

2010

# The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity

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## Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Deming, Will, "The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity" (2010). *Theology Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 1.  
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“distinguisher” (100) without comment (cf. Syriac *pāruqā*, “savior”). In the same passage, which lists the epithets of several prominent caliphs to the time of al-Ma’mūn, it is surprising that “al-Mahdī” should be flatly declared “not historical” (the caliph al-Mahdī ruled from 775 to 785); one might add that this most messianically styled of caliphs is given less than his due in a work on this topic. Any who check this assertion will find both “*mahdī*” and “al-Mahdī,” like “al-Ma’mūn” but unlike “*manṣūr*” and “Manṣūr, Abū Ja‘far,” missing from the index—the three passing references to al-Mahdī are found under “Muḥammad b. Ja‘far (the caliph al-Mahdī),” which is unlikely to help the nonspecialist.

Several matters of a more conceptual nature would also, in the view of the reviewer, have benefitted from clarification. The comparative contextual significance of messianic and apocalyptic prophecies is nowhere clearly delineated, though the two must reflect variant visions of the future. This absence is related to a wider inattention to the motives of the figures who invented and transmitted prophecies—“anxieties” are frequently invoked, but surely this is more than pious nail biting. Here again, attention to what historians have (biographical information about *ḥadīth* transmitters) instead of what they lack (prophecies about certain pivotal episodes in ‘Abbāsīd history) may have been in order. One notes finally a certain reluctance to explore the tension inherent in the book’s central argument: that messianic discourse was not only destructive but also sought “to maintain social, political, and economic order in a new form” (6). If the order is “new,” in what sense and to what degree is it “maintained”? The answer is not obvious and deserves discussion.

The author’s commitment to examining non-Muslim as well as Muslim prophecies is commendable and frequently helpful (using the work of Robert Hoyland to good effect). Yet it might have gone deeper. It is worth alerting the reader that a prophecy concerned with “the unification of diverse monotheistic confessions under a single supreme faith” that predicts that “the lion would join the cattle and the wolf would join the lamb” (46, 49) echoes Isaiah 11:6 and 65:25 (the author knows this but notes it only in a later, unconnected footnote [170]). Nowhere is it noted that the “voice from the sky” (cf. *ḥōnē ek tōn ouranōn*) that is to identify the *mahdī* (43) spoke also in Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22, and John 12:29 (it called Jesus “son”).

The author has done a valuable service by exposing ‘Abbāsīd prophetic discourse to further analysis, and readers will come away with a clearer idea of what it can—and cannot—tell us about the milieu that generated it and that it did much to change. Yet much systematic work remains to be done.

LUKE YARBROUGH, *Princeton University*.

BUDIN, STEPHANIE. *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xi+366 pp. \$90.00 (cloth).

In *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity*, Stephanie Budin gives her thesis simply and directly: “Sacred prostitution never existed in the Ancient Near East or Mediterranean” (1). According to her, “The vicious cycle that is sacred prostitution studies” is a “long-standing mistake, exacerbated by bad scholarship for some 2000+ years” (5, 13). The cycle began when scholars of ancient Near Eastern texts relied on classical accounts of sacred prostitution in Babylon, Egypt, and Phoenicia to define Semitic words for temple personnel. These

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definitions and the literature they engendered were then accepted by classicists, who used them to locate yet more cases of sacred prostitution in their own literature. Because research crossed disciplines in this way, advances in one discipline were not always noted in the other, and so the scholarship evolved by fits and starts and never revisited its initial premises (4–13). A critical examination of this scholarship reveals that there is no credible evidence for an ancient institution of sacred prostitution. Instead, what we have are a few questionable ethnographic reports of the practice buttressed by several purported instances that either have nothing to do with prostitution, nothing to do with religion, or, in some cases, nothing to do with either.

While Budin is not the first to question the relevance or the reliability of the evidence for sacred prostitution, she is the first to offer such an ambitious and comprehensive case against every purported instance of sacred prostitution in Mesopotamian and classical antiquity. In all, she examines ancient Near Eastern texts from outside the Bible (17–33, 45–47), biblical passages from both testaments (33–45, 260–65), Greco-Roman texts (48–259), and patristic authors (265–86), often citing earlier studies that arrive at similar conclusions but frequently taking issue with their approaches (e.g., 67–76, 93–94, 114–15).

Chief among the Greco-Roman texts, which occupy most of the book, are Herodotus's *Historiae* 1.199, Lucian's *De Syria dea* 6, the apocryphal Letter of Jeremiah 43, Pindar's fragment 122, and Strabo's *Geographica* (passim). Herodotus is key because he provides the first undeniable description of sacred prostitution and because his description becomes the paradigm for both ancient and modern authors. Thus Herodotus reports that all Babylonian women must, as a rite of passage, have intercourse with a foreigner in exchange for money, which is dedicated to the Babylonian Aphrodite. Of the other alleged reports of sacred prostitution, Lucian simply embellishes and sensationalizes Herodotus's account; and the Letter of Jeremiah, which may or may not have been influenced by Herodotus, was nonetheless interpreted by modern scholars in light of the historian. Strabo, in turn, seems genuinely confused about the practices he describes, inclining modern scholars to identify several cases of sacred prostitution in the work of this author by using Herodotus; and Pindar has been misinterpreted by ancient and modern readers alike through their familiarity with both Herodotus and Strabo.

Especially with regard to the classical material, one must agree with Budin, or at least admit that she has the better argument (if not always original to her). Mistakes were made. Yet it is by no means clear that Budin has managed to exonerate the uncompromising nature of her thesis that sacred prostitution never existed anywhere in antiquity. I suspect that many readers will want to question her proposed translation of the passage from Athenaeus (49–50), her suggestions for the meaning of *hierodoulos* (167–84) and *scorta* (251–52), or her line of argumentation for the Letter of Jeremiah (111); and, as a biblical scholar, I find her structural interpretation (à la Tribble) of Genesis 38 (38–42) and her tentative analysis of Deuteronomy (i.e., “although it is possible,” “may,” “could” [36]) to be inconclusive. Beyond this, Budin appears simply to have ignored important evidence. Thus, while she cites Karel van der Toorn's article, “Cultic Prostitution” (*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman [New York, 1992], 5:510–13), she never acknowledges or engages its conclusions (1–2).

Finally, it is important to recognize that some of what Budin claims depends entirely on her restrictive definition of sacred prostitution, which necessitates

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an “exchange of sex for some other commodity” (18). Using this definition, she is able to rule out sacred prostitution for any text that does not explicitly mention payment. But this approach overlooks the possibility that temple personnel, if they offered patrons sex, may have received support from the temple for this and other services as a matter of course. Further, it opens up the dangerous possibility that part of Budin’s thesis stands or falls on the basis of a technicality. To the extent that other scholars define sacred prostitution differently (e.g., those she cites on pp. 1–2), reexamining their evidence on the basis of a criterion that they might not accept does not necessarily negate their findings. Indeed, it seems rather to reduce this aspect of Budin’s argument to a claim that while other scholars may have found something worth studying—“the conflation of sexuality and religion” (18)—they have erred in using the wrong terminology. Put differently, Budin promotes a definition of sacred prostitution that guarantees she will not find this practice in antiquity. Indeed, she admits as much, although begrudgingly, when she writes, “What I offer here is not so much a definition of a ritual or institution or practice that took place in the ancient world, but rather a sketch of an artificial conglomeration of ideas that have been pulled together over the centuries into the image of a ritual or institution or practice” (3), having written in a sentence just before this, “What is ultimately important to remember, though, is that sacred prostitution did not exist.” But such a methodology begs two questions. First, why all the fuss and bother? Why, for example, begin the discussion of a text (e.g., 199), only to tell the reader later on (203) that the text is excluded from consideration anyway, by definition? Why not, rather, categorically exclude all such texts (which are perhaps the majority) at the beginning of the study? And second, why not talk about what we do have in the texts? Even if we grant that “sacred prostitution” so defined did not exist, we are still left with a phenomenon that Budin labels “sacred sex” (4) but never explores. In the end, while Budin’s study offers an overview of this whole area of research and a full bibliography, it often conjures up the image of someone banging in a bent nail with an unnecessarily large mallet, a process that is neither tidy nor conclusive. WILL DEMING, *University of Portland*.

STROUMSA, GUY G. *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity*. Translated by Susan Emanuel. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. xviii+136 pp. \$32.00 (cloth).

The end of sacrifice (“obviously a synecdoche,” the author informs us [xvi]) is one of several shifts charted with care and élan by Guy Stroumsa in this collection of essays. The first four essays derive from lectures delivered at the Collège de France (published in French in 2005; the *mutations religieuses* of the original subtitle have mutated further into “religious transformations” [xv]); the final essay was previously published elsewhere but coheres with Stroumsa’s overall themes: the material and intellectual invention of a new mode of religious being, whose societal symptoms (including intolerance and violence) linger on into modernity. The tone is cheerful and friendly but not unserious, the product of a deeply learned historian of religion doing a welcome turn as a public intellectual.

Stroumsa’s first essay treats the invention of a new religious “self” to be trained and inspected (the chapter title, “A New Care of the Self,” signals