TEMPLE PROSTITUTION AT APHACA: AN OVERLOOKED SOURCE*

In her book *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2008), Stephanie Budin compiles and analyses an impressive array of literary sources which describe, or have been interpreted as describing, several practices that modern scholars have collectively and variously called sacred, ritual, cultic or temple prostitution. In general, as Budin explains, '[s]acred prostitution is the sale of a person's body for sexual purposes where some portion (if not all) of the money or goods received for this transaction belongs to a deity … usually Aphrodite'. Three major subtypes include 'once-in-a-lifetime prostitution and/or sale of virginity in honor of a goddess', activity that 'involves women (and men?) who are professional prostitutes and who are owned by a deity or a deity's sanctuary', and 'a temporary type of sacred prostitution, where the women (and men?) are either prostitutes for a limited period of time before being married, or only prostitute themselves during certain rituals'.[1]

Budin argues, however, that many of the sources do not say what they have been held to say, while others are confused or purposely deceptive. In her view, the sources amount to a flimsy foundation upon which modern scholars, in 'a huge misunderstanding',[2] have constructed the institution of sacred prostitution. In short, Budin unambiguously claims, '[s]acred prostitution never existed in the ancient Near East or Mediterranean'.[3]

In one particular case, Budin argues that the traditional interpretation of temple prostitution at Aphaca and elsewhere in Phoenicia is not supported by the sources.[4] An overlooked text, however, suggests otherwise. A late antique *ēthopoeia* wrongly attributed to Libanius[5] features a recently reformed prostitute who deeply regrets her past life and vows to destroy the brothel that operates on Mt Lebanon. In this article I argue that (1) the author of this *ēthopoeia* is familiar with temple prostitution as an institution in precisely the general and specific terms stipulated by Budin;[6] (2) the author is not drawing exclusively on known literary sources for temple prostitution at Aphaca or elsewhere, and thus may know something that we (and they) do not; and (3), although possibly a Christian, the author does not call his own motives into question with a

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[1] S. Budin, *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2008), 3. Budin's book is an excellent guide to previous scholarship on the subject. For a recent concise overview, see also S.G. Pembroke, 'Prostitution, sacred', in *OCD*[4].

[2] Budin (n. 1), 12.

[3] Budin (n. 1), 1.

[4] Budin (n. 1), 270–86.

[5] Lib. *Ēthopoeia* 18 (= *Progymnasmata* 11.18). Greek text: R. Foerster, *Libanii Opera*, vol. 8 (Leipzig, 1915), 414–16. Authorship: A.F. Norman, *Libanius: Selected Orations*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), xlix rejects the exercise as spurious, and R. Foerster and K. Münscher, 'Libanios', *RE* 12 (1925), 2522 attribute it to Nicolaus (now generally called Ps.-Nicolaus), a late antique rhetorician whose exercises were included in manuscripts of Libanius' *Progymnasmata*. See also n. 10 below.

[6] Budin (n. 1), 3.

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polemical narrative against pagan opponents. Although the exercise does not prove the existence of temple prostitution at Aphaca or elsewhere, it nevertheless does prove that an ancient author either believed it existed there—and in one of the very forms that Budin argues did not exist in antiquity—or found it plausible and unremarkable enough to serve as the backdrop to his story. This text therefore constitutes a serious challenge to Budin's absolute rejection of temple prostitution in general and at Aphaca in particular.

According to Eusebius, Aphaca on Mt Lebanon in Phoenicia was the site of a temple of Aphrodite that was destroyed by Emperor Constantine.[7] Eusebius describes the temple and its destruction as follows (*Vit. Const.* 3.55.2–5):

> (2) This was a grove and precinct, not at a city centre nor among squares and streets, such as frequently adorn the cities for decoration, but it was off the beaten track away from main roads and junctions, founded for the hateful demon Aphrodite in a mountainous part of Lebanon at Aphaca. (3) This was a school of vice for all dissolute persons and those who had corrupted their bodies with much indulgence. Womanish men, who were not men but had rejected the dignity of their nature, propitiated the spirit with their sick effeminacy, and unlawful intercourse with women, stolen and corrupt sexual relations, and unspeakable, infamous practices went on at this shrine as in some lawless and ungoverned place. There was no one to find out what was being done because no respectable man dared to set foot there. (4) But what was practised there could not also escape the notice of the great Emperor. Having observed even these things for himself with imperial forethought, he decided that such a shrine was not fit to see the sun's light, and ordered the whole to be entirely demolished, dedications and all. (5) On the Emperor's command the devices of licentious error were at once destroyed, and a detachment of soldiers saw to the clearing of the site. Those who had hitherto indulged themselves learned chastity from the Emperor's menace.[8]

Eusebius' earlier account in *De laudibus Constantini* 8 is nearly identical. Socrates' *Hist. eccl.* 1.18.10 (fifth century) refers to 'the unspeakable vices indiscriminately practised there' (τὰς ἐκεῖ γιγνομένας ἀνέδην ἀρρητοποιίας), and Nicephorus Callistus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 8.30 (fourteenth century) to 'the shameful and indecent couplings there' (τὰς ἐν ἐκείνῳ αἰσχρὰς καὶ ἀσέμνους μίξεις). None of these sources explicitly mentions prostitutes or prostitution.

Like Eusebius, the author of the *ēthopoeia* depicts the sacred precinct as the site of promiscuous sexual intercourse (without Eusebius' allegations of gender deviancy), but, unlike Eusebius, he makes it a place in which male visitors give something of value to Cyprian Aphrodite in exchange for sex with women who are explicitly called 'whores' and 'courtesans'. The exercise thus offers a textbook example of temple prostitution in action.

Τίνας ἂν εἴποι λόγους πόρνη σωφρονήσασα;

(1) ἐρρέτω μοι γένος προαγωγῶν. οὐκέτι δύο καὶ τριῶν ὀβολῶν τῷ προσιόντι πιπράσκομαι. καθελεῖ μοί τις τὰ περὶ τὴν Κύπριν τῶν ἐραστῶν ἀναθήματα, ὧν καὶ τῇ μνήμῃ μόνῃ μέμφομαι τὰ μιάσματα. (2) ἥρπαζον τὸ ῥόδον, ἤσκουν τὴν ἀναισχυντίαν, ὠνειροπόλουν τὰ χείρονα, ἔσπευδον τὴν νύκτα τῆς ἡμέρας αἰσχροτέραν ἐργάσασθαι. ἔτι περιπλεκομένη τὸν δεῖνα τὸν πλησίον ἐθήρευον, ἐπέσκωπτον τῷ γείτονι ψιθυρίζουσα.

[7] For sources and discussion, see Budin (n. 1), 270–6; J.L. Lightfoot, *Lucian: On the Syrian Goddess* (Oxford, 2003), 328–31 (note the reservations at 329: 'Perhaps predictably, [Aphaca] was supposed, like Byblos and Heliopolis, to have featured sacred prostitution, of which we hear, perhaps no less predictably, only when Constantine closed it down') and cf. 323–5 for discussion of sacred/ritual prostitution more generally; A. Cameron and S.G. Hall, *Eusebius: Life of Constantine* (Oxford, 1999), 303 (Aphaca as a site of 'sacred prostitution'); F. Millar, *The Roman Near East: 31 B.C. – A.D. 337* (Cambridge, 1993), 217 (Aphaca as a site of 'ritual prostitution').

[8] Transl. Cameron and Hall (n. 7), 144–5.

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ἐμὸς ἦν ὁ λῃστής, ἐφίλουν τὸν ἀποκήρυκτον, μεστὴν εἶχον τὴν οἰκίαν ἀνδρῶν ἀπρεπῶν. (3) ἀλλὰ καθαίρω τὴν γνώμην, φεύγω τὴν Ἀφροδίτην, φιλῶ τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς τὴν ἐπιείκειαν. νόμον ἐν τῷ Λιβάνῳ θήσω τοῦτον, ἵνα τοῦ γράμματος ἔχῃ τὴν δύναμιν· ἐξόν σοι, γύναι, καὶ σωφρονεῖν καὶ φεύγειν τὴν Ἀφρογένειαν μή σου τῆς ἀσελγείας ἀφορμὴν τὴν Ἀφροδίτην προβάλλου μοι. οὐ πέφρακται ταῖς σώφροσιν ἱκετεύειν τέμενος. φεύγει καὶ Κύπρις τὸν γάμον, εὖ οἶδα, τὸν ἐφύβριστον, ὅπου πολλάκις ἀγνοεῖ τὸ σπέρμα πατὴρ ὃ πεφύτευκεν, <καὶ> ὁ δεύτερος τοῦ πρώτου σφετερίζεται καὶ μίσγεται τὰ γένη καὶ πάντα τίκτει δυσσέβειαν. ταῦτα γράφω καὶ γράψω καὶ τούτοις χρήσομαι. τάχα τῶν ἑταιρῶν ἀνελῶ τὸ πικρὸν ἐργαστήριον.

What words would a prostitute say upon exercising self-control?

(1) Let the race of pimps be gone from me! I am no longer for sale to any comer for two or three obols. Someone will destroy for me the dedications of lovers to the Cyprian [Aphrodite], whose defilements I rebuke even when merely reminded of them. (2) I plucked the rose; I practised shamelessness; I dreamed of worse things; I hurried to make the night more disgraceful than the day. While still in an embrace, I would hunt the mister nearby; I would make jokes, whispering to his neighbour. The robber was mine; I loved the disinherited son; I kept a house full of indecent men. (3) But I am cleansing my mind; I shun Aphrodite; I love the reasonableness of Athena. I will post this law on Mt Lebanon, so that it might have the force of a written law: 'It being permitted to you, woman, both to show self-control and to shun the Foam-born one [Aphrodite], do not propose Aphrodite to me as the incitement to your wantonness. This sacred precinct has not been fenced in for self-controlled women/wives to make supplication. Even the Cyprian [Aphrodite] flees wanton mating, I know well, where often a father does not know the seed that he planted, <and> a second father appropriates what belongs to the first, and the lineages are mixed up, and everything begets impiety.' These words I write, and will write, and I will apply them. I will quickly destroy the bitter workshop of the courtesans.[9]

A 'whore' (πόρνη) until very recently, the speaker has decided to target the temple of Aphrodite for destruction. Pimps (προαγωγῶν) used to bring to her and the other female prostitutes (τῶν ἑταιρῶν) a steady line of lowlife male customers, who paid 'two or three obols' in the form of or in addition to 'dedications' (ἀναθήματα) to Aphrodite. In either case, these transactions fulfil a basic requirement of temple prostitution that payment be made to the temple in exchange for sexual services. The speaker plans to post a sign at the temple to call out individual women/wives (ἐξόν σοι, γύναι) for pretending to worship Aphrodite there, when in reality (she alleges) they are having intercourse with so many men that they are unable to determine who the fathers of their children are.[10] These women/wives that she addresses may be women working openly as prostitutes, or may be ostensibly respectable wives using the temple as cover for their illicit behaviour. However, the phrase 'the bitter workshop of the courtesans'

[9] Adapted from C.A. Gibson, *Libanius's* Progymnasmata: *Model Exercises in Greek Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (Atlanta, 2008), 403–5.

[10] Similar concerns are raised by Socrates, *Hist. eccl.* 1.18.7 with regard to sexual practices at Phoenician Heliopolis, where wives (he alleges) were held in common by law, and 'for this reason their offspring were in doubt, for there was no distinction between parents and offspring' (διὰ τοῦτο ἀμφίβολα μὲν ἦν τὰ τικτόμενα παρ' αὐτοῖς, γονέων γὰρ καὶ τέκνων οὐδεμία διάκρισις ἦν …). Cf. also the 'Introduction of a Law' exercise by Ps.-Nicolaus (it is not by Libanius, according to Norman [n. 5], xlix, and it is attributed to Nicolaus by Foerster and Münscher [n. 5], 2522; Greek text in Foerster [n. 5], 568–71; translation in Gibson [n. 9], 529): 'All races of creatures that actually exist naturally originate in marriage alike, but nevertheless are joined by marriages not alike; for the unreasoning animal's way of life, naturally robbed of the power of discretion, mixes everyone together in marriages, and allows everyone to mate with one another. By this, a male child is also joined with the female from whom he came, and he becomes a father by intercourse with her with whom he has mated, and this prevents each from learning what is born as a result of his intercourse. And the idea of "child" and "father" is unclear among them, all those who decide to join in marriage.'

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(τῶν ἑταιρῶν … τὸ πικρὸν ἐργαστήριον) shows that there is a regular staff of prostitutes working there, whose work area our speaker intends to destroy.[11] Budin's general and second specific definitions of sacred prostitution—'the sale of a person's body for sexual purposes where some portion (if not all) of the money or goods received for this transaction belongs to a deity … usually Aphrodite' and prostitution that 'involves women (and men?) who are professional prostitutes and who are owned by a deity or a deity's sanctuary'[12]—are fulfilled here, with the reservation that the speaker may perhaps not be 'owned by' Aphrodite.[13]

It is worth noting that the author does not make the reformed prostitute a Christian, and so any implicit Christian criticism of pagan cults—which Budin sees as motivating many of the texts about temple prostitution[14]—is here muted. The prostitute chooses Athena over Aphrodite and notes on her sign that 'even the Cyprian [Aphrodite] flees wanton mating' (φεύγει καὶ Κύπρις τὸν γάμον … τὸν ἐφύβριστον). She may have rejected prostitution and changed her religious allegiance, and her morals may now align with those of some late antique Christian authors, but she is still portrayed as a worshipper of traditional gods. Her Aphrodite is not a whore, as she is represented in overtly Christian texts.[15] If the author is pagan, no further explanation of this conversion within paganism is needed. But if he is Christian, why does he forego the opportunity of using his story in service of a Christian triumphalist narrative starring a new Christian convert? He may simply be playing by the usual rules of Greek rhetorical exercises in Late Antiquity, and setting his story in what D.A. Russell termed 'Sophistopolis', a world that looks very much like classical Athens and that rarely acknowledges people and events after Alexander the Great.[16] The reformed but still pagan prostitute—necessarily still pagan because Christianity does not yet exist in this historical fiction—could nevertheless be seen by the late antique readers of the exercise as a spiritual forebear to Constantine as she sets out to end temple prostitution at Aphaca, an institution whose existence these readers would not have questioned.

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[11] For the expression 'bitter workshop', cf. 'the bitter workshop of Satan' (τὸ πικρὸν τοῦ Σατανᾶ ἐργαστήριον) in the tenth-century *Vitae Sancti Basilii Junioris* 1.52. Greek text in S. McGrath, D.F. Sullivan and A.-M. M. Talbot, *The Life of Saint Basil the Younger: Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of the Moscow Version* (Washington, D.C., 2014).

[12] Budin (n. 1), 3.

[13] It is unclear whether the speaker is free or a slave. The word 'whore' (πόρνη) in the title, and the fact that her clients are brought to her by pimps (προαγωγῶν), may suggest slave status. The word 'courtesan' in the text (ἑταιρῶν), and the fact that she is able to read and write, may instead suggest free status. Less certain is the significance of two silences in the text: the speaker gives the impression that it is her choice to leave her profession (a slave would have no choice), and there is no mention of the consequences of doing so, such as being pursued as a runaway or punished by the pimps. The author may have felt that addressing these complications would detract from his delineation of the woman's character (*ēthos*) and emotional state (*pathos*) at this powerful moment—the rhetorical goal of every *ēthopoeia*.

[14] Budin (n. 1), 260–1.

[15] See Budin (n. 1), 265–70 on Cyprian Aphrodite/Venus as whore in Christian apologetic.

[16] D.A. Russell, *Greek Declamation* (Cambridge, 1983), 21–39.

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