

# 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

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THE CURIOUS MENTION of women weaving items for Asherah in the account of Josiah’s reforms has long vexed interpreters. The pertinent passage reads: וִיתֵץ אֶת־בְּתֵי הַקְּדֻשִׁים אֲשֶׁר בְּבֵית יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הַנָּשִׁים אֹרְגוֹת שָׁם בָּתִּים לַאֲשֶׁרָה, “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 אֹרְגוֹת בָּתִּים 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 exegetes 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 stereotyped 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 καθείλεν τὸν οἶκον τῶν καδοῖσι τῶν ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ κυρίου, οὓς αἱ γυναῖκες ὕφαινον ἐκεῖ χεττιν τῷ ἄλσει, “And he tore down the house of the *kadēsīm* who were in the house of the Lord, there where the women were weaving *chettin* for the grove.” Here קדשים (“male cultic functionaries”) is transliterated, rather than translated.<sup>1</sup> Usually, the LXX opts to render this word with terms derived from πόρνη, πορνεύω (“prostitute”) or τελέω (“bring to perfection, initiate into the mysteries”).<sup>2</sup> In addition, בתים is rendered as χεττιν, possibly a corrupt transliteration of the Hebrew (the Lucianic recension has στολάς, “garments”). Finally, the LXX understands לאשרה as τῷ ἄλσει (“the grove”).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 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, *Qēdēša*, *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 *qēdēša* and *zōnā* in Genesis 38 and Deut 23:18–19[17–18] favors the idea that the *qēdēšīm* 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.

<sup>2</sup> Discussed well by Westenholz, “Tamar, *Qēdēša*, *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 exegetical effort to provide both nuances of the Hebrew terms. She also notes that Origen and Aquila render קדש 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. ἐναλλάγῃ. The LXX does not contain 1 Kgs 22:47–50.

<sup>3</sup> 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 כ, which would explain the use of the Greek consonant χ, which can transliterate a כ (or a ח). Indeed, a *beta* always renders a Hebrew ב elsewhere in the LXX. While such a misreading is certainly possible, the suggestion leaves unexplained the doubled *iota* in χεττιν (and the *v* instead of *μ*). Usually a single *iota* (or *ε*, *η*, *αι*, *ει*) transliterates a single *yod* (as in בתים). Even a geminated *yod* is rendered with a single *iota*. See, e.g., ἡ in 1 Chr

*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* reads, וְהָרַע יְתָּ בְּתֵּי הַקִּדְּשִׁים טַעֲוֹתָא דְּבַבִּית מִקִּדְּשָׁא דִּי, דְּנִשְׂיָא מִסֵּן תַּמָּן מְכוּלִּין לְאַשְׁרָתָא, “And he tore down the houses of the *qēdēs* 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 טַעֲוֹתָא (“prostitution”), and it treats the Asherah as a common noun, the asherah.<sup>4</sup> The בְּתֵּי here are seen as מְכוּלִּין (“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 אֲשֵׁרָה merely as a “grove.” The Vulgate differs from the previous witnesses, however, in understanding בְּתֵּי somewhat literally as *quasi domunculas*, “like little dwellings.”<sup>5</sup>

The Peshīṭta renders the verse: סִחַף סֵלָא גֻּלְתָּא דְּנִשְׂיָא וְכַבְּשֻׁלֹת גֻּלְתָּא. סִנְעִיָּא גֻּלְתָּא דִּי, וְכַבְּשֻׁלֹת גֻּלְתָּא דִּי, “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., אֲשֵׁרָה) by translating it with the common term for prostitutes (נִשְׂיָא; cf. Heb. זֹנֶה). It also makes no mention of Asherah and treats בְּתֵּי as גֻּלְתָּא (“vestments,” presumably for unnamed priests or idols).<sup>6</sup>

Naturally, later exegetes turned to some of these interpretations for guidance. Thus, Rashi identifies בְּתֵי הַקִּדְּשִׁים as בְּתֵי הַזִּמָּה (“houses of licentiousness”) and the

7:28, which the LXX transliterates as Γαυαν. Perhaps the latter part of the LXX transliteration originally read -ταειν (or, better, -ταειμι), which would bring it closer to the transliteration found in Theodotion—βεθθαιμι (the difference between ττ and θθ poses no dilemma, since both can render a geminated ת). Note that both χερταιν and βεθθαιμι also oddly render the Hebrew *qamets* with the vowel ε rather than the expected α. The fact that the two recensions transliterate בְּתֵי rather than translate it demonstrates that its meaning was unknown.

Regarding אֲשֵׁרָה, 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.

<sup>4</sup> The root טעו means “err, go astray,” and it can occur in reference to idol worship, though *Targum Onqelos* also uses it (in the *aphel* form) to render לְהִזְנוּת (“to prostitute”) in Lev 19:29. Hence my translation.

<sup>5</sup> The reading is perhaps based on analogy with Amos 5:26, which some have read as referring to the סִכּוֹת (“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 סִכּוֹת as a god, that is, Sikkuth.

<sup>6</sup> R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879) col. 1296, s.v. גֻּלְתָּא. For the various ways that the Peshīṭta renders Asherah elsewhere in the Bible, see John Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature,” *JBL* 105 (1986) 385–408, here 397.

בתיים the women were weaving as יריעות (“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 לבתיים לבדים (“holders for the poles,” lit., “houses for the poles”). He thus interprets the בתיים as an enclosure surrounded by woven hangings.<sup>7</sup> Gersonides (Ralbag) asserts that the curtains constituted a מחיצה (“partition”).

Modern translators either follow the ancient witnesses<sup>8</sup> or opt to render בתיים as clothing for Asherah, based on a supposed Arabic cognate<sup>9</sup> and/or on comparative evidence for clothing divine statues.<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> Mayer Gruber argues that

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

<sup>8</sup> Thus, A. Graeme Auld translates “hangings” (*I and II Kings* [Daily Study Bible; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986] 223); Rudolf Kittel: “Überzüge oder Futterale für das Bild” (*Die Bücher der Könige* [HKAT 1.5; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1900] 301). I. W. Slotki suggests “curtains or partitions behind which the ritual obscenities were practiced” (*Kings: Hebrew Text and English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* [London: Soncino, 1950] 304).

<sup>9</sup> The Arabic بَتُّ (battu, “woven garment”) was first suggested as a cognate by Albert Šanda, *Die Bücher der Könige*, vol. 2, *Das zweite Buch der Könige* (EHAT 9.2; Münster: Aschendorff, 1912) 344; and then by G. R. Driver, “Supposed Arabisms in the Old Testament,” *JBL* 55 (1936) 101–20, here 107, who asserted that it meant a “cloak of coarse silk or wool thrown over the head or shoulders and hanging down the back.” The reading was adopted by Montgomery, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, 539. Hence also J. Robinson, *The Second Book of Kings* (CBC; London: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 220; and John Gray, *I and II Kings: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 730 n. f., who sees the items as “robes” that were made “probably for those serving Asherah as well as for her image.” Marvin A. Sweeney renders “coverings” (*I & II Kings: A Commentary* [OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013] 438).

<sup>10</sup> Thus, O. Thenius, *Die Bücher der Könige* (Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament 9; Leipzig: Weidmann, 1849) 426; Hugo Gressmann, “Josia und das Deuteronomium,” *ZAW* 42 (1924) 313–36, here 325–26; Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation* (AB 11; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988) 279; Westenholz, “Tamar, Qēdēša, Qadištu,” 248; Ackerman, “Queen Mother,” 391; D. J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings: An Introduction and Commentary* (TynOTC 9; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993) 321; William G. Dever, “The Silence of the Text: An Archaeological Commentary on 2 Kings 23,” in *Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Honor of Philip J. King* (ed. Michael D. Coogan, J. Cheryl Exum, and Lawrence E. Stager; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 143–68; Phyllis Bird, “The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus,” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (ed. Alice Bach; New York: Routledge, 1999) 3–20, here 9; Jesse C. Long Jr., *1 and 2 Kings* (College Press NIV Commentary; Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002) 509; Lissa M. Wray Beal, *1 and 2 Kings* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary 9; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014) 507.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, بَتُّ (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 ساج (sāj). See William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968) 1:148, s.v. بَتُّ (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 בְּתֵי הַנֶּפֶשׁ in Isa 3:20, which is listed with items of jewelry and other finery.<sup>12</sup> Much debated, this item remains an enigma, though the use of בְּתֵי in Exod 25:27 for rings suggests a ringlike object, perhaps for the neck.<sup>13</sup> This would match well the הַטְּבָעוֹת וְהַנִּזְמֵי הָאֵף (“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 [*bāttîm*] . . . where the women wove, (namely) the houses for Asherah.”<sup>14</sup> Adrian Schenker similarly has opined that we should understand the בְּתֵי as “workshops.”<sup>15</sup> 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 בְּתֵי as the sole key to understanding the verse. As I aim to demonstrate, however, it is not just the term בְּתֵי that deserves our attention but the combined idiom אֲרָגוֹת בְּתֵי.

## 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,

1968) 1:50. Freytag’s work was largely drawn from al-Jauharī, *Tāj al-luġa wa Ṣaḥāḥ al-ʿArabīya* (ninth–tenth century C.E.), and al-Fīrūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīt* (fourteenth–fifteenth century C.E.), both of which are organized according to a rhyming scheme, cite no prooftexts, and relish in rare, contemporary usages. Dozy’s collection is heavily weighted toward postclassical usage, especially from Hispano-Arabic. Thus, neither is particularly helpful for establishing cognate evidence for Biblical Hebrew. See John A. Haywood, *Arabic Lexicography: Its History and Its Place in the General History of Lexicography* (Leiden: Brill, 1960) 68–91, 126.

<sup>12</sup> Mayer I. Gruber, “The *Qāḏēš* in the Book of Kings and in Other Sources” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 52 (1983) 167–76.

<sup>13</sup> Franz Delitzsch suggested that we understand it as “holder of a scent,” that is, “breath of an aroma” (*Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah* [2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1892] 1:132). George Buchanan Gray similarly suggested “perfume boxes” (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah, I–XXXIX* [ICC; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912] 73). Montgomery argues for “houses of the soul” (*Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, 539). However, L. Durr may have been closest to the mark in reading נֶפֶשׁ as “neck” (“Hebr. נֶפֶשׁ = akk. *napitštu* = Gurgel, Kehle,” *ZAW* 43 [1925] 262–69). The item then would refer to rings (perhaps interconnected) hanging about the neck. As far as I am aware, there is no evidence in the ancient Near East for the type of neck rings that mark beauty and status among women, for example, in Celtic, Kayyan, or South Ndebele cultures.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Ackerman, “Asherah, the West Semitic Goddess of Spinning and Weaving?,” *JNES* 67 (2008) 1–30, here 18. The problems posed by the LXX and the masoretic pointing encourage Ackerman to reject the reading and see the woven items as garments for cult statues or other sorts of textiles such as priestly garments or draperies.

<sup>15</sup> Adrian Schenker, *Älteste Textgeschichte der Königsbücher: Die hebräische Vorlage der ursprünglichen Septuaginta als älteste Textform der Königsbücher* (OBO 199; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004) 46.

deception, and entrapment.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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<sup>18</sup> such that when it was associated with a man, it denoted his effeminacy.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the processes of both spinning and

<sup>16</sup> See Scott B. Noegel, "Evil Looms: Delilah—Weaver of Wicked Wiles," *CBQ* 79 (2017) 187–204.

<sup>17</sup> See Alexander Uchitel, "Women at Work: Weavers of Lagash and Spinners of San Luis Gonzaga," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2–6, 2001* (ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting; 2 vols.; *Compte rendu, Rencontre assyriologique internationale 47*; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002) 1:621–31; Marie-Louise Nosch, Henriette Koefoed, and Eva Andersson Strand, eds., *Textile Production and Consumption in the Ancient Near East: Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Iconography* (Ancient Textiles Series 12; Oxford: Oxbow, 2013); Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (OtSt 49; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 408–9.

<sup>18</sup> 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 (*pilakku*) only with women, goddesses, and female demons. See *CAD* P:372, s.v. *pilakku*.

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).

For the Greeks, see Evy Johanne Håland, "Athena's Peplos: Weaving as Core Female Activity in Ancient and Modern Greece," *Cosmos* 20 (2004) 155–82. Nevertheless, there was a small group of male weavers in Athens. See W. Thompson, "Weaving: A Man's Work," *Classical World* 75 (1982) 217–22. In Athens, a tuft of wool also marked the birth of a girl. See Jenifer Neils, "Children and Greek Religion," in *Coming of Age in Ancient Greece: Images of Childhood from the Classical Past* (ed. Jenifer Neils and John H. Oakley; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) 139–61, here 143. On Athena as the patron goddess of weaving, see already Martin P. Nilsson, "Die Anfänge der Göttin Athene," *Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser/Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabskabernes Selskab* 4 (1921) 3–20.

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Esarhaddon's treaty curse: "[As (with) a spindle] may they cause you to be pinned down. May they treat you [like a woman in the presence] of your enemy," in D. J. Wiseman, *The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1958) 75–76 (Ramataia Text, ND 4327, col. viii, 616–17). In Hittite culture, putting a spindle and distaff in a man's hand dishonored him. See Jaan Puhvel, *Hittite Etymological Dictionary*, vol. 3, *Words Beginning with H* (Trends in Linguistics: Documentation 5; Berlin: Mouton, 1991) 342. Cf. *CAD* S:24, s.v. *saggullu*. Compare David's curse against Joab for killing Abner: "let it fall upon the head of

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

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.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the Sumerian and Akkadian terms for “weave” also refer to a “spider web.”<sup>22</sup> The other Akkadian term for “spider” (*anzūzu*) also is identified with entrapment in a popular saying: *hamēti ŠE.GUR*<sub>4</sub>

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).

<sup>20</sup> Sumerian mythological texts refer to Uttu, the goddess of weaving, as a “voluptuous woman” (munus ni.bulug<sub>3</sub>), and her expertise in weaving, as “womanly work” (nig-nam-munus-a), an idiom that also means “sexual skills.” Her very name (<sup>d</sup>tag.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. In a song to the goddess Bau for Šu-Suen, the king refers to his concubine as <sup>g</sup>gen-na túg dun-na gál-[la]-gu<sub>10</sub>, “My warp beam for weaving” (Šu-Suen A, lines 5–6).

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 טווה בשוק (“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.

In Athens, the Arrhēphoria were charged with preparing young women for marriage by introducing them to sexuality and the mastery of spinning and weaving. See Sarah Iles Johnston, “A New Web for Arachne,” in *Antike Mythen: Medien, Transformationen und Konstruktionen* (ed. Christine Walde and Ueli Dill; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009) 1–22, here 14. The word συμπλοκή designates both “weaving” and “sexual intercourse” (Plato, *Pol.* 281a; *Symp.* 191c). This observation is offered by John Scheid and Jesper Svenbro, *The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Fabric* (trans. Carol Volk; Revealing Antiquity 9; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) 176 n. 121. LSJ, s.v. συμπλοκή.

<sup>21</sup> *CAD* E:396, s.v. *ettūtu*.

<sup>22</sup> Sumerian *zé-zé* = dun-dun (Akk. *šatû*); *CAD* Š/2:217, s.v. *šatû* B. Another term for “spider,” *ḥādīlu*, also derives from a root meaning “to knot, net” (*CAD* H:22, s.v. *ḥādālu*; 23, s.v. *ḥādīlu*). The Akkadian word *qû* (“thread”) also means “spider web” (*CAD* Q:287, s.v. *qû* A).



(*anzūzu*) *itaddū birēti*, “the spider threw the wasp into fetters.”<sup>23</sup> In Egyptian too, the term *šht.t-ht* (“spider”) derives from a verb for “weaving, trapping” (*šht*), and one writes it with the hieroglyph sign for a bird trap (𓂏), an object made of woven materials.<sup>24</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible, the weaving (ארג) spider and its web are synonymous with entrapment and hopelessness. Thus, Isaiah berates liars who קורי עכביש יארגו, “weave the webs of a spider” (Isa 59:5). Their plans will be without consequence, because “their webs [קוריהם] do not become a garment” (59:6).<sup>25</sup> When Job laments, “My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle [ארג], they go without thread” (Job 7:6–7)—a complaint that turns upon the polysemy of תקוה for both “hope” and “thread”<sup>26</sup>—Bildad cleverly counters, “The hope [תקוה] of the impious will perish; his confidence will be cut off; his trust is but a spider’s web [בית עכביש, lit., ‘house of a spider’],”<sup>27</sup> he leans on its web [ביתו, lit., ‘its house’], but it gives way” (Job 8:14–15).<sup>28</sup> Hezekiah’s prayer after recovering from his illness is similarly inspired: “I took up like a weaver [ארג] my life, he cut me off from a loom [דלה]” (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 שבכה (“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.<sup>29</sup> 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).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup> CAD A/2:155, s.v. *anzūzu*. W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996) 220.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> The Hebrew פָּגַד (“garment”) also means “treachery.”

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> According to J. P. van der Westhuizen, the term עכביש (“spider”) derives from a Proto-Semitic root *kt* to which a prothetic ל was added and later a ב, the latter to indicate an animal (“Some Notes on the Term עכביש,” 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, عكث *ukāṭa* (“spider” or “spider web”).

<sup>28</sup> 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 [بيت *bayitā*]; and indeed, the weakest of homes [البيوت *al-bayūt*] is the home [لا-بيت *la-bayit*] of the spider, if they only knew.” I thank my student Sharif Randhawa for drawing my attention to this sura.

<sup>29</sup> Democritus DK 154 = Plutarch, *Soll. an.* 974 A6–10.

<sup>30</sup> That is, ἡὺρ ἄραχνια λεπτά. 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 token 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 Ninhursag, in which the weaving goddess Uttu continuously manipulates the sexual advances of the god Enki.<sup>31</sup>

In biblical texts, we find the stereotype operative in Qoheleth's description of a deceptive woman: אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־הִיא מְצוּדִים וְחַרְמִים לְבָהּ אֲסוּרִים יָדֶיהָ, "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 אל־טֶבַח כְּשֹׁר, "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*.<sup>32</sup>

As Evy Håland 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."<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the connection to scheming and entrapment obtains linguistically as well in much of the vocabulary for weaving.<sup>35</sup> 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.

<sup>31</sup> Alhena Gadotti, "Why It Was Rape: The Conceptualization of Rape in Sumerian Literature," *JAOS* 129 (2009) 73–82.

<sup>32</sup> See Noegel, "Evil Looms," 187–204, for the complete evidence.

<sup>33</sup> Håland, "Athena's Peplos," 170.

<sup>34</sup> Johnston, "New Web for Arachne," 7.

<sup>35</sup> 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 δόλος τοῦ λυπεύω, "I wind a skein of wiles" (19.137); the term τοῦ λυπεύω 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 (Liv. 1.57.9).<sup>36</sup>

### 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 ארג for "spinning a web" (Isa 59:5) and בית for "spider web" (Job 8:14–15),<sup>37</sup> I contend that we should understand the phrase ארגות בתים as a double entendre that polemically casts the women in the service of Asherah as spiders "weaving webs," and thus, as sexual predators.<sup>38</sup> One advantage of this reading is that it makes the weaving women a perfect gendered parallel for the קדשים. In essence, the ארגות בתים are synonymous with the קדשות.<sup>39</sup> 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, μήτις ("weaving") means "cunning" (*Od.* 13.386); περισπλέω denotes "weave, twine around" but also "deceitful speech"; ῥάπτειν ("sew") can mean "plot evil" (*Il.* 18.367; *Od.* 3.118, 16.423); and ὑφαίνω means "weave" or "scheme" (*Il.* 3.212). LSJ, s.vv. μήτις, πλέω, ῥάπτω, and ὑφαίνω. Cf. the Hebrew root עבת, which means both "weave" or "scheme mischief" (see Mic 7:2–3). Perhaps the root חבר ("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*.

<sup>36</sup> Francesca Santoro L'Hoir, *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus' Annales* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009) 170.

<sup>37</sup> 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 כָּצַשׁ ("like a moth") as עֲכָבִישׁ ("spider").

<sup>38</sup> 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 [hyrax]). The Akkadian cognate *bītu* ("house") occurs in reference to nest of a *ḥaḥḥuru*-bird. See *CAD* B:286, s.v. *bītu* (cf. בֵּית in Ps 84:4 [bird]; 104:17 [stork]). The *Fable of the Spider* also states that the gods created *kiššū* ("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 *kiššu* as a type of *bītu*.

<sup>39</sup> I find it plausible that the Vulgate's translation of קדשים with *effeminatorum* 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.”<sup>40</sup>

Note too that 2 Kgs 23:7 refers to the women with the definite article—הַנְּשִׁים (“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.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the use of הַנְּשִׁים here is an otherwise superfluous addition, since the narrator could have conveyed the same information without it, that is, האֲרָגוֹת שֶׁם בָּתִּים.<sup>42</sup>

Additional literary support for understanding אֲרָגוֹת בָּתִּים as a double entendre comes from the passage's threefold use of the term בֵּית, each time with a different meaning—a device known as antanaclasses.<sup>43</sup> 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 antanaclasses involving the word בֵּית in 2 Samuel 7 for “palace” (7:2), “temple” (7:5–7), and “dynasty” (7:11–16).<sup>44</sup> That the author of our pericope was familiar with the device is clear just a few verses earlier, where the root עָמַל similarly occurs with three

<sup>40</sup> 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 yhssk ahbt tr t'rrk*, “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 Joaquín Sanmartín; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995)] 1.4 iv 38–39). *CAT* 1.4 ii 3–4, describes Asherah as *plkh b ydh plk t'lt bymnh*, “her spindle in her hand, the spindle of charm in her right hand.”

<sup>41</sup> Meindert Dijkstra, “Goddess, Gods, Men, and Women,” in *On Reading Prophetic Texts: Gender-Specific and Related Studies in Memory of Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes* (ed. Bob Becking and Meindert Dijkstra; BIS 18; Leiden: Brill, 1996) 83–114, here 98; idem, “Daar zaten de vrouwen, die Tammuz beweenden (Ezechiël 8:14),” *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 50 (1996) 203–14; idem, “Women and Religion in the Old Testament,” in *Only One God? Monotheism in Ancient Israel and the Veneration of the Goddess Asherah* (ed. Bob Becking et al.; Biblical Seminar 77; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) 164–88, here 173–76.

<sup>42</sup> 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.

<sup>43</sup> On antanaclasses in Hebrew literature, see Scott B. Noegel, “Polysemy,” in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* (ed. Geoffrey Khan et al.; 4 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2013) 1:178–86, here 179.

<sup>44</sup> A similar use of antanaclasses involving “palace” and “dynasty” appears in the inscription of Bar-Rakkib, lines 12–16. See K. Lawson Younger Jr., “Panammuwa and Bar-Rakib: Two Structural Analyses,” *JANES* 18 (1986) 91–103.

different meanings in close succession: “And the king stood [ויעמד] by the pillar [העמוד] . . . then all the people pledged [ויעמד] themselves to the covenant” (2 Kgs 23:3). In fact, the very uniqueness of the phrase ארגות בתים, following so closely upon two different meanings of the word בית, should alert us to the possibility of an additional nuance.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, considering the combined evidence, I suggest that we understand the ארגות בתים 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).

<sup>45</sup> Another example of antanaclasis occurs in 2 Kgs 23:8, though the passage is difficult: ונתן את־במות השערים אשר־פתח שער יהושע שר־העיר אשר־על־שמאול איש בשער העיר. Here the narrator employs the word שער (“gate”) three times, but in at least two different ways. The first, in the plural, modifies במות (“high places”). It is arguably the most difficult to translate since the relative pronoun אשר appears to situate the gates within another structure also called a שער (“gate”). The second 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 שער refers to the city gate. I suggest that we understand the first occurrence, that is, השערים, 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.”