

BOOK REVIEW

Book Review of Riegner, Irene E. *The Vanishing Hebrew Harlot: The Adventures of the Hebrew Stem ZNH* (SBL 73). Peter Lang: New York, 2009.

Irene E. Reigner's *The Vanishing Hebrew Harlot: The Adventures of the Hebrew Stem ZNH* seeks to challenge our understanding of the Hebrew root זנ"ה. The book is the published version of a doctoral thesis, which was submitted at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. The starting point of the study is the observation that זנ"ה is used both in a sexual context and in prophetic speech chastising the wrong religious cult practices of the Israelites. The book, therefore, examines three hypotheses. The first is that "[t]he stem זנ"ה has three significations: a. Participate in non-Yahwist praxis; b. Prostitute, be promiscuous and c. Inn-keeper (noun)" (p. 3). The second hypothesis concerns the negative significances זנ"ה acquires, "as it becomes associated with repugnant sexual terms and images and destructive theological terminology" (p. 4). The last hypothesis is centred around the argument that "the signification of prostitution and promiscuity functions independently of and distinct from זנ"ה 'participate in non-Yahwist praxis'" (p. 4).

To support this claim, R' first examines linguistic connections between the Hebrew זנ"ה and cognates or at least similar sounding words in other Semitic languages, such as Akkadian (chapter 2), Ugaritic (chapter 4) and Aramaic (chapter 5). In between those chapters, there is a chapter on 'holy prostitution,' which focuses on two Akkadian words—*harīmtu* and *qadištu*. The next eight chapters consist of classical exegeses of biblical passages: Chapter 6 deals with "Sacrifices and Deities," in Judg 2:17; 8:27, 33; Lev 17:7; 20:5; Num 15:39; Ezek 6:9; 16:20; Ps 106:38–39; Lev 20:6 (order according to the appearance in the book). In chapter 7, "Of Deities, Assimilation, and Intermarriage," R' examines Num 25:1–3, 6–8; Hos 9:10; Exod 34:15–6 and Deut 3:16. Chapters 8 to 10 considers different passages and themes in the book of Hosea. Chapter 11 studies

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parts of Jeremiah and chapter 12 examines five verses in Leviticus (Lev 9:29; 21:9, 7, 14–15). Chapter 13, “Prostitution, Promiscuity, and Innkeepers,” presents different pericopes in which the root זנ"ה is used in connection with prostitution namely Judg 16:1; Gen 38:12, 24, Deut 22:21; 1 Kgs 3:16; Amos 7:17; Gen 34:31 and Josh 2:1, 6:17, 22, 25 (again listed in order of appearance). The final chapter gives a summary and concluding remarks, stating that:

The stem זנה is a comprehensive term for the complex of non-Yahwist religious praxis that includes ceremonies, deities, religious sites, beliefs, and participants, all that compete with Yahweh and all that challenge Yahwist praxis The negative assessment of זנה as a reference to non-Yahwist religious praxis that emerges with Hosea and Jeremiah could only have been an Israelite phenomenon, a by-product of a trend towards the exclusive worship of one deity, in this case Yahweh (p. 216).

Two indices (key words, pp. 233–36 and biblical references, pp. 237–39) and a list of references (pp. 217–32) conclude the study.

Overall, the endeavour is commendable. One has to get a firm grip on the language and its intricacies, before translating and interpreting biblical passages. Our view on obscure or supposedly clear Hebrew terms is broadened and misunderstandings can be avoided if one compares the Hebrew with related texts and/ or languages. Especially the problem of the so-called *hapax legomena* is often best solved by linguistic comparative studies. Better exchanges between linguistics and exegesis would benefit the whole theological scholarship. The premise of the book is thus very interesting. However, one should read it with caution.

The study based the entire linguistic discussion on the observation that all forms of roots used in the book “derive from the Semitic, biconsonantal root *zn*” (p. 19). There may very well have been biconsonantal roots in some proto-form of the Semitic languages (cf. A. Militarev, “Root Extension and Root Formation in Semitic and Afrasian,” *Aula Orientalis* 23 (2005): 83–129), but that is far from being unchallenged. While following the path of biconsonantalism is possible, positing that every root in Akkadian, Ugaritic, Hebrew and Aramaic with at least [z] and [n] are cognates of one another and can therefore interpret one another, however, is not. In chapter 2, “The Akkadian Connection,” for example, R’ compares the Akkadian verbs *zanānu* (A and B), *zānu*, and *zenû* to זנ"ה because “[t]hey may be homophones and homographs with each word having an autonomous development from an independent *zn* root.” (p. 19). It is not even clear if זנ"ה derived from a Proto-Semitic **zn(y/w)* or a *dn(y/w)* root, let alone if there was a biconsonantal ancestor. Even if the interpretation זנ"ה < **zn(y/w)* < **zn* was correct, that does not mean that every single instance of [z] + [n] in Akkadian, Ugaritic or Aramaic does so too and that it has any connection with the Hebrew

verb זנ"ה in the biblical corpus. Furthermore, the relationship between the Semitic languages is not considered. Ugaritic is much closer related to Hebrew than Akkadian is, while Aramaic is in between those two. That does not imply that Akkadian should not be used in a comparative study of a Hebrew term but an Ugaritic term would usually be more fruitful than an Akkadian one. At least the difference between the languages must be made clear.

The exegetical chapters examine a variety of biblical passages on the verb זנ"ה. They are interspersed with excursions to different smaller problems, like “Baal Peor and the Septuagint” (p. 85). The selection of the texts is surprising, however. R’ examines Ezek 16:20 but does not mention the remaining 34 instances of the root in this biblical book. Ezekiel 23 especially would have been helpful in understanding the root זנ"ה as a metaphor (D. Bindrim, *Die Flamme des Herrn? Eine philologische und theologische Untersuchung der Wurzel זנ"ה im Alten Testament* (VTOA 1; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 2023), 305–320). The first impression of the exegetical chapters is that R’ covers a wide array of biblical passages. She discusses the root זנ"ה in the Pentateuch, in the Deuteronomistic history and in the prophetic literature—especially in Hosea, Jeremia, and Ezekiel. On a closer, however, one has to wonder why the discussion is focused on single verses, sometimes half verses. In the examination of Hos 4:17–9, for example, only eleven out of nineteen words of the three verses are given. The exclusion of those eight words is not explained. While suggesting that the analysis covers all instances of the root זנ"ה in the Hebrew Bible, only those verses which further the argument of the author are cited and analysed. Examples from Isaiah, Proverbs and the Twelve Prophets are not even considered.

R’ shows that “the argument advanced by many scholars collapses—that the religion of the Canaanite population was replete with cultic sexual rituals, orgies and prostitution” (p. 215). The root זנ"ה really does not have any connection to the mythical sacred prostitution. Sadly, her argument that זנ"ה denotes primarily participating in “in non-Yahwist religious praxis/practices” (p. 204) is flawed. The linguistic “connections” are not based on a sound methodology and the exegesis of biblical passages is misleading due to a biased selection.