Some Jewish Women in Antiquity

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CHAPTER 6

Prostitutes

Despite the Bible's severe standards of sexual mores, there is no explicit injunction against prostitutes. This is not to imply that the prophets viewed it with equanimity: numerous verses voice vehement opposition to prostitution, and the prophets employed it frequently as a figurative representation of moral-religious transgressions. Of the relations between God and the people of Israel, the metaphor of a loving married couple was frequently used.

The lack of any explicit biblical injunction against visiting a prostitute seems to reflect the profound insight that, though prostitution is never an honorable profession, neither is it a crime on the same scale as stealing or murder. Legislators of old realized the futility of trying to ban prostitution altogether, as it had always been an inseparable part of civilization.

The objective of this chapter in painting a picture of prostitution in antiquity, especially in Eretz Israel, is historical, not moral. The issue bears upon the entire social structure in antiquity, as well as upon the sexual politics of the time. Clearly, evidence of any kind of contact between the sages and prostitutes would shed new light on the social standing of the sages, as will be seen below. Let us now turn to our first source.

I. The Bible

In the biblical period there were two (perhaps three) types of prostitutes in Eretz Israel and throughout the Ancient Near East: temple prostitutes who performed sexual acts as part of cult worship and ordinary

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3 The idea of abolishing all prostitution from the land was familiar in the religious domain, and perhaps it, too, was based on economic motivation. See: Ez. 16:41; Ps. 73:27.
prostitutes providing sexual services for money. Obviously the cult prostitutes, acting in the name of religious worship, enjoyed greater social prestige than the others, motivated by the need to earn their livelihood.\footnote{An instructive analysis of the extra-biblical sources, in an attempt to ascertain the origin of the custom, can be found in: E. Westermarck, The History of Human Marriage, 5th ed. (MacMillan, London, 1925), I, pp. 207-235. On the status of prostitutes in Mesopotamia and determining the historical reliability of testimony describing cult prostitution in Canaanite worship, see: M. Gruber, "Kedesha", Beer-Sheba, III (1988), pp. 45-41 (Hebrew); Richard A. Henshaw, Female and Male: The Cultic Personnel (Pickwick Publications, Allison Park, PA, 1994), pp. 191-256.}

The Bible denounces contact with either kind; approaching a cult prostitute was perhaps castigated more harshly, since the practice reinforced the idolatry that the Israelites sought so fiercely to abolish.

Biblical literature barely alludes to direct contact with prostitutes; for the prophets, prostitution became a literary image for women's faithlessness. In fact, only isolated incidents of men engaging prostitutes are mentioned: Judah went to a prostitute, or so he believed (Gen. 38) until he discovered that the woman was none other than his daughter-in-law Tamar, in disguise.\footnote{Note the difference: Tamar, daughter-in-law of Judah, "rapes" a man (like the daughters of Lot), while Tamar, daughter of David (descended from Judah and Tamar) herself is raped. In both cases the degree of kinship on both sides makes the union forbidden by biblical law.} Judah promised to send the woman a kid from his flock as payment, with his Adullamite friend: "he inquired of the people of that town, 'where is the cult prostitute,' only to hear the reply, 'there has been no prostitute here.'"\footnote{Note how Tamar's appellation changes. In Gen 38:15 "he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face" (Gen 38:15). It continues with Judah asking the local people "Where is the cult prostitute" (Gen 38:21), and later he is told "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot", (verse 24), and Judah rules that she be burned (as in Lev. 21:9). See also: Michael C. Astour, "Tamar the Hierodule", JBL, 85 (1966), pp. 185-196; Mordechai A. Friedman, "Tamar, A Symbol of Life: The 'Killer Wife' Superstition in the Bible and Jewish Tradition", AJR Review, 15 (1990), pp. 23-61.} There was apparently only a minimal difference between a cult prostitute and an ordinary prostitute. When the Israelites crossed the desert, "the people profaned themselves by whoring." The text continues: "The people partook of [sacrifices for their god] and worshipped that god" (Num. 25:1-2). Idolatry was also the cause of the plague that wiped out twenty-four thousand Israelites.

The prophets pronounced the following injunction against ordinary prostitutes and cult prostitutes: "No Israelite woman shall be a cult prostitute, nor shall any Israelite man be a cult prostitute. You shall not bring the fee of a whore or the pay of a dog into the house of the Lord your God in fulfillment of any vow, for both are abhorrent to the Lord
your God” (Deut. 23:18-19). For the prophets, then, this combination of worship and sexual acts was abhorrent, and they forbade Israelites — men and women alike — from serving as cult prostitutes or taking part even indirectly in the cult worship of such prostitutes. For instance, if a cult prostitute received a kid as payment and came to the temple to fulfill a vow — such as promising to sacrifice a kid if God granted her a child — the temple priests were forbidden to accept the kid as sacrifice. From this prohibition (and from external sources), we learn that the word “dog” here refers to a male prostitute hired by women for sexual relations. The payment received by male prostitutes was also banned from the temple. Cult prostitutes, termed an abomination by the prophets, acted in or adjacent to the temple, as in the pagan cults of the time (and of early Islam).  

The spies sent by Joshua to Canaan found shelter with the prostitute Rahab in Jericho. This indicates that prostitutes lived close by the city walls, where a constant stream of strangers passed by. Samson, too, went to a prostitute in Gaza (presumably a non-Jewish one), but the social context of these incidents is unclear.

The famous judgment of Solomon, demonstrating the king’s great wisdom, teaches us also that prostitutes lived together in communities, with their children. These children were obviously raised in sorry conditions. Child mortality points to neglect, but motherly feelings still stirred the prostitutes, sparking fights over their parental rights to the survivor. Even when a child of a prostitute grew and became a man of great prowess, he, as an illegitimate child, never inherited his father as legitimate children did. We learn this from the case of Jephthah. His attitude to his only daughter, whom he sacrificed to God, is somehow

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7 A biblical example of this are the sons of Eli who “lay with the women who performed tasks at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” (1 Sam. 2:22). Women came to the temple (asking God to grant them a child, for instance). The barren woman is most humiliated in the Bible. See also: M. Baer, "Banan selv Eli beaggadat Hazal", Bar-Ilan, 14-15 (1977), pp. 79-93 (Hebrew).
8 Josh. 2:1; Judg. 16:9. According to the pseudo-Philo apocryphal composition (43:5), Delilah was a prostitute, though this is not stated explicitly in the Bible.
9 1 Kings 3:16 ff. It should be noted that in the case of Rahab and at Solomon’s trial, the king speaks to prostitutes, showing that the social standing of the prostitutes was not as lowly as might have been imagined: see further below.
10 Judg. 11:1 ff., and see Astour, above, n. 6. In the biblical period the child of a prostitute was considered a bastard: “No one misbegotten shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord” (Deut. 21:3). For this reason, bastards were not allowed to take part in the community, as happened to Jephthah who “was the son of a prostitute... they drove Jephthah out... So Jephthah fled from his brother and settled in the Tob country” (Judg. 11:1-3).
linked to his own childhood as a prostitute's son growing up without a father.\(^{11}\)

In the time of King Jeroboam (tenth century B.C.E.), The Bible says, "There were also male prostitutes in the land" (1 Kings 14:24), who served in the cult worship. A woman would come to pray to God, and the priest would have sexual relations with her. The verse continues: "Judah imitated all the abhorrent practices of the nations that the Lord had dispossessed before the Israelites." It is clear that the prophets denounced this worship. Of King Asa we read: "Asa did what was pleasing to the Lord, as his father David had done. He expelled the male prostitutes from the land, and he removed all the idols that his ancestors had made. He also deposed his mother Maacha from the rank of queen mother, because she had made an abominable thing for [the goddess] Asherah. Asa cut down her abominable thing and burned it in the Wadi Kidron" (2 Kings 15:11-13).

King Asa killed male prostitutes who served idolatrous cults, and even deposed his mother Maacha from her position as priestess to Asherah, who is identified with the goddess Ashtoreth. From the fact that the biblical author mentions, in the same breath, idolatrous cults to both gods and goddesses, presumably male prostitutes worshipped Baal, while Asherah was served by female prostitutes. This might explain the beliefs, held even in the highest social circles in Jerusalem, that the god had a wife\(^{12}\) and the god and goddess each required cult prostitutes.

Though Asa abolished male prostitution, it did not die out, as we learn from the description: "He also stamped out the remaining male prostitutes who had survived in the land from the time of his father Asa" (I Kings 22:47). However, as Asa was unable to abolish male prostitution entirely, it may be assumed that his son Jehoshaphat was equally unsuccessful.

The death in battle of Ahab, King of Israel, is described in the following manner: "and they flushed out the chariot in the pool of Samaria. Thus the dogs lapped up his blood and the whores bathed [in it], in accordance with the word that the Lord had spoken" (1 Kings 22:38).

\(^{11}\) In psychological terms, a prostitute's son can be said to exact his revenge upon the women who raised him, and sacrificed his beloved daughter just as fathers sacrificed their male children (Abraham, the king of Moab (2 Kings, 3:27). The social position of bastards improved over the years, and only marriage was forbidden to them. In the Middle Ages, commentators held that Jephthah's daughter was not really sacrificed, but she lived a life of abstinence. See L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Ramat-Gan, 1975), V, p. 140 (Hebrew).

\(^{12}\) This is not the place to discuss these opinions, but see M. Weinfeld, "Yoman Pirsumim", *Shnaton le-Mikra uleheker ha-mizrah ha-kadum*, 4 (1989), pp. 280-284 (Hebrew).
The dogs and whores were allowed to defile the blood of Ahab. “Dogs” are the male prostitutes, as their mention alongside the prostitutes shows. It is possible that the dogs licking the king’s blood and the bathing in the blood were part of the cultic worship of male or female temple prostitutes serving Baal and the goddess Kibla.13 The Bible tells us that King Josiah scourged Jerusalem to abolish idolatry from the city in the last third of the seventh century B.C.E. He removed the altars from various places in the country. He also did the following:

He brought out the image of Asherah from the House of the Lord to the Kidron Valley outside Jerusalem, and burned it in the Kidron Valley; he beat it to dust and scattered its dust over the burial ground of the common people. He tore down the cubicles of the male prostitutes in the House of the Lord, at the place where the women wove coverings for Asherah. (2 Kings 23:6-7).

Like Josiah’s restoration of the Yahweh cult, Asa’s campaign for the purging of idolatry included uprooting the asherah (either a tree or the image of the goddess) from the House of the Lord and banishing the male prostitutes from the temple God, a place frequented by women too. Here and in other descriptions, it can be seen that these women were both prostitutes and priestesses. Until that time, it was apparently customary in Jerusalem to combine sexual acts with religious worship. The phrase “where the women wove” does not bear any sexual connotation, but their mention in proximity to the allusion to male prostitutes indicates that the women who wove (clothes for the goddess, presumably) also engaged in sexual acts of cult worship.14

A manifestation of the connection between prostitutes and the cult milieu can be seen in the character of the wife of the prophet Hosea. The prophet is instructed by God: “Go, get yourself a wife of whoredom and children of whoredom,” (Hosea 1:2) and the prophet went and married Gomer daughter of Diblaim.15 In the pagan world as well as in the Yahweh cult, going to a prostitute could be a religious act.16

14 See: 1 Baruch 10:19; b. Ketubot 106a; Pesikta Rabbati 26, 131a. The weaving women, like the women who keened over Tammuz (see Ch. Three) in the temple, and male prostitutes in the houses, also engaged in sexual relations in the temple courts. Temple prostitutes brought their payment to the altar, and would dress the goddess and feed, wash and anoint her.
15 For an explanation of this matter and of the name Gomer in particular, see: Y. Dvir, Yiuda shel ha-shlihut ba-shem ha-mikra’i (Tel-Aviv, 1969), p. 191 (Hebrew).
16 On the opinion held by the commentators that such a marriage never took place, see:
Cult prostitution was abolished in one form, only to reappear in another. Evidence of this, though not fully clear, appears in the Scholion of Megillat Ta’anit for the date of the twenty-third of the month of Marheshvan: “for the gentiles built a site there and stood the prostitutes upon it, and when the house of the Hasmoneans grew strong, they took it from them and destroyed it.”17 The Hellenist rulers reinstated idolatry in the temple, along with the practices of prostitution, which the prophets and kings of Israel had tried to abolish centuries earlier.

In any event, at the close of the First Temple period or a short while later, cult prostitution disappeared, leaving only ordinary prostitutes in the land, as seen in talmudic sources, which, due to the nature of the documents, provide information lacking in biblical accounts.

II. The Talmud

There are quite a few anecdotes about prostitutes in talmudic literature. This anecdote became familiar after its inclusion in the prayerbook.18

1 B. Menahot 44a quotes the following baraita:

Once a man, who was very scrupulous about the precept of zizith, heard of a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted four hundred gold [denars] for her hire. He sent her four hundred gold denars and appointed a day with her. When the day arrived he came and waited at her door, and the maid came and told her, “The man who sent you four hundred gold denars is here and waiting at the door,” to which she replied, “let him come in.” When he came in, she prepared for him seven beds, six of silver and one of gold, and between one bed and the other there were steps of silver, but the last were of gold. She then went up to the top bed and lay down upon it naked. He too went up after her in his desire to sit naked with her, when all of a sudden the four fringes [of his garment] struck him across the face, whereupon he slipped off and sat upon the ground. She also slipped off and sat upon the ground and said, “By the Roman Capitol, I will not let you alone until you tell me what blemish you saw in me.” “By the Temple,” he replied, “Never have I seen a woman as beautiful as you

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are, but there is one precept which the Lord our God has commanded us, it is called zizith... Now [the zizith] appeared to me as four witnesses testifying against me.” She said, “I will not leave you until you tell me your name, the name of your town, the name of your teacher, the name of your school in which you study the Torah.” He wrote all this down and handed it to her. Thereupon she rose and divided her estate into three parts: one third for the government, one third to be distributed among the poor, and one third she took with her in her hand. The bedclothes, however, she retained. She then came to the Beth ha-Midrash of R. Hyya and said to him, “Master, give instructions about me that they make me a proselyte.” “My daughter,” he replied, “perhaps you have set your eye on one of the disciples?” She thereupon took out the script and handed it to him. “Go,” said he, “and enjoy your acquisition.” Those very bedclothes which she had spread for him for an illicit purpose, she now spread out for him lawfully.

Although the main theme of this story is the commendation of the wearing of ritual fringes as protection from sinful behavior, another theme appears: the contact between sages and prostitutes. A disciple in the study-house, a man known to the teacher, apparently a rich man who traveled overseas, presumably to Rome, went (like Samson) to a prostitute, and not a cheap one, either. She eventually converted to Judaism and came to Eretz Israel. Evidently even among the sages there were some who consorted with prostitutes, and non-Jewish ones to boot.

2 Another edifying story about the contact between sages and prostitutes is found in b. Abodah Zarah 17a:

19 The parallel is in Sifre Num. 115. The best text of the Sifre is Rome MS 32. The textual variants in the Sifre are minor compared with the Talmud, and it seems that the compiler of the Sifre, for reasons of modesty, did not state explicitly that they were naked. For more on this story, from a different perspective, see: A. Goshen-Gottstein, “Mitzvat zizit, ha-azonah ve-sipur ha-darshani”, Ts. Groner and M. Hirshman (eds.), Mahshevet Hazal: Divrei ha-Kenes ha-Rishon (Haifa, 1990), pp. 45-58 (Hebrew).

20 The price of four hundred zuz is clearly literary hyperbole (like the four hundred boys and girls, Chapter One, above). Compare to the prostitute’s fee discussed below. On the payment of prostitutes in antiquity, see: Sarah B. Pomeroy, Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity (Robert Hale, London, 1975).

21 The following story in b. Megilla 14b is attributed to R. Nahman: “Eight prophets who were also priests were descended from Rahab the harlot... She became a proselyte and Joshua married her.” (see Chapter One). This is a case of a prostitute who converted to Judaism, married one of the great men of the time, and became the ancestor of prophets. The same idea appears in Matthew 1:5: “And to Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab”. According to the common historical background of these legends with the story discussed here, apparently one or more of the prominent men of the time consorted with a non-Jewish prostitute, who converted to Judaism, engendering a line that included sages.

22 According to S. Abramson (ed.), Abodah Zarah MS (New York, 1957), p. 29. In another version the title “rabbi” is added (along with a prayer to pagan gods). However, only after he repented and died did a voice from heaven call out “rabbi”, and the text continues: “Rabbi said: it is not enough that those who have repented are accepted –
It was said of R. Eleazar b. Dardoya that he did not leave out any harlot in the world without coming to her. Once, on hearing that there was a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted a purse of denarii for her hire, he took a purse of denarii and crossed seven rivers for her sake. As he was with her, she blew forth breath and said: "As this blown breath will not return to its place, so will Eleazar b. Dardoya never be received in repentance." He thereupon went, sat between two hills and mountains and exclaimed: "O, ye hills and mountains, plead for mercy for me!" The replied: "How shall we plead for thee? We stand in need of it ourselves." ... "Heaven and earth, plead ye for mercy.... Ye stars and constellations...." Said he: "The matter then depends upon me alone!" Having placed his head between his knees, he wept aloud until his soul departed. Then a bath-kol was heard proclaiming: "Rabbi Eleazar b. Dardoya is destined for the life of the world to come."

In this story, too, a Jew visits an expensive prostitute in another country. Both sinners repented: indeed, the main theme and purpose of the Talmud in recounting the tales was to encourage repentance; the authors of the story show great awareness and understanding of human weakness. This time there is a tragic ending, with the only glimmer of optimism being Elazar b. Dardoya’s reward in the hereafter. The only unusual element in this story is Elazar b. Dardoya’s appeal in prayer to forces that can be construed as angels of God, contrary to the prevailing opinion of the talmudic sages. Elazar b. Dardoya apparently did not belong to the circle of sages. Only after his repentance did he merit the title “rabbi”. The story shows that a Jew, known to the sages, though his connection with the study-house is not clear, went to a prostitute, and ultimately repented.

3 B. Berakhot 23a (and an allusion in y. Berakhot 1:3, 4b) tells a story in the context of a halakhic discussion: "One who enters a regular privy takes off his tefillin at a distance of four cubits and puts them in the window on the side of the public way and enters."

For a certain student once left his tefillin in a hole adjoining the public way, and a harlot passed by and took them, and she came to the Beth ha-Midrash and said, “See they are also called “rabbi.” See also: M. Baer, “Al Ma’asei kapara shel ba’alei-teshuva besifrut Hazal,” Zion, 46 (1971) p. 159-181 (and especially p. 163, Hebrew).

23 Of prayers to angels, see E.E. Urbach, The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts – London, 1994), pp. 181-183. Regarding this particular prayer (the appeal to angels), see The Fathers According to R. Nathan, Ver. A, 12. In the past there were many more prayers like Elazar b. Dardoya’s, as can be learned from the text of the prayer said by Moses in the following sources: Yehudah Hadassi, Eshkol ha-Kofer (Gozlaw, 1836), 109b (Hebrew); A.M. Habermann, Helkat Mehokek (Jerusalem, 1947), p. 62 ff. (Hebrew). Compare these prayers to the prayer to the sun and moon for Adam in The Book of Adam and Eve 36,2. Note that, in fact, this prayer is quite different from extant prayers of repentance or confession: there is no recognition of sin here, nor of resolve to act properly in the future.
what So-and-so gave me for my hire," and when the student heard it, he went to the
top of a roof and threw himself down and killed himself. Thereupon they ordained
that a man should hold them in his garment and in his hand and then go in.

This story is recounted in order to explain halakhic change regarding
the proper placement of phylacteries when entering a privy. However, a
close reading of the gemara shows that it was not only the prostitute
who removed the phylacteries from their hiding-place; mice and other
passers-by did so as well. The historical context still remains in need of
clarification, and its historical truth cannot be determined conclusively:
did the sage really leave his phylacteries in the hands of a prostitute as a
pledge of payment (as did Judah), or did she frame him? Did she herself
remove the phylacteries from their hiding place without having had
any contact with the disciple?

The publicity that the prostitute gave her actions and the suicide of
the suspect incriminate him, implying that he did in fact visit the
prostitute. The prostitute in this story is credible, unlike Tamar: it will
be recalled that Tamar was sentenced to be burned for engaging in
prostitution, until she produced the seal, the candle and the staff
belonging to Judah. Here, however, the prostitute was not the accused
but the accuser, leading to the conclusion that she was having her fun.
She knew exactly where the sage customarily hid his phylacteries and
took advantage of the opportunity to inculpate him. What did she hope
to gain? The death of Elazar b. Dardoya, who undoubtedly consorted
with the prostitute, and of the disciple in the second story, seem to point
to their guilt. Death would seem to follow upon sin, according to the
principle “death exonerates sin.” This points to the probability that the
disciple did indeed visit the prostitute and was not unfairly accused.

The disciple, then, went to a prostitute and left a pledge with her (or
forgot his phylacteries, having taken them off there). Since he did not
pay, the woman came to the study-house to collect her due. Preferring
death to public humiliation, he committed suicide. From the redaction

24 Cf. a similar story in b. Sanhedrin 11a: “A story is related of a woman who appeared
at the Beth haMidrash of R. Meir and said to him, “Rabbi, one of you has taken me to
wife by cohabitation.” Thereupon he rose up and gave her a bill of divorce, after which
every one of his disciples stood up in turn and did likewise.” R. Meir did not claim that
the woman framed one of his pupils – he accepted her claim and gave her a divorce to
protect the disciple’s reputation, though he was neither identified nor vilified alto­
gether (see m. Kiddushin 1:1).

25 Cf. Pesikta Rabbati 22, 11b on blasphemy: “One may not wear his phylacteries, and
wrap himself in the tallith, and then go commit sins.” Thus, Eleazar was saved from sin
thanks to his prayer shawl, which he did not remove; the disciple who removed his
phylacteries was not saved from sin. Cf. M. Bar-Ilan, “Ve-samu et shmi al benei
Yisrael”, HUCA, 60 (1989), Hebrew section, pp. 19-31 (especially 28 ff.)
of the story it seems that his colleagues did not suspect him of seeing a prostitute.

4 B. Hagigah 15a tells how God wishes all sinners to repent, except for the apostate Elishah b. Abuyah. The sage says:

“Since I have been driven forth from yonder world, let me go forth and enjoy this world.” So Aher went forth into evil courses. He went forth, found a harlot and demanded her. She said to him, “Art thou not Elisha b. Abuyah?” [But] when he tore a radish out of its bed on the Sabbath and gave it to her, she said: “It is another [Aher].”

Theoretically at least, the sages were supposed to be above the need for such worldly pleasures. For b. Abuyah, leaving the social circle of the sages was a physical act, symbolized by his visit to a prostitute. (How did the prostitute recognized the sage by name — does this imply previous acquaintance?)

5 Further examples of the connection between the sages and prostitutes appear in two stories in b. Bava Metzia 85a:

Rabbi chanced to visit the town of R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon. “Did that righteous man leave a son?” he inquired. “Yes,” they replied, “and every harlot whose hire is two zuz hires him for eight.” So he had him brought before him, ordained him a Rabbi, and entrusted him to R. Simeon b. Isi b. Lacunia.

Rabbi chanced to visit the town of R. Tarfon. Said he to them, “Has this righteous man who used to swear by the life of his children, left a son?” “He has left no son, but a daughter’s son remains, and every harlot whose hire is two zuz hires him for eight.” He had him brought before him, and said to him: “Should you repent, I will give you my daughter.” He repented.

The first story suggests that R. Simeon b. Yohai’s grandson, Yossi, was a male prostitute. Ordained “rabbi,” he studied with R. Simeon b. Isi b. Lacunia and proved that he was deserving of his title. R. Tarfon’s grandson was also involved in prostitution, but repented.

Both stories were redacted in the same dialogic format to show that grandsons of rabbis still belonged to the milieu of the sages by virtue of their family merit. Repentance is a possibility even for those who strayed and engaged in prostitution. Though the picture painted here is lurid, telling how female prostitutes hired male prostitutes to satisfy their lust,26 still we learn that the grandsons of R. Simeon b. Yohai and

26 This picture of a female prostitute hiring a male prostitute to satisfy her sexual appetite seems farfetched, but the idea recurs again in the words of R. Hisda in b. Abodah Zarah 17a: “Every harlot who is hired, ends up hiring.” Evidently the practice existed in antiquity.
of R. Tarfon (end of the second century C.E. or beginning of the third) regularly visited prostitutes. Furthermore, the first story shows how someone of the lowest spiritual level can still be called “rabbi,” despite not having studied.

6 B. Pesahim 113a-b reports the opinion of R. Yohanan: “Concerning three does the Holy One, blessed be He, make proclamation every day: a bachelor who lives in a large town without sinning, etc.” This tradition was recited before Rabah in Babylonia, and he interpreted it according to the following story:

R. Hanina and R. Oshaia were cobblers in Eretz Israel and dwelt in a street of harlots and made shoes for harlots and went in to them. They (the harlots) looked at them, but they (the scholars) would not lift their eyes to look at them, and their (the harlots') oath was: “by the life of the holy rabbis of Eretz Israel.”

A man indeed needs great strength of character to work in the prostitutes’ market and deal with them as customers, without sinning. We know from talmudic literature of sages who overcame their desire and did not commit adultery (a sin worse than going to a prostitute). Here, two sages lived among prostitutes and were on familiar terms with them; nevertheless, they refrained from contact with them. However, the following story shows that this was the rare exception.

7 The homily in Ex. Rabbah 43:7 (tr. S.M. Lehrman, London, 1939, p. 502) in the name of R. Yohanan explains how the Israelites in Egypt came to practice idolatry:

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27 The Rashbam’s commentary interprets the oath as one said by the prostitutes. However, I believe the oath was common to all inhabitants of Babylonia, who, hearing the story of the righteousness of the sages in Eretz Israel, would use this formula of an oath. Cf. the Rabbanan Kaddish prayer: “For Israel and for the sages... in this holy place and in every place,” preceded by “by your life,” which is the formula of an oath.

28 Cf. Num. Rabbah 9,7: “From where is it known that Israel are called holy when they abstain from adultery and licentiousness? As it is written, (Lev. 20:7), “You shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I the Lord am your God.”

29 See the series of miracles attributed to R. Hanina b. Papi, R. Zadok and R. Cahana in b. Kiddushin 39b-40a. They withstood temptation when ordered to sin with a “matron,” a gentle woman of high social standing. See other miracle stories about Amram the Hasid, R. Meir and R. Akiva in b. Kiddushin 81a, and the story about R. Matya b. Harash in Yalkut Shimon on Gen., 161 (and in Tanhuma Buber, Vilna 1885, p. 131); Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibrot, A. Yellinck, Beit Hamidrash (Jerusalem, 1938), I, pp. 79-80 (where Satan appears before the sage “as a beautiful woman, of beauty unmatched since Na’ama, sister to Tuval Cain.” B. Kiddushin 61b recounts how R. Hiyya b. Ashi’s wife disguised herself, called herself Harutha (Rashi: the name of a well-known prostitute in the town); her husband then approached her as a prostitute.
It can be compared to a wise man who opened a perfumery shop for his son in a street frequented by harlots. The street did its work, the business also did its share; and his youth likewise contributed its part, with the result that the son fell into evil ways. When the father came and caught him amidst the prostitutes, he began to shout: "I will slay thee!" But his friend was there, and he said: "Thou wert the means of destroying [the character] of this youth, and yet thou dost shout at him! Thou didst ignore all other professions and hast taught him only to be a perfumer, and thou didst forsake all other districts and hast opened a shop for him just in the street where prostitutes dwell!"

This story presumably draws upon actual circumstances to show how a young man is easily led astray when finding himself in the company of prostitutes.

8 An additional encounter between sages and prostitutes, similar to the story of the righteous men in Eretz Israel, appears in b. Abodah Zarah 17a-b:

R. Hanina and R. Jonathan were walking on the road and came to a parting of ways, one of which led by the door of a place of idol-worship and the other led by a harlots' place. Said the one to the other: "Let us go [through the one leading] by the place of idolatry, the inclination for which has been abolished. The other however said: "Let us go [through that leading] by the harlots' place and defy our inclination and have our reward." As they approached the place, they saw the harlots withdraw at their presence.

The story tells of two sages in Eretz Israel in the third century C.E. Their act of bravery was to pass by a brothel, withstand temptation and refrain from entering. When the prostitutes saw the sages, instead of approaching them as they would do to any customer, they hid inside the brothel. They were presumably Jewish women who feared the sages would recognize them.

This was improper behavior for a sage, as the following interpretation shows In (The Fathers According to R. Nathan, Version B, 3, tr. A Saldarini, Leiden 1975, p. 47):

Where are we told that the Writing made a hedge about their words? Scripture says: "Keep your way far from her [a loose woman]," (Prov. 5:8.) A man is told: "Do not walk down this street or enter this alley, for there is a prostitute here; she is an attractive woman and she seduces all creatures by her beauty." He said: "I am

30 The same story appears in b. Berakhot 32a: "It is like the case of a man who had a son; he bathed him and anointed him and gave him plenty to eat and drink and hung a purse round his neck and set him down at the door of a bawdy house. How could the boy help sinning?".

31 A good example of how a woman, not necessarily a prostitute, "drew everyone after her by her beauty" can be found in the positive comments made by Zrubabel about women in the apocryphal 3 Ezra, 4:13-32.
confident that although I walk (there), I won’t look at her and I won’t desire her beauty.” He is told: “Although you are confident, don’t go.”

While some sages avoided passing through the marketplace frequented by prostitutes, others made no effort to avoid such encounters.

9 B. Abodah Zarah 18a-b tells how and why R. Meir entered a brothel:

Beruria, the wife of R. Meir, was a daughter of R. Hanina b. Teradion. Said she [to her husband], I am ashamed to have my sister placed in a brothel. So he took a tarkah full of denarii and set out. If, thought he, she has not been subjected to anything wrong, a miracle will be wrought for her, but if she has committed anything wrong, no miracle will happen to her. Disguised as a knight, he came to her and said, “Prepare thyself for me.” She replied, “The manner of women is upon me.” “I am prepared to wait.” he said. “But,” said she, “there are here many, many prettier than I am.” He said to himself, that proves that she has not committed any wrong, she no doubt says thus to every comer... Others again say that Elijah the Prophet appeared to them as a harlot who embraced him. God forbid, said they, were this R. Meir, he would not have acted thus! and they left him. He then arose and ran away and came to Babylon.

There are several levels of meaning in this story, and it is difficult to determine its historical truth. R. Meir was spotted by Jews, apparently in Rome, embracing a prostitute, but since they could not believe he would do such a thing they gave him the benefit of the doubt. The following story in The Fathers According to R. Nathan, Version A, chapter 8, (tr. J. Goldin, New Haven, 1955, p. 51)34 recounts that R. Meir was involved in such a situation:

32 See the parallel in Version A, 2: “Do not enter this alley, as there is a prostitute there, attractive and fine... so that one does not grow accustomed to passing by the door of a harlot, as it is written: ‘For many are those she has struck dead, and numerous are her victims’ (Prov. 7:26).”

33 He followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly” (Num. 25:8). As to knowledge of the sister’s presence in the brothel (confirmed by other sources), Sifre Deut. 32, 4, 307 has: “They said to his daughter: it is decreed that your father be burned and your mother killed, and you must go to work.” “To work” is clearly a euphemism for prostitution. However, Midrash Haggadol on Gen. 27:3, has “to do work on the Sabbath”; this shows that the compiler or scribe did not understand the denotation of “work” in this context, and related it to the ban on doing any labor on the Sabbath. The same thing happened in b. Megilla 12b: “This [remark] teaches you that the wicked Vashti used to take the daughters of Israel and strip them naked and make them work on Sabbath.” The words “on Sabbath” are redundant here, as the issue is not the desecration of the Sabbath, but rather, prostitution carried out before the queen for her enjoyment (Cf. b. Gittin 58a).

34 Cf. other stories of a similar character in b. Shabbat 127b; The Fathers According to R. Nathan ibid. and Version B, ch. 19, p. 41; all these stories imply that the sages faced strong sexual temptation.
And judge everyone with the scale weighted in his favor. There was once a young girl who had been taken captive, and two saintly folk went after her to ransom her. One of them entered the harlots' apartment. When he came out he asked his companion: "What didst thou suspect me of?" The other replied: "Of finding out perhaps for how much money she is being held." Said the first: "By the Temple service, so it was!" and he added: "Even as thou didst judge me with the scale weighted in my favor, so may the Holy One, blessed be He, judge thee with the scale weighted in thy favor."

The circumstances underlying R. Meir's visit to the brothel recur elsewhere: it stands to reason that the Roman enemy, like other conquering armies, used female prisoners as prostitutes, and several references to this appear in talmudic literature. It transpires from the story that R. Meir went to redeem his sister-in-law from the brothel, redemption of prisoners being an important commandment. Jews frequently did so for relatives and fellow Jews taken prisoner. After it was discovered that R. Meir bribed the brothel's guard, R. Meir had to escape to Babylonia. There is a marked legendary stamp to this story, and we can presume that the historical reality was less noble. Nevertheless, the story's underlying message is that Jewish women were prostitutes in the Roman empire after they were captured in Eretz Israel. Some of these women were ransomed and freed, while others remained, unless they committed suicide or died of grief.

10 Lamentations Rabbah 1 (16, 46, tr. A. Cohen, London 1939, pp. 127-8) tells the following story of prisoners and prostitutes:

It is related that the two children of Zadok the priest, one a boy and the other a girl, were taken captive, each falling to the lot of a different officer. One officer resorted to a harlot and gave her the boy [as a slave]. The other went to a store-keeper and gave him the girl for wine... After a while the harlot brought the boy to the shopkeeper and said to him, "Since I have a boy who is suitable for that girl, will you agree that they should marry and the issue will be divided by us?" He accepted the offer... They embraced and kissed until they expired. Then the Holy Spirit cried out, "For these things I weep."

Here, then, is another incident of the treatment of Jewish women in captivity at the hands of Roman soldiers. This time, the woman was a slave in a merchant's house. The sister did not engage in prostitution, but her brother was taken to a prostitute, probably as payment. His fate is unclear, but we have already seen above that at times female

35 See Amos 7:17: "Your wife shall play the harlot in the town, your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword." Compare to the girls who jumped into the sea, aware that they were going to be used as whores, above, Chapter One.
prostitutes would hire male prostitutes: perhaps the young prisoner was required to provide sexual services. The ending was tragic. The brother and sister were not ransomed, and died of grief. Jewish prisoners — men and women alike — shared the bitter fate of enforced prostitution.

11 M. Horayot 3:7 speaks of the commandment to redeem prisoners (The Mishnah, tr. H. Danby, Oxford 1933, p. 466):

A man must be saved alive sooner than a woman, and his lost property must be restored sooner than hers. A woman’s nakedness must be covered sooner than a man’s and she must be brought out of captivity sooner than he. When both stand in danger of defilement, the man must be freed before the woman.

This halakha appears in t. Horayot 2:5, (The Tosefta, tr. J. Neusner, New York, 1981, p. 351), where the term “disgrace” is used in reference to a brothel.37 The following story appears there:

R. Joshua went [to Rome], and they told him: “There is here a child from Jerusalem with beautiful eyes and a handsome face, and he is in danger of shame.” R. Joshua went to look into the matter. When he came to the door, he recited this verse... At that instant said R. Joshua: “I call to testify against me the heaven and the earth, that I shall not move from this spot until I shall redeem this child!” He redeemed him for a huge sum of money and sent him to the Land of Israel.

In this story, a youth from Jerusalem was taken prisoner, brought to Rome and sold to a brothel of male prostitutes. Luckily for him, unlike in the previous incident, he was freed, and ultimately became a scholar.


R. Phinehas said: It happened that two harlots of Ashkelon were quarreling. In the course of the quarrel one said to the other, “You should not go out because you look like a Jewess.” They subsequently became reconciled, and the one said, “I forgive you everything you said except the remark that I look like a Jewess.”

The midrash recounts that even among the non-Jewish prostitutes of Ashkelon, the lowliest of the gentiles, the standing of the Jew was lower still. R. Phinehas wanted to interpret the verse Lamentations 1:11: “See, O Lord, and behold, how abject I have become!” but apparently he knew that it was a true story.

37 The denotation of ‘kalon’ is disgrace and humiliation, and it is linked to prostitution in Hosea 4:18: “Disgrace is the ‘gift’ which the wind is bringing.”
III. In the New Testament

The gospels telling of the Jews in Eretz Israel in the first century C.E. include several references to prostitutes. The Greek verb *porneo* recurs several times, designating adultery committed with a married woman, not a visit to a prostitute. The prostitute, as in biblical literature, was the most abject and shameful person imaginable. Thus, for instance, in First Corinthians 6:12-20 the author tells his disciples:

> Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body... Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be! Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a harlot is one body with her? For He says, ‘the two will become one flesh.’ But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with him. Flee immorality...

The dichotomy stressed here is between the spiritual and the material, with the prostitutes exemplifying the most physical. This resembles the above description of Elishah b. Abuyah. It must be noted that in all talmudic literature there is no categorical halakha against going to a prostitute. There are, of course, general expressions of denunciation, but no explicit halakha, such as the one before us. This might reflect the reality of the sages’ environment, where going to a prostitute was not condoned but it nevertheless existed (whether for religious or social reasons). It is difficult to draw conclusions ex silencio. In any case, different information is learned of prostitutes from the words of Jesus to the priests and elders in the temple in Jerusalem:

> Jesus said to them: “Truly I say to you that the tax-gatherers and harlots will get into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-gatherers and harlots did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterwards so as to believe him” (Matthew 21:31-21).

According to this, the tax-gatherers and prostitutes believed in John the Baptist, while the priests did not. This speech lacks historical context, such as when and where such an event took place. However, Jesus presumably was right, and the tax-gatherers and prostitutes did believe in John the Baptist, who derived his authority not from official

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social standing or power, but from his extraordinary personality. Such a charismatic figure could find disciples among tax-gatherers and prostitutes, but not among the priests and elders. Tax-gatherers are portrayed negatively in talmudic literature, and, of their mention along with prostitutes, it can only be said that like attracts like. An incident similar to the one in which the sage who was meticulous in his observance of the commandment to wear ritual fringes succeeded in causing a prostitute to repent also happened to the prostitutes who believed in John the Baptist. That incident did not take place in a brothel, where men come to satisfy sexual desire alone, but in the marketplace, where tax-gatherers and prostitutes would be likely to keep company.

The Jews of Eretz Israel apparently frequented prostitutes to a certain degree, despite the negative halakhic standing on this. The encounter between sages and prostitutes apparently took place on a sexual level, whether they succumbed to temptation or succeeded in overcoming lust. At times they even wielded a positive influence on the prostitutes, both male and female, enabling them to leave their occupation and in some cases even convert to Judaism.

IV. The Social Aspect

As incongruous as it may seem today, cult prostitutes belonged to a relatively high social class. Male and female cult prostitutes enjoyed the same social standing. The king’s mother herself was the chief votaress of a goddess. After idolatry was suppressed in Jerusalem and all of Eretz Israel, women no longer participated in any form of worship in the temple. Their exclusion from the temple cult reflects the wish expressed by the prophets to protect women’s modesty; at the same time, it reflects women’s inferior social standing in the cult of Yahweh.

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42 See D. Flusser, Yahadut umekorot ha-Nazrut (Sifriyat Poalim, Tel-Aviv, 1979), p. 81 ff. (Hebrew).
43 Compare to the opposition between the hasid and the tax-gatherer in y. Hagigah 2:2, 77d; Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibrot, A. Yellinek, Beit Ha-Midrash,2 (Jerusalem, 1938), where the tax-gatherer receives his punishment in the world to come next to Miriam b. Eli, who was a prostitute or adulteress. See also b. Shabbat 33b, R. Simeon b. Yohai’s opinion of the Romans: “R. Simeon b.Yohai answered and said: “All that they made, they made for themselves; they built marketplaces, to set harlots in them; baths, to rejuvenate themselves; bridges, to levy tolls for them.” Here, as in the Christian text, tax-gatherers and prostitutes are mentioned together, this time prejoritively. Cf. Matthew 11:19, where John the Baptist is said to have befriended “tax-gatherers and sinners”.
In contrast to cult prostitutes, ordinary prostitutes in the biblical period and afterwards were on the lowliest social rung. They did not engage in sexual activities for any religious purpose and received no recognition of services rendered to society. Even if society frowned upon their occupation, it was recognized that prostitution would never be wholly abolished. With the exception of priests (Lev. 21:7), anyone was free to marry a prostitute, though objections to this were raised.\textsuperscript{44} The practice of prostitution was legal, and existed from the earliest urban culture in Mesopotamia, throughout the talmudic period and afterwards.

The incidents of contact between sages and prostitutes recounted in talmudic literature derive from Eretz Israel in the second and third centuries C.E.; some of the stories take place outside Israel. The common denominator in all the anecdotes is some degree of contact between sages and prostitutes. The characterization must be noted: never is the prostitute the heroine; she merely provides circumstantial background for the sage. There is no motif in these stories that could be termed "the good-hearted prostitute," which became a familiar motif in later European literature. There is no attempt to condone the behavior of prostitutes. However, compared to the biblical stories, talmudic literature is more tolerant of men who visited prostitutes, and the large number of such stories reflects a degree of familiarity with prostitutes, though not necessarily in the sexual sense.

The stories discussed above show that some sages did visit prostitutes, though such intimate details cannot be confirmed in any degree of exactitude. In one case, a disciple tried to conceal the fact that he consort ed with a prostitute, and in another case, such behavior is represented as the turning-point leading to the sage's repentance. Prostitution was abhorrent to the sages, in accordance with the biblical outlook, though they were aware that it addressed a social need.

The national-religious identity of the prostitutes is specified only in some of the stories. We hear of non-Jewish prostitutes in Ashkelon and of one from another land who converted to Judaism. In general, however, there is no certainty as to whether they were Jewish or not. It will be no exaggeration, however, if we conclude that most of the prostitutes

\textsuperscript{44} It is interesting to see Lev. 21:9 in this context: "When the daughter of a priest defiles herself through harlotry, it is her father whom she defiles; she shall be put to the fire." The legal authority is not denouncing the girl's sin, nor the social consequences, but refers only to the disgrace she brings her father. Compare further to the Mesopotamian prostitute's socio-legal standing; Y. Fleishman, \textit{Mehqarim be-Maamado ha-Mishpati shel ha-Yeled ba-Mitka u-va-Mizrah ha-Qadum}, Ph.D. dissertation, Bar-Ilan University (Ramat-Gan 1989), p. 359 ff. (Hebrew, unpublished).
referred to were Jewish. The prostitute who brought the phylacteries to the study-house was surely Jewish, and it makes no difference whether she found the phylacteries by chance or received them as pledge. The fact that sages frequented the same marketplaces as did prostitutes can serve as evidence that they were Jewish prostitutes, though there is no conclusive evidence of this.\textsuperscript{45} The prostitutes belonged to different economic classes; some were “high-class” and were paid large sums of money, while others worked for much less. The wealthy ones owned homes, furniture, gold and silver utensils. The poorer majority were badly off. If one of the customers forgot to pay, or left a pledge and never redeemed it, the prostitute had no choice but to appear in public and demand payment. Payment was also received in goods, such as the kid Judah promised Tamar, as seen from the commentary in Sifre Deut. 23:19, 260 (tr. R. Hammer, New Haven and London, 1986, p. 250) on the verse: “Thou shalt not bring the hire of a harlot” — If one says to a harlot, “Take this lamb for your hire.” The prostitute received a kid to eat, a sign of her low social standing and financial straits.\textsuperscript{46}

The brothel was situated in the marketplace in the center of town or on a main thoroughfare. There are references to the “prostitutes’ marketplace,” though this may be literary hyperbole. We learn of prostitutes frequenting the marketplace, and of their activities, from the description of the sages of the sins the Israelites committed with the daughters of Moab (Num. 25). The description seems to reflect a degree of the sages’ acquaintance with similar contemporary situations. Sifre Num. 131 recounts:

At that time, the Ammonites and Moabites built enclosures from Beth Hayeshimoth to Mount Hermon. They placed there women selling all sorts of sweetmeats. And the Israelites would come eat and drink. When a man would go out to walk in the marketplace and would seek to take an object from an old women, she would sell it to him at its value, and a young girl would call him from inside: “Take it for less.” And he would take it from her on the first day and the second day. On the third day she said to him: “Come inside and choose for yourself, for are you not at home here?” And he went in to her, and she had a pitcher full of wine... And he would drink and the wine burned in him and he said “Obey me,” and she took out an impression of Pe’or from under her breast-band, and said to him: “Rabbi, if you want me to obey you, bow down to this...”

\textsuperscript{45} Cf. b. Mo’ed Katan 16a: “Rabi ruled that disciples be forbidden to sleep in the marketplace,” due perhaps to the prostitutes who frequented the marketplace.

\textsuperscript{46} Cf. m. Temurah 6:2 (tr. Danby, p. 560): “If a man said to his fellow, Here is this lamb for thee so that thee suffer thy bondswoman to lodge with my bondsman.” This can perhaps help understand Proverbs 6:2: “The first loaf of bread will go for a harlot,” in a different sense from the usual interpretations, according to which a man goes to a prostitute and squanders all his money until he lacks bread to eat. Perhaps the verse means that a man can go to a prostitute for the low price of a loaf of bread.
The sages were familiar with the practice whereby the brothel owner—the madam—would solicit men outside, then young girls would seduce them with the allure of wine and a good price. For the sages, relations with non-Jewish prostitutes were bound up with idolatry. According to the traditions and moral outlook preserved in talmudic material, it seems that the prostitutes in their days had many ways of alluring customers, of which the sages were unaware.  

Prostitutes generally were dressed distinctively: When Judah saw Tamar, “he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face” (Gen. 38:15). This ancient custom changed over the years and the ammoraim were perplexed by the verse: the Eretz Israel sources fail to make clear exactly how the prostitutes were recognizable by their clothing.  

By contrast, b. Berakhot 20a has a story of Babylonian origin telling of this matter. R. Ada b. Ahaba saw a heathen woman wearing a red head-dress in the marketplace, and, thinking she was Jewish, tore off her clothes. He then discovered that she was the gentle prostitute Mathon. The story teaches incidentally that in Babylonia, as in Rome, prostitutes would sit in the marketplace clad in red.

Within the community of prostitutes, relations were often sour. The women would compete for customers, and would occasionally fight...

47 An example of a misunderstanding of this sort can be found, in my opinion, in the famous story of the widow of Ephesus, the Hellenistic story alluded to in b. Kiddushin 80b, and quoted there in the Tosafot in the reference beginning: “ki hakhi ma’aseh”. According to the story, a widow in a cemetery desired a man, and even agreed that he take her husband out of his grave. This story has various parallels. See S. Krauss, “Hagadot Leumioth,” HaGoren, 4 (1903), pp. 27-32 (Hebrew). M. ben Gurion, Memekor Yisrael, (Tel Aviv, 1945), V, pp. 84-86 (Hebrew). The story of women’s unfaithfulness is told from a man’s perspective. It appears that the widow was in fact a prostitute who had come to the cemetery to solicit men (this is clear from Rashi’s version of the story in his commentary on b. Abodah Zarah 25b). Luring customers in the cemetery was a known tactic in ancient Naples (and throughout the Hellenistic world), and even in modern Italy. See: D. ben-Amotz, Lizkor velishkoah, Tel-Aviv 1981, p. 24 ff. (Hebrew); A. Scheiber, Essays on Jewish Folklore and Comparative Literature (Akademiai Kiado, Budapest, 1985), pp. 234-235.

48 M. Kelim 24:16 (tr. Danby, p. 640) “There are three kind of head-net: that of a girl, which is susceptible to midras — uncleanness; that of an old woman, which is susceptible to corpse-uncleanness; and that of a harlot, which is not susceptible to any uncleanness.” The reference to a harlot is understood by some from the expression ‘yotzet la-hutz’ here and ‘yotzet ha-hutz’ in m. Kelim 28:9, from the Aramaic nafka t bar a (see, for instance, the Aramaic translations of Gen. 38:15). However, it is unlikely that the sages would discuss the degree of sanctity of the clothing of a prostitute. The phrase seems to refer to clothing worn by women on occasions of leaving the house.

49 The red color of a prostitute’s garment might already be mentioned in Jer. 4:30: “What do you accomplish by wearing crimson, by decking yourself in jewels of gold, by enlarging your eyes with kohl?” Perhaps the crimson cord Rahab hung in the window (Josh. 2:21) was also the sign of a brothel.
with each other, as in the story of the Ashkelon prostitutes. The tannaim were aware of this; b. Pesahim 113b reads: “Our Rabbis taught: Three hate one another, viz. dogs, fowls, and Parssee priests, and some say, harlots too.”

The sages also knew, however (b. Shabbat 34a), that “[Even] whores paint one another.” Perhaps for this reason, the first speaker does not include prostitutes among those who hate each other. At least three historical sources, in addition to the Mishnah, tell of Jewish women taken prisoner by the Romans and forced to engage in prostitution, and this is corroborated by Roman sources. It has already been shown that “The real professional prostitutes on the lists were without exception slaves. The free-living women were generally ex-slaves, freedwomen; at least, they were certainly not Roman by birth.”

The socio-professional standing of prostitutes in Rome derived from Rome’s victory over its enemies, as we learn from some rabbinical sources.

It is not clear what motivated women to engage in prostitution; presumably, a combination of financial need and inability to find any kind of employment were contributing factors. This would be a typical situation for a widow with no husband to provide for her. The professions (trade, clerks) were all masculine. Widows with children to feed were likely candidates for prostitution. In times of war and political instability, there was a concomitant rise in the number of prostitutes, both from choice and enforced captivity. The wealthy prostitutes seemed to be motivated by the lucrative appeal and the ease of the occupation. In this case, greed and luxury won out over any moral scruples.

Three sources speak of male prostitutes. In two cases (which are, perhaps, one and the same), they are motivated by money; in the other the occupation is part of the services demanded in a brothel of a prisoner of war. Neither men nor women lasted long in that occupation. Some preferred death, as in the story of the girls who jumped into the sea. Those who were not capable of committing suicide often died of grief.

Hitherto, literary accounts of individual cases of prostitution have been examined, but actual prostitution in antiquity — and in the modern world as well — must also be addressed. Prostitution is the result of a double moral standard — a man may do what a woman may not. A man is tolerated when he seeks sexual gratification outside the home. Women, however, are forbidden to do so. The ancient ban on a man being alone with a married woman, a religious-social maxim common to many ancient cultures, viewed such intimacy as but a short step from

prostitution. This double standard was expressed in socio-religious values, as well as in practice: men sought sexual gratification with prostitutes, paying with their own money, which their wives could not do. Scholars of the history of sexual mores in Rome claim that prostitution there stemmed from a different reason — the fact that female infants were often put to death. In antiquity it was customary to thin out the population by putting female infants to death or neglecting them. Based on various studies, scholars reached the conclusion that the proportion between the sexes in Rome was not equal, as might have been expected from a statistical viewpoint. They calculated that there were 17% fewer women than men. Adult males were hard put to find a bride, and had to resort to visiting prostitutes, a necessary institution in such a social structure.

This deterministic explanation can only be partly true, since prostitution still flourishes in modern society. Despite age-old religious protestations, prostitution exists among Jews too. Infant girls were never put to death in Jewish societies, as we know from Jewish and other sources. Prostitution cannot be explained by theoretical hypothesis alone, but we can understand that it is the inevitable result of a masculine society. In a matriarchal society, women would presumably pay men for their services. History cannot assist in solving this social conundrum, other than by indicating countless precedents for prostitution. However, a social analysis of the different sources does lead one to believe that prostitution will never be completely abolished.

It is interesting to note that all the literary accounts discussed here preserve a high moral standard, and have no intention of inducing


52 The figures are from Kiefer, above, n. 50.

53 See Judges 12:8: "After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem led Israel. He had thirty sons, and he married off thirty daughters outside the clan and brought in thirty girls from outside the clan for his sons"; II Chron. 11:21: "He begot twenty-eight sons and sixty daughters, of King Rehoboam." It should be noted that in the intrigues of the king’s court, there was a tendency to kill male infants, not female ones. King Abijah married fourteen wives and begat twenty-two sons and sixteen daughters (II Chron. 13:21; m. Makhshirin 2:7; t. Makhshirin 1:8). Male prostitutes mentioned above were probably homosexuals, as evident in the Sibylline oracles 3, 185-6; 5, 487.

55 The old saw of prostitution as the oldest profession in the world is not based on Jewish sources. See: Lujo Basserman, The Oldest Profession: A History of Prostitution (Stein and Day, New York, 1968).
sexual arousal, as erotic literature does.\textsuperscript{56} The purpose of the anecdotes in rabbinical literature about prostitutes in the world of the sages was to raise men’s moral standards and keep them from sinning, not to titillate. Repentance is the central motif, not lust.

This moralistic trend grows stronger in the stories of the sages who made an effort to free Jewish women from captivity, i.e., from brothels. The prostitutes enabled the sages to fulfill the commandment of redeeming prisoners. Despite their situation, some of the women in the brothels tried to keep pure, and to uphold their moral and Jewish standards even in the most difficult circumstances.

\textit{Conclusion}

Biblical and talmudic sources disclose a surprising degree of familiarity with prostitutes on the part of prophets and sages. Prostitution was not carried out in secrecy; at times it was denounced, at others accepted without reproach, and some prostitutes even converted to Judaism. Some contact between sages and prostitutes was the result of the Roman conquest, other contact resulted from circumstances that threw them together. Infrequently, sages sought out prostitutes of their own accord. However, the stories should not be taken to show that the talmudic sages regularly frequented prostitutes. On the contrary, not only did they categorically denounce prostitution,\textsuperscript{57} they managed to uphold the commandments of sexual restraint and withstand temptation even when they found themselves in close proximity with prostitutes. Moreover, the stories about prostitutes served to teach a religious lesson, and were told openly. Hence, it should not be concluded that the sages did in fact engage in such activities.

\textsuperscript{56} The most detailed account is in b. Aboda Zarah 65a: “Raba once sent a present to Bar-Sheshak on a heathen feast-day, saying, “I know that he does not worship idols,” but on paying him a visit, he found him sitting up to his neck in a bath of rose-water while naked harlots were standing before him. [Bar Sheshak] said to him: “Have you [Israelites] anything like this in the World to Come? He replied, “We have much finer than this.” He asked, “Is there anything finer than this?” This vision of heaven predates the Koran. On women as a sexual object in Islam, see: Vern L. Bullough, \textit{The Subordinate Sex} (Penguin Books, New York-Baltimore, 1974), pp. 134-152.

\textsuperscript{57} See for instance: b. Sotah 4b: “Whoever has intercourse with a harlot will in the end go seeking a loaf of bread”; Lev. Rabbah (tr. J. Israelstam, London, 1939, p. 297): “When Israel were in Egypt the Egyptians practised whoredom, as it says, “Whose flesh is as the flesh of asses” (Ezek. 23:20). When they entered the land of Canaan the Canaanites practised whoredom and witchcraft... the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: “My children, be careful that you do not act either in accordance with the practice of these or in accordance with the practice of these.” See also: A. S. Hirschberg, “Yofya vehityapputa shel ha-isha bizman ha-Talmud”, \textit{Heatid}, 4 (1923) pp. 1-52 (Hebrew).
There is but meager information as to the social standing of prostitutes. Unlike cult prostitutes, ordinary prostitutes were evidently motivated by a combination of factors: financial considerations, low social circumstances, captivity. However, the institution of prostitution in general can be said to stem from the overall structure of patriarchal society and the double moral standard it postulates. This would support the opinion that prostitution can never be completely eradicated.\footnote{On Jewish prostitutes in the Middle Ages in Italy see S. Simmonson, \textit{Toldot hayehudim be-dukasut Mantowa}, Tel-Aviv-Jerusalem, 1965, p. 154 ff, 394 ff. (Hebrew). On Jewish prostitutes at the end of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century, see: Edward J. Bristow, \textit{Prostitution and Prejudice}, (Schocken Books, New York, 1983).} It is not the prostitutes who occupy the focus of the rabbinical sources, but the righteous sages who did not sin with prostitutes, and who fulfilled the commandment of redeeming prisoners from captivity. Those sages who did sin with prostitutes ultimately repent. The proximity of the two social circles resulted in temptation that was hard for the sages to resist, though apparently very few of them succumbed.