The Women of Asherah: Weaving Wickedness in 2 Kings 23:7

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Abstract: In this essay, I examine a long-standing crux interpretum in 2 Kgs 23:7 that reads, “And he tore down the homes of the male prostitutes, which were in the temple of Yhwh; where the women were weaving there בָּתִּים for the Asherah.” Though a number of proposals have been offered for understanding the crux, most have opted for an ad sensum interpretation that renders בָּתִּים as a curtain, tent, vestment, or other woven object that one might find in a sacred precinct. Nevertheless, I submit that, while the passage indeed describes the role that women played in producing textiles for the Asherah cult, the pervasive association of weaving with spiders also evokes a widespread androcentric stereotype that associates weaving women with female sexuality, deception, and entrapment. In turn, this enables us to understand בָּתִּים as idiomatic for “webs.”

Key Words: sexuality • deception • entrapment • spider • double entendre

The curious mention of women weaving items for Asherah in the account of Josiah’s reforms has long vexed interpreters. The pertinent passage reads: ויתן את־בתי הקדשים אשר בחדר יוהו אשר הנשים ארוגות שם בתים לאשרה, “And he tore down the homes of the male prostitutes, which were in the temple of Yhwh; where the women were weaving there בָּתִּים for the Asherah” (2 Kgs 23:7). Especially difficult here is the use of בָּתִּים (lit., “houses”) as the apparent product of the weavers. Though exegetes have offered a number of proposals for understanding the crux, most have opted for an ad sensum interpretation that renders בָּתִּים as a curtain, tent, vestment, or other woven object that one might find in a sacred precinct. Nevertheless, I submit that, while the phrase ארוגות בתים indeed describes the role that women played in producing textiles for the Asherah cult, the pervasive association of weaving with spiders also evokes a widespread androcentric stereotype that associates weaving women with female sexuality, deception, and entrapment.
I divide my examination into three parts. In the first, I lay out the difficulties that the passage presents by surveying the various ways that the ancient witnesses and later exegesis have treated the passage. In the second, I provide evidence for the stereotyped interpretation from the wider Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds. In the third section, I offer a new interpretation of the passage in the light of the stereotype and additional literary evidence to support it.

I. Previous Treatments of the Weavers

Reflecting well the difficulty of interpreting 2 Kgs 23:7 are the divergent readings present already in the ancient witnesses. The Septuagint (LXX) translates: καὶ καϑεῖλεν τὸν οἶκον τῶν καδησιμ τῶν ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ κυρίου, οὗ αἱ γυναῖκες ὑϕαινον ἐκεῖ χεττιιν τῷ ἄλσει, “And he tore down the house of the kadēsim who were in the house of the Lord, where the women were weaving chettin for the grove.” Here בְּשֵׁשֶׁת ("male cultic functionaries") is transliterated, rather than translated. Usually, the LXX opts to render this word with terms derived from πόρνη, πορνεύω ("prostitute") or τελέω ("bring to perfection, initiate into the mysteries"). In addition, בָּתי is rendered as χεττιιν, possibly a corrupt transliteration of the Hebrew (the Lucianic recension has στολὰς, "garments"). Finally, the LXX understands נַארָא as τῷ ἄλσει ("the grove").

1 Joan Goodnick Westenholz argues that the קדשים and קדשות cannot be thought of as prostitutes, since their activity occurs within the bounds of controlled sexuality ("Tamar, Qĕdēša, Qadištu, and Sacred Prostitution in Mesopotamia," HTR 82 [1989] 245–65). She further argues, “Any cult-related sexual activity simply does not exist outside of sacred marriage rites” (262). However, this makes it difficult to explain the treatments of the קדשים and קדשות in the textual witnesses. Thus, Karel van der Toorn argues that, while there is no evidence for cultic prostitution as part of a fertility cult, “the parallelism between qĕdēšâ and zônâ in Genesis 38 and Deut 23:18-19 favors the idea that the qĕdēšîm engaged primarily in sexual activities” ("Female Prostitution in Payment of Vows in Ancient Israel," JBL 108 [1989] 193–205, here 203). English translations of biblical passages are my own except for the Vulgate, for which I use the Douay-Rheims Bible.

2 Discussed well by Westenholz, "Tamar, Qĕdēša, Qadištu," 248–49, who also observes that both Greek terms are employed in Deut 23:18. She sees this as suggesting confusion by the translators, but I opine that it also could represent an epexegetical effort to provide both nuances of the Hebrew terms. She also notes that Origen and Aquila render קדשים in 1 Kgs 22:47 as εὐδιηλλαγμένος, “which means ‘one changed into something else’—and from the context, a translation ‘perverse one’ seems warranted” (249). See LSJ, s.v. ἐναλλάγη. The LXX does not contain 1 Kgs 22:47–50.

3 Suggested by James A. Montgomery, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings (ed. Henry Snyder Gehman; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1951) 539. The proposal presumes a misreading of the initial consonant ב in בתים as ג, which would explain the use of the Greek consonant χ, which can transliterate ג (or a ꜰ). Indeed, a beta always renders a Hebrew ꜰ elsewhere in the LXX. While such a misreading is certainly possible, the suggestion leaves unexplained the doubled iota in χεττιιν (and the ν instead of μ). Usually a single iota (or ι, ει, ηι) transliterates a single yod (as in בימ). Even a geminated yod is rendered with a single iota. See, e.g., בָּתי in 1 Chr
Targum Pseudo-Jonathan reads, "וְתָרַע יַת בָּתֵּי הֶקְדֵישׁ טַעֲוָתָא דִּבֵּית מַקְדְשָׁא דַיְיָ דִּנֹשַׁיָא מָחַן תַּמָן מְכוֹלִין לַאֲשֵׁרְתָא," "And he tore down the houses of the qĕdēš of 'prostitution,' which were in the temple, in which women were there producing curtains for an asherah." The Aramaic here underscores the sexual role of the קדשים by employing the word טעואת ("prostitution"), and it treats the Asherah as a common noun, the asherah. The בתי here are seen as מכוולין ("curtains").

The Vulgate translates the passage thus: destruxit quoque aediculas effeminatorum quae erant in domo Domini pro quibus mulieres texebant quasi domunculas luci, "He destroyed also the pavilions of the effeminate, which were in the house of the Lord, for which the women wove as it were little dwellings for the grove." The use of effeminatorum again emphasizes the sexual associations of the קדשים, and lucus renders אبشرה merely as a "grove." The Vulgate differs from the previous witnesses, however, in understanding בתי somewhat literally as quasi domunculas, "like little dwellings.”

The Peshiṣṭta renders the verse: ἔκτρων ἑτερίν ἡ βασιλικὴ ἡ μεγάλητει, "And he destroyed the houses of the male prostitutes, which were in the house of the Lord, and (the houses) of the women who wove vestments there." The translation avoids connecting the קדשים with notions of holiness (i.e., קדש) by translating it with the common term for prostitutes (יָרְשָׁה; cf. Heb. זנה). It also makes no mention of Asherah and treats בתי as לתה ("vestments," presumably for unnamed priests or idols).

Naturally, later exegetes turned to some of these interpretations for guidance. Thus, Rashi identifies בתי הקדשים as בתי הזמה "(houses of licentiousness") and the 7:28, which the LXX transliterates as Γα ι αν. Perhaps the latter part of the LXX transliteration originally read -τειν (or, better, -τειμ), which would bring it closer to the transliteration found in Theodotion—βεθθιειμ (the difference between τ and θ poses no dilemma, since both can render a geminated θ). Note that both χεττιιν and βεθθιειμ also oddly render the Hebrew קמיס with the vowel ε rather than the expected α. The fact that the two recensions transliterate בתים rather than translate it demonstrates that its meaning was unknown.

Regarding אبشرה, I agree with Susan Ackerman ("The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel," JBL 112 [1993] 385–401, here 389) that it is fruitless to distinguish Asherah the goddess from asherah the stylized tree, post, or grove, since the latter clearly represented the former, whether symbolically or as a manifestation of the deity.

4 The root טעא means “err, go astray,” and it can occur in reference to idol worship, though Targum Onqelos also uses it (in the apfel form) to render שלחנה (“to prostitute”) in Lev 19:29. Hence my translation.

5 The reading is perhaps based on analogy with Amos 5:26, which some have read as referring to the תִּכָּל ("booth") of Moloch. Certainly this is how early Christians understood the passage, as Stephen’s speech in Acts 7:43 makes clear. There the term is rendered with σκηνήν ("tent"). The Vulgate too translates with tabernaculum. Nevertheless, others understand תִּכָּל as a god, that is, Sikkuth.

the women were weaving as בתיים (“curtains”). David Qimḥi (Radaq) suggests more uniquely that we understand the woven בתיים in the light of Exod 25:27, in which the pole rings for the sacred table are labeled לבהים לбудים (“holders for the poles,” lit., “houses for the poles”). He thus interprets the בתיים as an enclosure surrounded by woven hangings. Gersonides (Ralbag) asserts that the curtains constituted a מחיצה (“partition”).

Modern translators either follow the ancient witnesses or opt to render בתיים as clothing for Asherah, based on a supposed Arabic cognate and/or on comparative evidence for clothing divine statues. Nevertheless, the evidence for the Arabic cognate is weak, and the comparative evidence, while extant, is not applicable unless one assumes that בתיים must mean “clothing.” Mayer Gruber argues that

7 Followed by Yehudah Kiel, Da’at Mikra: Sefer Melachim (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989) 791, who observes a similar usage in Exod 26:29.


11 Indeed, بَتَ (battu) primarily means “cut off,” and it is used only in a derived sense in reference to the weaving or selling of garments known as سَاحِ (sāḥ). See William Lane, Arabic-English Lexicon (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968) 1:148, s.v. بَتَ (battu). Driver (“Supposed Arabisms,” 107) obtains his cognates from G. W. Freytag, Lexikon Arabico-Latinum (Halle: C. A. Schwetschke et filium, 1837) 1:81; and R. Dozy, Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes (Beirut: Librairie Liban,
“clothing” is demanded by context, but he draws attention to the phrase בתי הנפש in Isa 3:20, which is listed with items of jewelry and other finery. Much debated, this item remains an enigma, though the use of בתי in Exod 25:27 for rings suggests a ringlike object, perhaps for the neck. This would match well the הובלת הרקăn זנייה אפים (“the rings and nose rings”) in the next verse (Isa 3:21). Susan Ackerman has suggested (and rejected) the possibility of breaking up the masoretic pointing of the verse to read, “He destroyed the houses [בָּתי] . . . where the women wove, (namely) the houses for Asherah.” Adrian Schenker similarly has opined that we should understand the בתי as “workshops.” Such diverse attempts to understand the verse illustrate well the difficulties of its interpretation. They also demonstrate how focused exegetes have been on the term בתי as the sole key to understanding the verse. As I aim to demonstrate, however, it is not just the term בתי that deserves our attention but the combined idiom ארגות בתים.

II. Weaving and Its Tools: The Language of Female Sexuality, Deception, and Entrapment

In a previous issue of this journal, I published an examination of Near Eastern and Mediterranean traditions that associate weaving with female sexuality,
deception, and entrapment. Rather than repeat the evidence in full here, I will offer a condensed, albeit representative, sampling and refer the reader to my earlier article for additional support.

As is well known, weaving was primarily a woman’s task in the ancient world. Consequently, the tools of weaving became symbols of femininity. The spindle, in particular, became a gendered object in Mesopotamian, Hittite, Canaanite, Phoenician, Israelite, and Greek cultures such that when it was associated with a man, it denoted his effeminacy. Indeed, the processes of both spinning and

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18 In Sumerian culture, a spindle and comb were placed at the side of newborn girls. See M. Stol, Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting (Cuneiform Monographs 14; Groningen: Styx, 2000) 63. Akkadian texts associate the spindle (pilakkū) only with women, goddesses, and female demons. See CAD P:372, s.v. pilakkū.

For Hittites, see Alice Mouton, Rêves hittites: Contribution à une histoire et une anthropologie du rêve en Anatolie ancienne (CHANE 28; Leiden: Brill, 2007) 7.

For Canaanites, see Ackerman, “Asherah, the West Semitic Goddess of Spinning,” 1–30.

For Phoenicians, see the Phoenician inscription by Azitawadda from Karatepe (eighth century B.C.E.), which describes the safety that the king bestowed upon the city as marked by women carrying their spindles freely on the streets (KAI 26, col. 2, lines 5–6).

For Israelite evidence, see Prov 31:19, though sometimes men produced textiles alongside women (e.g., Exod 35:25–35).


weaving came to serve as metaphors for, and symbols of, female sexuality. This is well attested in Sumerian, Hittite, biblical, and Greek texts.20

In addition, in the ancient Near East the language of weaving had long been connected with spiders and, thus, naturally with deception and entrapment. Thus, the Akkadian word for “spider” (uttūtu/ettūtu) relates to the name of the Sumerian goddess of weaving, Uttu.21 In addition, the Sumerian and Akkadian terms for “weave” also refer to a “spider web.”22 The other Akkadian term for “spider” (anzūzu) also is identified with entrapment in a popular saying: ḥamēti šE.GUR₄ Joab, and upon all his father’s house; and let there not be cut off from the house of Joab one that has a discharge, or a leper, or one who grasps a spindle” (2 Sam 3:29) (M. Malul, “David’s Curse of Joab [2 Sam 3:29] and the Social Significance of mḥzyq bplk,” AO 10 [1992] 46–67). In Greek myth, Herakles performs a year of servitude for his mistress Omphale by handling the spindle, doing other chores normally done by women, and dressing in women’s clothing, while she wears his lion’s skin and handles his club (see Elmer G. Suhr, “Herakles and Omphale,” AJA 57 [1953] 251–63).

20 Sumerian mythological texts refer to Uttu, the goddess of weaving, as a “voluptuous woman” (munus ni.bulug3), and her expertise in weaving, as “womanly work” (níg-nam-munus-a), an idiom that also means “sexual skills.” Her very name (dtag.túg) means “weave cloth.” See Herman L. J. Vanstiphout, “A Double Entendre Concerning Uttu,” Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires (1990) 40–44; and in the same issue, idem, “Once Again, Sex and Weaving,” 45–46; see also Gwendolyn Leick, Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature (London: Routledge, 1994) 30–34. Regarding the Hittites, when the Hittite god Elkunirša refuses Ašertu’s (= Asherah) sexual advances, she threatens to stab him with her spindle (Harry A. Hoffner, “The Elkunirša Myth Reconsidered,” RHA 23 [1965] 5–16, here 6–8). For the biblical evidence, see Noegel, “Evil Looms.” The association continued in early Judaism. Concerning the expression צָוָה בְּשֵׁק (“spinning in the street”), b. Ket. 72b records, “Rabbi Judah said in the name of Samuel, ‘It refers to a woman who shows off her arms to bypassers.’ Said Rabbi Hisda in the name of Abimi, ‘It refers to a woman who spins (so that the spindle) dangles towards her vulva.’ . . . Rabbi bar bar Hannah said, ‘Once, I was walking behind Rabbi Uqba. I saw an Arab woman sitting, plying her spindle and spinning (so that the spindle) dangled towards her vulva. When she saw us, she broke off (the thread) and dropped the spindle and said to me, “Young man, would you fetch me back my spindle?”’” See Cynthia M. Baker, Rebuilding the House of Israel: Architectures of Gender in Jewish Antiquity (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002) 101–102, 209 nn. 50-51.

21 CAD E:396, s.v. ettūtu.

22 Sumerian zē-zē = dun-dun (Akk. šatū); CAD Š/2:217, s.v. šatû B. Another term for “spider,” ḫādlu, also derives from a root meaning “to knot, net” (CAD ḫ:22, s.v. ḫādālu; 23, s.v. ḫādilu). The Akkadian word qû (“thread”) also means “spider web” (CAD Q:287, s.v. qû A).
ANZUZU ITADDU BİRĒTI, “THE SPIDER THREW THE WASP INTO FETTERS.”23 In Egyptian too, the term sḫt.t-ḥt (“spider”) derives from a verb for “weaving, trapping” (sḥt), and one writes it with the hieroglyph sign for a bird trap (𓀪), an object made of woven materials.24

In the Hebrew Bible, the weaving (阿根) spider and its web are synonymous with entrapment and hopelessness. Thus, Isaiah berates liars who קורי עפעל יאראו, “weave the webs of a spider” (Isa 59:5). Their plans will be without consequence, because “their webs עפעל do not become a garment” (59:6).25 When Job laments, “My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle_argen they go without thread” (Job 7:6–7)—a complaint that turns upon the polysemy of תקה for both “hope” and “thread”26—Bildad cleverly counters, “The hope תקה of the impious will perish; his confidence will be cut off; his trust is but a spider’s web עפעל לוכד, lit., ‘house of a spider’),27 he leans on its web עפעל, lit., ‘its house’], but it gives way” (Job 8:14–15).28 Hezekiah’s prayer after recovering from his illness is similarly inspired: “I took up like a weaver_argen my life, he cut me off from a loom עדלה” (Isa 38:12). The association of weaving with entrapment is likely based, at least in part, on the fact that nets and other types of snares were made of woven or knotted materials. Thus, Bildad likens a רשת (“net”) to a תפל (“weaving,” Job 18:8), and the psalmist observes that one must יארב “lie in wait”) to use a רשת (Ps 10:9; cf. Prov 1:17–18).

In Greek literature, Democritus asserts that humans learned weaving from spiders.29 Homer records that Hephaistos wove a net “as fine as a spider’s web” around his bed to ensnare the adulterous Ares and Aphrodite (Od. 8.265–317).30

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24 Rainer Hannig, Die Sprache der Pharaonen: Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptische-Deutsch (2800–950 v. Chr.) (Kulturgeschichte der Antiken Welt 64; Mainz: P. von Zabern, 1997) 751.
25 The Hebrew🗣️ (“garment”) also means “treachery.”
26 On linguistic one-upmanship in Job, see Scott B. Noegel, Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job (JSOTSup 223; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 52, 132.
27 According to J. P. van der Westhuizen, the term עפעל (“spider”) derives from a Proto-Semitic root ק to which a prothetic w was added and later a ה, the latter to indicate an animal (“Some Notes on the Term עפעל,” in De Fructu Oris Sui: Essays in Honour of Adrianus van Selms [ed. I. H. Eybers, F. C. Fensham, and C. J. Labuschagne; Pretoria Oriental Series 9; Leiden: Brill, 1971] 214–21). The same root in Arabic is used for “weaving” locks of hair, “pollen” from palm trees, and, of course, עקא (“spider” or “spider web”).
28 The usage finds a parallel in the Arabic cognate بيت bayit for “spider web” (Qur’an sura 29:41): “The example of those who take allies other than Allah is like that of the spider who takes a home תפל; and indeed, the weakest of homes לביוט al-bayit is the home תפל of the spider, if they only knew.” I thank my student Sharif Randhawa for drawing my attention to this sura.
30 That is, ἀράξια λεπτα. He also parallels Penelope’s work at the loom with the work of a spider, when Telemachus comes to check on her chastity and asks “whether my mother endures
Ovid tells us that Arachne’s hubris for challenging Athena to a weaving contest angered her so much that she transformed her into a spider to spend eternity spinning and weaving (Metam. 6.1–145).

Such associations tokens a widespread androcentric stereotype that identifies weaving with female sexuality, deception, and entrapment. In Sumerian texts, this appears most notably in the tale of Enki and Ninḫursag, in which the weaving goddess Uttu continuously manipulates the sexual advances of the god Enki.31

In biblical texts, we find the stereotype operative in Qoheleth’s description of a deceptive woman: את־האשה אשר־היא מצודים וחרמים לבה אסורים ידיה “the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are bonds” (Qoh 7:26). See similarly the portrait of a man who followed an adulterous woman כשור אל־طبعה, עד יпалח חץ כבדו כמהר צפור אל־פח ולא־ידע כי־בנפשו הוא, “like an ox going to the slaughter he goes, like a fool/deer into a snare, until an arrow pierces his liver, like a bird rushing into a trap, and he does not know that it will cost him his life” (Prov 7:22). Such prooftexts notwithstanding, in the Bible it is the story of Delilah that best illustrates the association of weaving with female sexuality, deception, and entrapment. Its sophisticated use of weaving terminology, coupled with Delilah’s weaving of Samson’s hair into her loom, characterize her as a manipulative femme fatale.32

As Evy Háland observes, the same can be said for Greek traditions: “The female speech of weaving is connected with both a female way of handling things and female cunning.”33 Sarah Iles Johnston similarly remarks:

[A] spider’s web could evoke entrapment and a predatory nature, particularly when a weaker figure used tricks to capture a stronger one—the best known case being Aeschylus’ description of Clytemnestra capturing Agamemnon.34

Moreover, the connection to scheming and entrapment obtains linguistically as well in much of the vocabulary for weaving.35 According to Francesca Santoro

still in the halls, or whether some other man has married her, and the bed of Odysseus lies forlorn of sleepers with spider webs grown upon it” (Od. 16.30–35). Noted by Kathryn Sullivan Kruger, Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Female Textile Production (Danvers, MA: Rosemont, 2001) 80–82.

32 See Noegel, “Evil Looms,” 187–204, for the complete evidence.
35 In Greek literature, Penelope forestalls her would-be suitors for three years while weaving a burial cloth during the day and unraveling it at night (Od. 2.94–110, 19.139–51, 24.139–50). As she reveals to the disguised Odysseus, ἐγὼ δὲ δόλοις τολυπεύω, “I wind a skein of wiles” (19.137); the term τολυπεύω here means both “wind up thread” and “scheme.” This was noted by Marie-Louise Nosch, “Women, Weaving, and Plotting,” in KE-RA-ME-JA: Studies Presented to Cynthia W. Shelmerdine (ed. Dimitri Nakassis, Joann Gulizio, and Sarah A. James; Prehistory
L’Hoir, this connection is found in the literature of the ancient Mediterranean generally:

Weaving was metaphorical for sexual entrapment, as is implied in Homer’s portrayals of designing enchantresses who move to and fro at their looms. In Roman literature, the loom possesses a similar ambivalence, as is evident in the story of Lucretia, in which the mere sight of the woman spinning incites Sextus Tarquin’s lust (Livy 1.57.9). 36

III. The “Weavers” of Asherah

In the light of the widespread androcentric stereotype that associates weaving with female sexuality and entrapment, and the appearance elsewhere in the Bible of the root אֵרֶב for “spinning a web” (Isa 59:5) and בית for “spider web” (Job 8:14–15),37 I contend that we should understand the phrase אֲרוֹנָה בְּתֵי as a double entendre that polemically casts the women in the service of Asherah as spiders “weaving webs,” and thus, as sexual predators.38 One advantage of this reading is that it makes the weaving women a perfect gendered parallel for the קדשים. In essence, the אֲרוֹנָה are synonymous with the קדשים.39 Like prostitutes and idolaters elsewhere, the women in the Asherah cult embody snares, lying in wait for those unaware (e.g., Judg 8:27; Hos 5:1–4; Prov 6:25–26; 7:10–23; Ps 106:36;

Monographs 46; Philadelphia: INSTAP Academic Press, 2014) 91–101, here 93. Notions of weaving and deception are so close in Greek that a number of technical terms employed for the weaver’s work do double duty for “plot,” “scheme,” “show cunning,” and the like. Thus, μῆτις (“weaving”) means “cunning” (Od. 13.386); περοπλέκω denotes “weave, twine around” but also “deceitful speech”; ράπτειν (“sew”) can mean “plot evil” (Il. 18.367; Od. 3.118, 16.423); and ῥάπτειν means “weave” or “scheme” (Il. 3.212). LSJ, s.vv. μῆτις, πλέκω, ράπτειν, and ῥάπτειν. Cf. the Hebrew root עָבַה which means both “weave” or “scheme mischief” (see Mic 7:2–3). Perhaps the root רַסֵּק (“sew,” connect,” or “perform magic”) is apposite here as well. See Exod 26:11; 36:18; Deut 18:11. Cf. also risku (“knot,” “bond” of magic and dreams), CAD R:349, s.v. risku.


37 The LXX associates a spider web with the οἶκος (“house”) of a moth in Job 27:18 but appears to read “web of a spider” where the MT has “moth” in Ps 38:11 (= MT 39:12). The LXX perhaps read the MT’s קֶסֶף (“like a moth”) as קָנָס (“spider”).

38 Attributing houses to creatures of all kinds is not unique to Hebrew (e.g., Job 27:18 [moth], 1 Sam 6:7 [cow], Job 39:6 [onager], Prov 30:26 [lyrax]). The Akkadian cognate בֵּית (“house”) occurs in reference to nest of a ḥaḥaru-bird. See CAD B:286, s.v. בֵּית (cf. בתו in Ps 84:4 [bird]; 104:17 [stork]). The Fable of the Spider also states that the gods created קיסס (“sanctuaries”) for all creatures, including the spider. See Enrique Jiménez, The Babylonian Disputation Poems: With Editions of the Series of the Poplar, Palm and Vine, the Series of the Spider, and the Story of the Poor; Forlorn Wren (CHANE 87; Leiden: Brill, 2017) 302–3. Malku I 262, identifies the קיסס as a type of בֵּית.

39 I find it plausible that the Vulgate’s translation of קְדִישֵׁים with effeminatum was inspired by the male prostitutes’ association with weaving women.
Qoh 7:26). Their activity in Yhwh’s temple recalls other traditions of sexual impropriety in sacred places (e.g., Num 25:1–4; 1 Sam 2:22; Ezek 16:16). Yet, as with the liars of Isa 59:5, their deceptive and dangerous webs also come to naught. If Ackerman is correct that Asherah was the patron goddess of weavers, then the double entendre bears an additional sting, for Ugaritic texts portray Asherah as possessing a strong libido and working her “spindle of charm.”

Note too that 2 Kgs 23:7 refers to the women with the definite article—הנשים (“the women”). As Meindert Dijkstra observes, in some instances the article can designate members of a professional class, such as the women who weep for Tammuz in Ezek 8:14 and Jer 9:16, with whom Dijkstra also suggests we identify the women of Asherah. Indeed, the use of הנשים here is an otherwise superfluous addition, since the narrator could have conveyed the same information without it, that is, הארגות שם בתים.

Additional literary support for understanding ארגות בתים as a double entendre comes from the passage’s threefold use of the term בית, each time with a different meaning—a device known as antanaclasis. First, it refers to the “homes” (perhaps “chambers”) of the male prostitutes, then to Yhwh’s “temple,” and finally to the weavers’ “webs.” As such, it rivals another well-known case of antanaclasis involving the word בית in 2 Samuel 7 for “palace” (7:2), “temple” (7:5–7), and “dynasty” (7:11–16). That the author of our pericope was familiar with the device is clear just a few verses earlier, where the root עמד similarly occurs with three

40 See Ackerman, “Asherah, the West Semitic Goddess,” 1–30. Ugaritic texts presume Asherah’s libido when El asks whether sexual desire led her to his palace: *hm yd il mlk yḥšk ahbt gr tʾrrk,* “Does the phallus of El the King excite you, the love of the Bull arouse you?” (*CAT* [Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places (ed. Manfred Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquin Sanmartin; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995)] 1.4 iv 38–39). *CAT* 1.4 ii 3–4, describes Asherah as *plkh b ydh plk tʾl bymnḥ,* “her spindle in her hand, the spindle of charm in her right hand.”


42 The definite article perhaps also lends the text an aura of intrigue in a way similar to the narrator’s reference to Bathsheba as “the woman” in the account of David’s affair (2 Sam 11:2, 5). See Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983) 27.


different meanings in close succession: “And the king stood \( \text{יוֹעֵדֵם} \) by the pillar \( \text{הָאָטָמְד} \) . . . then all the people pledged \( \text{יוֹעֵדֵם} \) themselves to the covenant” (2 Kgs 23:3). In fact, the very uniqueness of the phrase \( \text{אַרְגֹּתְתָּ בָתִים} \), following so closely upon two different meanings of the word \( \text{בָּתִים} \), should alert us to the possibility of an additional nuance.\(^{45}\)

Therefore, considering the combined evidence, I suggest that we understand \( \text{אַרְגֹּתְתָּ בָתִים} \) both as women who wove textiles for the Asherah cult and as a double entendre for sexual predators in the temple. I thus translate the passage: “And he tore down the homes of the male prostitutes, which were in the temple of Yhwh, there where the women were, ‘weaving webs’ for Asherah” (2 Kgs 23:7).

\(^{45}\) Another example of antanaclasis occurs in 2 Kgs 23:8, though the passage is difficult: \( \text{וַנָּתַץ} \) את־במות השערים אשר־פתח שער יהושע שר־העיר אשר־על־שמאול איש בשער העיר. Here the narrator employs the word \( \text{שער} \) (“gate”) three times, but in at least two different ways. The first, in the plural, modifies \( \text{במות} \) (“high places”). It is arguably the most difficult to translate since the relative pronoun \( \text{אשר} \) appears to situate the gates within another structure also called a \( \text{שער} \) (“gate”). The second \( \text{שער} \) refers to the door of the governor’s private home (cf. Prov 14:19; 2 Kgs 9:31). It too is followed by a relative pronoun that locates it within another structure. Only the third occurrence of \( \text{שער} \) refers to the city gate. I suggest that we understand the first occurrence, that is, \( \text{שערים} \), as summarizing the two different types of gates where there were altars and render the passage: “He tore down the high places of the gates, (that is to say) that which was at the entrance of the door of Joshua, commander of the city, (and) that which was to a person’s left just within the city gate.”