adams's Reinterpretation of Hosea 4:13–14

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From her first sentence, Karin Adams indicates her support for a movement in ancient studies to discredit any potential indications of sacred prostitution in the ancient world.¹ Her focus is on Hos 4:13–14 where the קדשה (*qēdēšā*) seems to be identified with the זונה (*zônâ*). There are three locations in the Hebrew Scriptures where the term קדשה occurs, and in each case the קדשה seems to be identified as a זונה: Gen 38:21–22; Deut 23:17–18; and Hos 4:14. A few additional texts may also be read as indicating sacred prostitution (e.g., Prov 7:10–20; Numbers 25), but without the term קדשה. Based on the meaning of term itself, the קדשה (“holy one,” fem.) seems to be a priestess of some sort, and the only three texts in which this term occurs seem to associate it with the term זונה. Those who would deny the concept of sacred prostitution in this Hebrew literature have an uphill battle against apparent identity. Adams focuses her analysis on the text in Hosea.

I. זונה AND קדשה

An important part of Adams's argument assumes that the verb זנה is specific to prostitution, like the term זונה. Although זונה has the form of the *qal* participle of the verb זנה, it functions as an independent noun, for it has a semantic range distinct from זנה. זונה is a term that designates a prostitute, a female who exchanges sexual favors for payment. The stability of this definition is indicated in such texts as Ezek 16:34, where the זונה of the parable is contrasted with other זונות, for she pays her paramours instead of receiving payment from them. Only stable, restricted usage can stand up to such ironic use.

¹ Karin Adams, “Metaphor and Dissonance: A Reinterpretation of Hosea 4:13–14,” *JBL* 127 (2008): 291–305. On sacred prostitution, see, e.g., Stephanie Lynn Budin, *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

In contrast, the verb זנה indicates fornication, any of a variety of sexual relationships outside of the marriage contract. This verb does not seem to be restricted to prostitution. Likewise, the abstract nouns זנות (*zēnūt*) and תזנות (*taznūt*) do not seem to be restricted to prostitution and have the broader meaning of fornication. The verb זנה occurs six times in the parable of Oholah and Oholibah in Ezekiel 23, along with eleven occurrences of תזנות and one occurrence of זנות. In the Hebrew Scriptures only Ezekiel 16 can compete for such a concentration of these terms. At no point in ch. 23 is either woman accused of taking payment for זנה. The noun/participle זונה occurs only once in Ezekiel 23 (v. 44), in a statement that compares Oholah and Oholibah to a זונה while distinguishing them from the זונה of the comparison. In this chapter זונה has a semantic range distinct from that of the verb זנה and the abstract nouns זנות and תזנות.

If we understand זנה as having a broader semantic domain than זונה, certain texts become less problematic. Deuteronomy 22:20–21 is the case of the daughter who is married but is found by her husband not to be a virgin. She is said not to be a virgin because she did זנה while part of her father's household. There is no requirement here that she received payment for her sexual activity. Any form of fornication could be responsible for her loss of virginity. Likewise, Judg 19:2 need not require that the concubine sell her sexual services to another man. The verb זנה need indicate only that she had sexual relations with a man other than the Levite who holds her concubine contract. Genesis 38:24 may be understood as a play on these semantic ranges, because Tamar did indeed masquerade as a זונה, but the speaker knew only that she fornicated (זנה) and became pregnant from her fornications (זנונים).

There is one more use of זנה that is interesting in the controversy over sacred prostitution in antiquity. זנה is often used figuratively for inappropriate religious behavior among Israelites, especially idolatry and worship of other gods. In Num 25:1–2 the verb זנה does double duty, for the Israelites worshiped the god Baal of Peor, which is figurative fornication, and also fornicated literally with the women of Midian. The literal activity with the women is the first topic of this verb, “The people began to fornicate with the daughters of Midian. They [fem. pl.] called the people to do זבח sacrifices of their [fem. pl.] gods.” The verb זנה could refer to either literal fornication or pagan sacrifice, but probably refers to both. If the scholar insists that the semantic range of זנה be restricted to prostitution, this verb would indicate sacred prostitution on the part of the women of Midian, for their sexual liaisons with Israelite men were directly tied to זבח sacrifices to Baal. In fact, something akin to sacred prostitution may still be understood in this event, even if זנה is understood as fornication, distinct from prostitution.² However, identifying זנה with prostitution in Numbers 25 would link sacred activity and prostitution more tightly than Adams might desire.

² E.g., James E. Miller, *Raw Material: Studies in Biblical Sexuality* (2006), 71, online at www.othersheep.org.

II. A DOUBLE STANDARD

Adams makes an interesting comment on pp. 303–4. She questions the reading of Hosea 4 by various scholars who dismiss the idea of ancient sacred prostitution. Adams states that these interpreters “ironically apply an (unwarranted) double standard to male and female Israelites: males commit theological sins while females commit sexual sins.” Although Adams comments extensively on the double standards of Israelite society, she does not seem to understand how this double standard could produce a double standard in the text.

Ancient Israelite society was a patriarchal society. For a married woman, any fornication, any sexual activity outside the bounds of her marriage contract to one man would be adultery. The man is not so restricted. He is free to fornicate, to have sex without a marriage contract, with any woman no longer in her father’s house and not under marriage contract to another man. Many such women would be prostitutes, but not all. He can also have multiple wives, as many as he can afford. His fornication is adultery only when it involves a woman married to another man. This much Adams understands. A double standard is built into Israelite society, and any variety of double standards may appear in the various literary constructions found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Notably, the men of Hosea 4 are not accused of adultery, literal or figurative, but only of fornication.

First, the initial lines of Hos 4:10 are literal, not metaphorical. “They will eat, but not be sated. They will fornicate, but not multiply.”³ Just as they will be cursed with eating without receiving the desired outcome of eating, they also will fornicate without a desired (?) outcome of fornication—reproduction. This is followed by a metaphorical use of זנות, “for they have forsaken YHWH to keep fornication.” This is not the last time the poet will cross the line between literal and figurative fornication.

The women of Hos 4:13–14 are under the patriarchal control of the men addressed in these verses. This control and the honor implied in these patriarchal social structures call for a double standard. As with Num 25:1, the poet of Hosea 4 is playing with the verb זנה and the noun זונה. If the men of Israel insist on idolatry, which may be described as figurative fornication, they will get literal fornication under their noses, for the women under their control will dishonor them with fornication and adultery.⁴ The “double standard” provides the friction that gives power to these lines of poetry. But the men’s fornication is literal as well as figurative. They do literal זבח sacrifices with קדשות, and therefore do literal fornication with זנות. The literal sacrifices are part of the referent of the figurative fornication.

³ פּרֵץ; cf. 1 Chr 4:38; Gen 30:30.

⁴ Adultery and fornication are not confused here, contra Adams, “ADULTERY IS PROSTITUTION” (p. 299). Their brides adulterate, but their daughters fornicate. Metaphor or not, the distinction remains.

But these literal sacrifices are in parallel with literal fornication. Thus, literal fornication also plays a role in the figurative fornication.

To review:

- In v. 10 they abandon YHWH to hold onto (figurative) fornication.
- In v. 12 they seek counsel from wooden objects, for a spirit of (figurative) fornication has misled them and they have fornicated (figuratively) against their God.
- In v. 13 they have done this with (literal) sacrifices on high places, which leads to the (literal) fornication of their daughters and the (literal) adultery of their brides.
- In v. 14 God will not punish their daughters for (literal) fornication nor their brides for (literal) adultery, because the men addressed here fornicate (literally) with prostitutes and sacrifice (literally) with קדשות.

This leaves us with the question of how tight is the parallel between sacrifice with קדשות and fornication with זונה. Part of the answer may be found in the other two texts where קדשה may be found. In Gen 38:15, 21–22, one term is substituted for the other. In Deut 23:18–19, they seem to be in parallel. This might imply an identity between the two terms in Hosea 4 as well. But there is one other factor. Fornication with a זונה is not itself an idolatrous offense. Somehow this fornication needs to be seen as participation in an inappropriate religious activity for it to fit in this context. In other words, in this context, the fornication with the זונה is a religious act; therefore it is sacred prostitution. It is sacred prostitution, whether or not the זונה is identified as a קדשה. Identifying the זונה here with the קדשה merely simplifies things.

POSTSCRIPT:

THE ARGUMENT AGAINST ANCIENT SACRED PROSTITUTION

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not point out that the ancient literature preserved in the Hebrew Scriptures is mostly polemical, including a variety of attacks on alternate religious systems. Unless we assume that these texts are infallible (and I realize many readers do understand these texts as infallible), we should handle polemical material with caution. Because a writer attributes to Canaanite/pagan religion the practice of sacred prostitution does not mean we must therefore believe such practices were part of the ancient cultures indicated. It is at least possible that such claims were part of a polemical package that had only partial identity with the real world. Recognition of this factor could change the tone of some scholarly polemics on the issue of ancient sacred prostitution.