



"PrayHer"; Excerpt from "Eau Naturelle."

Photo: Elke Scholz, 1996

"Eau Naturelle" represents a photographic collaboration between Artists Elke Scholz and Zoya to honour the female form and spirit in Nature. Elke's work has been published and is included in collections in Canada, the U.S., Africa, Australia, and Europe. An exhibition of her work, "A Part of One Woman's Journey," will open at Chapel Gallery in Bracebridge, April 3, 1997.

Priestesses and "Sacred Prostitutes"

by Johanna H. Stuckey

Cet article questionne l'existence et les liens entre les prêtresses, les cultes sexuels et la «prostitution sacrée» de l'ancienne Méditerranée orientale.

Sumerian kings appropriated a ritual that originally installed a high priestess, in order to associate themselves with a Goddess' fertility, Her power, and, to some extent, Her divinity.

A deep concern for the fertility of land and people was central to ritual activity in ancient Eastern Mediterranean cultures, and, in some, cultic sexual intercourse constituted the mythic and ritual expression of that concern. The peoples of the area worshipped many deities, among them powerful "fertility" goddesses. Further, their deities were usually members of female-male pairs; this female-male complementarity normally extended to temple functionaries. In interpreting this concern with fertility and its sexual expression, scholars often state that these religions promoted sexual promiscuity and counted among their temple personnel "sacred prostitutes." I will review what scholars know about priestesses and about cultic sex in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean and try to determine whether "sacred prostitution" was widespread.

In Mesopotamia and, perhaps, other ancient Eastern Mediterranean cultures, the sexual ritual that scholars call "the Sacred Marriage" occurred in some form or other. If it involved human participants, they would have incarnated deities. Neither would have been a prostitute!

According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, "prostitution" means: "The offering of the body for indiscriminate lewdness for hire . . . ; whoredom, harlotry." By this definition, a prostitute is sexually promiscuous and, significantly, gets paid for sexual acts. Edwin Yamauchi's definition of "sacred prostitution," expanding on the dictionary one, is typical of scholarly pronouncements on the subject: "Cultic prostitution is a practice involving the female and at times the male devotees of fertility deities, who presumably dedicated their earnings to their deity" (213). He sees the "Sacred Marriage Rite" as one of the reasons for the practice, especially in Mesopotamia, where the king and "a temple prostitute" took the central roles. Obviously Yamauchi, as other scholars, is confusing ritual sex and paid sexual acts, whether sacred or not.

Prostitutes could have been available for hire near temples in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean area, but the evidence on priestesses does not support the argument that among them were "temple prostitutes." Further, the presentation of "cult prostitution" in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) seems to be partly responsible for the concept of "sacred prostitution."

Priestesses in ancient Mesopotamia

Rivkah Harris and other scholars have identified many Semitic and some Sumerian names for classes of priestess: *entu*, *naditu*, *ishtaritu*, and *qadishtu*. These terms and other information about Mesopotamian priestesses come from various places and periods, so that any generalizations I make must be somewhat speculative.

The *entu* priestess, the Sumerian *Nin-Dingir*, meaning "Lady Deity" or "Lady Who Is Goddess," was probably the "high priestess." She had elevated social status, but, in law, was subject to a strict code of ethics. If the "Sacred Marriage Rite" involved human participants, she would have incarnated the Goddess Inanna, later Ishtar, who had ritual intercourse with Her consort Dumuzi, later Tammuz. Unfortunately, we cannot be sure what happened in the temple's ritual bed chamber. However, in his persuasive article on the "Sacred Marriage," Douglas Frayne argues that, at least in earlier times, the king, incarnating Dumuzi, and the *Nin-Dingir* *entu*, the Goddess on Earth, had sexual intercourse.

The "Sacred Marriage Rite" was undoubtedly crucial to early Mesopotamian kingship. However, Douglas Frayne argues convincingly that the ritual was normally part of the installation of a new high priestess, but he refrains from speculating on the significance of this connection. Now, since evidence points to a later king's having replaced an earlier high priest as the male in the ritual, I suggest that Sumerian kings appropriated a ritual that originally installed a high priestess, in order to associate themselves with a Goddess' fertility, Her power, and, to some extent, Her divinity.

By historical times, the "Sacred Marriage Rite" served to underpin kingship in Mesopotamia. In cities other than Inanna's Uruk, the Goddess participating in the ritual was usually the protector Goddess of the city or the consort of the city's protector God. Normally the ritual identified Her with Inanna/Ishtar in order to validate the city's ruler through his relationship with the powerful Goddess. For a long time after the "Sacred Marriage Rite" and the office of high priestess had lost real significance, kings continued to call themselves "beloved of Inanna or Ishtar."

So important was the office of high priestess in Mesopo-

in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean

tamia that the conqueror of a city usually appointed a family member to that office (or as high priest of that city's protector deity). In this way, Enheduanna, perhaps the most famous Mesopotamian priestess, became high priestess of Moon God Nanna-Sin of the city of Ur. Flourishing around 2300 BCE (Before Common Era, same as BC), Enheduanna was daughter of Sargon, the earliest empire-building Semitic king. Author of many hymns to Inanna / Ishtar, Enheduanna is *the* very first poet in history whose name we know.

From the residence of the cloistered priestesses inside the temple-complex of the Moon God Nanna-Sin at Ur, archaeologists unearthed a damaged disc. One side of the disc depicted a ritual; the other carried an inscription. In the depiction, the tallest, thus most important, figure is a woman in a flounced dress like those that Goddesses wore; in addition, she wears a headdress reserved for priestesses. As another sign of rank, she supervises a naked male priest, who ritually waters a sacred tree. The inscription identifies "Enheduanna" as consort of Nanna-Sin and Sargon's daughter. Together, inscription and image suggest that the central figure is Enheduanna, high priestess of Ur (see Winter).

Significantly, the disc came from the cloister area; the high priestess may have been the senior *naditu* priestess, a kind of abbess. At the city of Sippar, between about 1880 and 1550 BCE, according to Rivkah Harris, *naditu* priestesses included royal and noble women. Harris argues that *naditu* derives from a root meaning "fallow, uncultivated." In some places, these priestesses could marry, but they could not bear children to their husband (see Jeyes). Perhaps this prohibition stemmed from the possibility

that they were all potential high priestesses, on whom also there was a prohibition against child bearing, except, maybe, as a result of the "Sacred Marriage Rite."

A *naditu* priestess's primary duty seems to have been to address daily prayers and offerings to her temple's divine couple. At Sippar she made offerings twice daily and a special monthly offering. In addition, she took part in yearly initiations of new *naditu* priestesses and attended at least six other festivals. It is not clear exactly what she did at these festivals and rituals, but none of the available evidence suggests that her duties were in any way sexual. Such priestesses in some localities or periods may have practised ritual sex, but there is no evidence that they did.

The many references to another class of priestess, the *ishritu*, meaning "devotee of Ishtar," sadly, give

us little information. She appears to have been a dedicated woman, who was, probably, also prohibited from bearing children, even though she could marry.

The same seems to have been true of the *qadishtu*, meaning "holy or tabooed or set-apart woman"; however, according to legal documents, *qadishtu* priestesses could bear children. As cult functionaries, they chanted at rituals, held up the deity's statue, and joined in various religious ceremonies. No evidence suggests that they performed sexual acts.

Mesopotamian society, then, expected its female cult functionaries to be chaste, and none of them had a sexual function in ritual, with the likely exception of high priestesses. However, because they were female, they may have been essential at most rituals, for female-male complementarity in officiants, as in deities, seems to have been the norm.



Linda Macfarlane, "Athena," graphite on paper, 7" x 7", 1996

Priestesses in ancient Syro-Palestine and the Hebrew Bible

Until recently, the scholarly consensus about Canaanite religion was that it was orgiastic and encouraged sexual promiscuity. The responsibility for this view lies primarily with the Hebrew Bible and, to some extent, with later sources, like Greek historian Heroditus (about 480 to about 425 BCE), Greek travel writer Strabo (about 64 BCE to 19 CE), and certain Christian writers.

Heroditus and Strabo, as well as the Christian writers, described Mesopotamian customs, not Canaanite ones. However, earlier scholars found their remarks useful, because they discussed ritual sex. In addition, the name of one class of Mesopotamian priestess, the *qadishru*, seemed helpful in the interpretation of the controversial term *qedeshah* in the Hebrew Bible; the term is usually translated as "sacred prostitute."

The later writers describe customs that the contemporary Babylonians supposedly practised—customs that required a woman, once in her life, to have sexual intercourse at a temple with the first stranger who offered her payment; afterwards, she dedicated the payment to the temple's Goddess. Of this "custom," Tikva Frymer-Kensky asserts: "No cuneiform text supports the idea that the women of Assyria or Babylon did this" (200). Significantly, as Yamauchi points out, these late commentaries are the "most explicit texts describing sacred prostitution in Mesopotamia" (216). Even if they were accurate—and scholars doubt that they were—what they describe does not fit the usual definition of "prostitution." Nonetheless, they had their influence on interpretations of the Hebrew Bible's references to the *qedeshah*.

Greek satirical writer Lucian (about 115 to about 200 CE), also very influential, described similar customs that he located in Syro-Palestine: during mourning rites for Adonis, women who refused to shave their heads had, for one day, to sell themselves in a "foreigners-only market." The women offered their fees to the goddess Astarte. Of course, this evidence is also very late, and Lucian was a satirist!

Qdsh, the root of the Mesopotamian Semitic word *qadishru*, means "holy, sacred"; the same root occurs in the Hebrew Bible's *qedeshah*. Thus, both words should mean not "sacred prostitute," but "holy or sacred woman."

Fortunately, we can get help from other Syro-Palestinian material than the Hebrew Bible. Since 1929, archaeologists excavating Ugarit, an ancient city in Syria, have been recovering thousands of clay tablets, dating from 1550-1200 BCE, that contain mythic poems, god and offering lists, and lists of religious functionaries. This material suggests that Ugaritic religion was essentially similar to Canaanite religion and that cult practice at Ugarit was not orgiastic. Indeed, Ugarit's fertility cult appears not to have been primarily sexual, nor is there unambiguous evidence for a "Sacred Marriage Rite" at Ugarit. Further, the tablets provide no suggestion of "cult prostitution."

However, the Ugaritic tablets do contain titles of some religious functionaries, but, as de Tarragon says, none is grammatically in the feminine gender. This fact may mean only that the masculine gender form, at Ugarit as elsewhere, was understood to include both male and female.

The *qdshm*, "holy men," seem to have been an important group of priests, for lists place them second only to the *khnm*, "priests." The group may have included women. The high-status *qdshm* could marry and establish families, and they could hold other offices. There is, in addition, no suggestion in the Ugaritic material that the *qdshm* had any sexual role in ritual, nor is there any evidence that they were "sacred prostitutes."

As early as 1941, Beatrice Brooks questioned the usual translation of *qedeshah* as "sacred prostitute," but only recently have scholars begun to rethink the term. Phyllis Bird argues that most previous discussion accepted that "sacred or cultic prostitution" had actually occurred in the context of fertility cults. This assumption, she maintains, resulted from the Hebrew Bible's "deliberate" association of *qedeshah*, "holy woman," with *zonah*, "prostitute" (76).

It seems likely, then, that an influential group of priestesses (the *qedeshah*) existed in Canaan. Otherwise, why would the writers of the Hebrew Bible take such trouble to discredit them? Their function in Canaanite religion is unknown, but they were almost certainly priestesses, as were their Mesopotamian counterparts.

Conclusion

Whether or not the Biblical *qedeshah* had a sexual function in ritual, it is highly likely that, in early ancient Mesopotamia, at least one category of female religious functionary, the *entu* priestess, did engage in sexual intercourse as the central act of a crucial fertility rite. This priestess almost certainly incarnated a Goddess on earth. Around her clustered groups of priestesses whose functions probably varied widely and large numbers of whom were sworn to chastity. They were priestesses in a religious system with complementarity of female and male; the "Sacred Marriage Rite" was a case in point.

Canaanite religion also was, as far as we know, one in which Goddesses and Gods were complementary and their complementarity necessary to the right ordering of the world. One example of the playing out of this complementarity on the human level comes from Ugarit. There, both the king and the queen had important roles in ritual, usually separate ones, but both necessary. It would be surprising to me if the same complementarity did not apply to the Canaanite religion that the Hebrew Bible describes. For instance, the Hebrew Bible understands the Canaanite Rain and Storm God Baal to be closely associated with the Goddess Ashtoreth (Astarte).

In Mesopotamia, according to Gruber (142), the *qadishru* priestesses had special connections to the worship of Adad (Baal Hadad). Is it possible that the "sacred women" of the Hebrew Bible were likewise associated with the cult of

Baal? Since Baal was unquestionably the chief rival of the Israelite god, would it not make sense that the writers of the Hebrew Bible would want His special priestesses to share in His shame and degradation?

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WOMEN AND TORAH

Wife Of

Noah's wife can be seen as a metaphor

for the thousands of women

who are nameless

receive no wordly recognition

whose stories need to be told.

As they entered the ark, Noah looked unto his wife

and they knew that life could continue.

She trusted

she believed

she toiled.

She endured.

Her labour created the haven that kept the breath of life.

For forty days and nights the waters swelled

The floodgates subsided.

Forth they came out of the ark.

Generations remember the man who built the ark

And she who maintained life is faceless.

Let us render homage to this woman and celebrate her strength.

Women and Torah is an independently operating subgroup of Tapestry, a Jewish feminist group in Calgary, which meets monthly to gain an understanding of women in the Torah, to discuss their roles, highlight their contribution to Judaism, and enhance their own spirituality through an understanding of their legacy. Members of the group include Carla Atkinson, Elaine Bucknum, Loretta Butot, Shirley Dunn, Jenny Glickman-Rynd, and Maggie Serpa.