Through a Glass, Darkly:
Reflections on the Translation and Interpretation of Exodus 38:8[1]

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Exodus 38:8 provides an interesting detail concerning the composition of the basins which were to serve for the ritual cleansing of the priests in the tabernacle:

ויעשׂ את הכיור נחשׁת ואת כנו נחשׁת במראת הצבאת אשׁר צבאו פתח אהל מועד

> He [sc. Bezalel] made the basin of bronze with its stand of bronze, from the mirrors of the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting (NRSV).

The verse is found within a section of text (Exod 35:1-38:20) that describes the building of the tabernacle, before its eventual completion and dedication in 38:21-40:38. The exact arrangements for the basin had already been prescribed by 30:17-18; the description of its production follows the prescription closely, albeit in brief, omitting how the items are to be used as described in 30:19-21. A second and particularly interesting difference is found

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in the addition of a new element of information in 38:8, that the material from which the basin was composed was provided "from the mirrors of the serving women who serve (במראת הצבאת אשר צבאו) at the entrance to the tent of meeting." This verse has proven particularly controversial in the history of interpretation. While the idea apparently underlying the verse is that these mirrors of bronze (or perhaps some other metal) had been melted down to make the basin (usually rendered as "laver" in earlier translations[2]), the verse has been subject to much speculation concerning both its interpretation and the correlated implications which it may have for the role and place of women in the Israelite cult.

The translation of כיור as "basin" presents few problems,[3] as it is attested with that meaning some twenty-three times in the text of the Hebrew Bible (and nine times in Exodus alone[4]). However, nearly every other important element in the verse has been subject to scholarly debate. To begin with, this is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where the plural noun מראת occurs with the meaning "mirrors." Elsewhere the meaning "visions" is to be preferred (Gen 46:2; Ezek 1:1, 8:3, 40:2, 43:3). The composition of these

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[2] E.g., ASV, KJV, NAS, NKJV, RSV. The English word "laver" comes from the Latin *lavatorium* (so also "lavatory").

[3] The word is probably a loan from Uratian, from whence it made its way via Akkadian (*kiūru*) into Aramaic (JA) and Biblical Hebrew. See Paul V. Mankowski, *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew* (HSS, 47; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000) 65-66; CAD K, 476. Note the combination of *kiūru*, "basin," with *kannu*, "stand," in several of the Neo-Assyrian texts cited in CAD.

[4] Exod 30:18, 28; 31:9; 35:16; 38:8; 39:39; 40:7, 11, 30; Lev 8:11; 1 Sam 2:14; 1 Kgs 7:30, 38 (x4), 43; 2 Kgs 16:17; Zech 12:6; 2 Chr 4:6; 4:14; 6:13.

"mirrors" from נחשׁת, usually "bronze," has also been contested, and there is some ambiguity as whether to translate the lexeme as bronze,[5] copper,[6] or brass.[7] The role of the women has been disputed, and scholars are unsure how to understand their function at the entrance to the tent of meeting. Finally, the donation itself has been questioned, with debate concerning whether the women had gifted their mirrors or if they had been forcibly taken from them in punishment. The stakes of the meaning of this particular verse, then, are high, and depending upon one's vantage point, the verse can be utilized in order to reconstruct an important cultic role for women in the tabernacle – or the reverse of this, to provide another example of women subject to censure and control by the androcentric perspective of the Hebrew Bible.

In the following I will attempt to provide a new access to this problematic verse by utilizing comparative evidence for mirrors from across the eastern Mediterranean. Starting by noting the particular problems inherent to the interpretation and translation of Exod 38:8, it will be shown that previous scholarly attempts to deal with these

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[5] E.g., ESV, NAS, NCV, NIV, NLT, NRS, RSV. Cf. Noel Dwight Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 1999) 582, who argue that bronze is more useful and decorative than copper.

[6] E.g., TAN, REB. Cf. E. Stern, '*mr'h*,' in *Enciclopedia miqra'it*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1968) columns 440-442; John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC; Waco: Word Books, 1987) 487; C. Houtman, *Exodus*. Vol. 3: *Chapters 20-40* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Leuven: Peeters, 2000) 367; William Henry C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2006) 665; Sarah Shectman, *Women in the Pentateuch: A Feminist and Source-Critical Analysis* (HBM, 23; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009) 156.

[7] E.g., ASV. KJV, and WEB.

problems fall down on both philological and contextual grounds. This lays the foundation for a new interpretation of the mirrors derived from comparative Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Greek sources. Both the material evidence of mirrors as well as the literary texts that describe them flesh out our picture of the uses, functions, and associations that came along with mirrors in the ancient world. I will show how mirrors were understood to be a feminine product, associated with women across a variety of archaeological and literary domains. Frequently utilized as votive offerings by women, mirrors in the ancient world had a religious, ritual aspect that allowed for a particularly female form of religious expression.

By focusing on the treatment of the philological puzzles presented by this single verse, we will get to see a fragment of a much larger issue with broader implications. Drawing comparisons with material culture and texts from across the eastern Mediterranean, I will argue that mirrors in ancient Israel and the wider ancient Near East can provide a glimpse, so to speak, of attitudes towards the self. Specifically, I will point to underlying ideas about how the self was understood, viewed, and how objects function in relation to the self. This small study is part of a larger project of mine to consider cosmetics, mirrors, jewelry and clothing through a sociological lens. In my reconstruction of ancient performances of the self, the body functions as the observed center in which complex ideologies of identity, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and social status are articulated. Clothes, cosmetics, and the adornment of the body are the means by which bodies are made social. But all too often, modern scholars have assumed that cosmetics and their ilk would have functioned in ancient societies exactly as in our own. There is a broad tendency in contemporary scholarship to view these items through a gendered lens that both marginalizes their importance and has failed to understand their proper role in the biblical texts in which they feature. We will see such a tendency to do so in our

treatment of the Exodus verse, as interpreters both ancient and modern have marginalized the importance of such objects in the construction of the self, associating objects like mirrors with vanity and frivolity.

Problems with the Translation and Interpretation of נחשׁת and מראת: Mirrors of Bronze?

As noted, Exod. 38:8 provides the only instance of the use of the plural noun מראת with the meaning "mirrors." The same lexeme is to be translated as "visions" at Gen 46:2; Ezek 1:1, 8:3, 40:2, 43:3. This has led to an alternative interpretation by Sarah Shectman, who favors the reading "visions" here in this verse as well. Belying most translations of the verse is the idea that the relative particle אשׁר plus the preposition ב here refers to something being made out of something else, so the basins made from whatever מראת is then taken to indicate.[8] Shectman instead supposes that אשׁר ב- be taken to mean making something *according* to something else, and hence translating the verse as "he made the basin of copper, and its stand of copper, *according to the visions* of the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting."[9] Accordingly, she interprets the verse as a remnant of a "much older tradition about the Tabernacle as a place of oracular activity,"[10] and attributes an important cultic and visionary role to these women.

[8] For examples of אשׁר ב- with this meaning, see Exod 31:4, 38:30, etc.

[9] Shectman, *Women in the Pentateuch*, 156.

[10] Ibid, 156-157.

An even more radical interpretation is that of Jonathan Kaplan and Wilfred G.E. Watson, who have separately suggested reading במראת not as "from the mirrors" but as the preposition ב of intention affixed to the infinitive מרא, "feed, nourish." By repointing *ṣōb̲'ōt* as *ṣib̲'ōt* they are able to provide the translation "and he made the basin… *to feed* [with water] *the ministers* who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting…"[11] Certainly, this is unsatisfying due to the level of disturbance to the text of MT necessary to get to the reading; it also ignores the other instance of the feminine plural participle of צבאת in the Hebrew Bible in 1 Sam 2:22, where it is employed in precisely the same context as in Exod 38:8. Both the interpretations of Shectman on the one hand, and Kaplan and Watson on the other, seem to be governed more by an ideological perspectives on the role of women in ancient Israelite religion than by any linguistic considerations: so Shectman, whose reading is explicitly feminist, as the sub-title of her book announces, has *over interpreted* the role of these women, seeking to attribute to them an important cultic and oracular function, despite the improbability of this in the context of the Priestly source. On the other hand, Kaplan and Watson, who seem to feel uneasy with a reference to women within the context of the Israelite cult, *under interpret* their role and so entirely remove the women from the text. What both readings overlook is the comparative Semitic evidence that favors the traditional reading of מראת as "mirrors." In Akkadian, the noun

[11] Jonathan Kaplan, "Two Samaritan Amulets," *IEJ* 17 (1967) 158-162; and Wilfred G.E. Watson, "More on Shared Consonants," *Biblica* 52 (1971) 44-50.

"mirror," *nāmaru*, is derived from the verb *amāru*, "to see,"[12] which is precisely the same substantivized use of a verb of vision that we see in 38:8. This is also the case with the other word used to designate "mirror" in the Hebrew Bible, in Job 37:18, where the lexeme ראי is clearly also semantically related to the verb of seeing, ראה. (The only other reference to a mirror in the Hebrew Bible is in Isa 3:23, גלינים, which properly means "tablet" and only in its context, which refers to items of beautification and adornment, is the reading "mirror" suggested.) A mirror is an object in which one observes a "vision" of oneself, and accordingly lexical terms for "vision" and "mirror" are often closely related. This is even the case in our own word for "mirror," derived from the Latin verb *mirare*, "to look at."

While the meaning of מראת as "mirrors" therefore seems secure, the fact that commentators have all the same been unsure of the translation belies the fact that the function of the mirrors in the verse in question is little understood. Compounding the problem further is the indecision among both modern translations and commentators concerning the nature of the mirrors themselves, whether cast from bronze, copper, or brass. While נחשׁת might properly mean "bronze," bronze is an alloy of copper and tin, and some scholars have suggested copper to be the preferred metal in this instance. In particular, Edward L. Greenstein has argued on the basis of Egyptian evidence that

[12] See CAD N_1, 219-220. A second Akkadian term for mirror, *mušālu* is derived from the root *mašālu*, "to be like, to equal," hence the mirror is an object in which one sees one's own likeness. See CAD M_1, 356.

copper was in fact the preferred medium in which ancient mirrors were cast.[13] On the other hand, Egyptian mirrors were made of copper only until the end of the Middle Kingdom (ca. 1630 BCE), after which bronze began to be utilized instead – and in fact, the Egyptians seem to have lagged behind other Near Eastern states with regard to this metallurgical shift.[14] By looking at further comparative evidence of mirrors and basins in antiquity, a new picture of their uses and function can be developed, helping to explicate their function in the text as well as the nature of their composition.

Problems with the Translation and Interpretation of הצבאת צבאו: Cultic Functionaries or Cultic Prostitutes?

A second problem with the verse lies with the women and their designation by the root צבא, used most often in relation to military service and troops.[15] However, the idiom *ṣāḇ'ā ṣeḇ'ō* in P is also applied to the Levites, where it describes their qualification to serve in the temple.[16] It is a common feature of the P composite to apply military images and

[13] Edward L. Greenstein, "Recovering the Women Who Served at the Entrance," in *Studies in Historical Geography and Biblical Historiography: Presented to Zechariah Kallai*, ed. Zecharyah Kalai, Gershon Galil and Moshe Weinfeld (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 165-173, here 166.

[14] On this shift, see Claire Derriks, "Mirrors," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, vol. 2, ed. Donald B. Redford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 419-422, here 419.

[15] See HALOT III, 994-995.

[16] See e.g., Num 4:23, 8:24; and Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: JPS, 2003) 30.

metaphors to the wilderness period.[17] Since our verse is usually understood as a P text,[18] here too the notion seems to be some sort of temple service context.[19] What is at stake here is the implications of צבאת here as a *feminine* plural participle: if like the Levites these women served at the Temple, does this accordingly also imply that they held a cultic or ritual function? Carol Meyers has noted that the position of these women at the entrance to the tent of meeting – an important site for Moses' oracular interactions with God (Exod 33:9-10) – suggests that they held a key cultic role, and the verse in question therefore provides the vestige of an "old tradition of gender-inclusive cultic activity."[20] William

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[17] Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 666.

[18] On Exod 38:8 as P, see e.g., Samuel R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus with Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911) 376; Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (trans. J.S. Bowden; OT; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962) 274; Houtman, *Exodus*, 572. On the other hand, Israel Knohl (*The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995] 193) argues that the all-Israel inclusive focus of H led to women being incorporated into the passage. Yet Shectman (*Women in the Pentateuch*, 155, n. 28) has noted the absence of explicitly H terminology here. Indeed, she argues against a P or H origin for the verse, on the basis of her interpretation of the women here as serving an important cultic and oracular function (157). Her arguments are considered in detail above.

[19] So NAS, NCV, NIRV, NLT and NRS provide the translation "serve;" while ASV, ESV and RSV translate "minster," with the same implication.

[20] Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (NBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 279; *idem*, "Women at the Entrance to the Tent of Meeting (Exod 38:8; 1 Sam 2:22)," in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, ed. Carol Meyers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 202; cf. Urs Winter, *Frau und*

H.C. Propp even suggests that the temple-women were entrusted with examining other women for ritual impurity, an interpretation that goes way beyond the evidence of the text itself.[21]

On the other hand, some relegate the role of the women to spheres particularly associated with "women's work," so cleaning, cooking, and other menial tasks.[22] This discomfort with attributing an important cultic role to these women seems to also belie

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Göttin: Exegetische und ikonographische Studien zum weiblichen Gottesbild im alten Israel und in dessen Umwelt (OBO, 53; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983) 58-65; Phyllis Bird, "The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus," in *Community, Identity, and Ideology: Social Sciences Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Charles E. Carter and Carol Meyers (Sources for Biblical and Theological Study, 6; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996) 515-536, here at 530-531; and Janet S. Everhart, "Serving Women and Their Mirrors: A Feminist Reading of Exodus 38:8b," *CBQ* 66 (2004) 44-54. This interpretation was in fact already suggested by Ismar John Peritz, "Women in the Ancient Hebrew Cult," *JBL* 17 (1898) 111-148. Meyers also argues that the wearing of shiny jewelry was a particularly female response to demonology, with the reflective objects serving an apotropaic function, although she does not link this to the function of the mirrors in the Exodus narrative; see Meyers, *Exodus*, 280. The connection to mirrors and demonology is made by Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 665; and Susan Ackerman, "Mirrors, Drums, and Trees," in *Congress Volume Helsinki 2010*, ed. Martti Nissinen (VTSupp., 148; Leiden: Brill, 2012) 537-568, who accordingly suggests a sacred or magical function for the mirrors of Exod 38:8.

[21] Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 665.

[22] So, Driver, *The Book of Exodus*, 391; R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973); Randall C. Bailey, *Exodus* (Joplin: College Press, 2017) 386. Nahum M. Sarna (*Exodu*s [The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: JPS, 1991] 230) even goes as far as to describe these women as "at the bottom of the occupational and social scale."

some of the ancient versions, who were clearly unsure of how to render the verse in question. Rather than have the women "serve" at the Temple, the LXX speaks of the women "who *fast*," αἳ ἐνήστευσαν, either paraphrasing, or misreading צבאת as צמות, "fasting." The Vulgate has the women "*keep watch* at the entrance of the tent…," *quae excubabant in ostio tabernaculi*, thus relegating these women to ancient doormen![23] More radical is 4QSam[a], which removes the women from the text entirely. This discomfort is also reflected in the minority interpretation of some of the modern translations of צבאת as "assembly," exploiting the connections between a military troop with large rabbles or gatherings.[24] According to this interpretation, far from being cultic functionaries, these women are merely notable in the fact that a number of them had arrived together in order to make their donation!

Even more confusing is the only other instance of the feminine plural participle of צבאת in the Hebrew Bible in 1 Sam 2:22, where it is used in precisely the same context: "Now Eli was very old, and he kept hearing all that his sons were doing to Israel, and how they lay with *the women who were serving* (הצבאת) at the entrance to the tent of meeting." According to the sexual nature of this reference, some commentators have suggested that the women in 1 Sam 2:22 were cultic prostitutes, and as a corollary

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[23] Susan Ackerman has recently renewed this interpretation, noting that a number of small ceramic models of shrine buildings from the Transjordan and Israel often feature anthropomorphized figures on the shrine's exterior. See Ackerman, "Mirrors, Drums, and Trees," 553. Nevertheless, it is not clear if the figures Ackerman refers to are human or divine, and I find this suggestion to be rather speculative.

[24] E.g., KJV, NKJV.

construed the role of the women in Exod 38:8 in a similar fashion.[25] Indeed, the association of the women with mirrors has been related to their status as prostitutes,[26] although it should be said that this interpretation seems to be governed by an uncritical acceptance of the association made between mirrors, cosmetics, perfumes, and other bodily adornments with immorality made in some of the prophetic texts (e.g., Isa 3:16-24; Jer 4:30; Ezek 16:15-18, 23:40-42; Amos 6:6).

An extension of this argument is to read the donation of the mirrors as the subject of a punitive measure. Most commentators read 38:8 in light of the earlier donation call in 25:2,[27] hence some even refer to the "unselfish generosity" of the women for donating their mirrors,[28] especially since such objects were "normally valued by a woman"[29] (with similar gendered implications to the association of mirrors with immorality seen above,

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[25] Julian Morgenstein, *The Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death, and Kindred Occasions Among the Semites* (Cincinnati: HUCA, 1966) 97; Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973) 201-203; Greenstein, "Recovering the Women Who Served at the Entrance," 171-173.

[26] J. Philip Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus* (NCB; Somerset: Oliphant, 1971) 330; Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, 97. A more innocent interpretation is that of Arnold B. Ehrlich (*Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel 1* [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908] 420-421), who proposes that these women utilized the mirrors for the purposes of beautification in order to attract husbands.

[27] Driver, *The Book of Exodus,* 391; Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus* (NAC, 2; Nashville: Broadman & Hilman, 2006) 767.

[28] Bailey, *Exodus*, 386; Sarna, *Exodus*, 230.

[29] Stuart, *Exodus*, p. 768. Umberto Cassuto (*A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* [trans. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967] 407) calls mirrors a woman's "most precious treasures."

and just as unsavory). A slightly different iteration of this argument is found in Manfred Görg's claim that P has the women give up their mirrors precisely in order to show that the Israelites had renounced these ancient (female) cultic practices already in the time of Moses.[30] Though Menahem Haran disconnects the verse from 25:2, suggesting that the basin and its pedestal were less important than the other temple furnishings as they were intended for use by the priests and not explicitly designated as belonging to Yahweh,[31] he still sees the mirrors themselves as a gift. Thus, despite the different nuances of these three interpretations, all assume that the mirrors were given away freely by the women. On the other hand, Edward L. Greenstein connects the verse to Num 16:37-39, the only other instance in the Torah where an Israelite provides a bronze utensil in order to furnish an item in the tabernacle, the account of Eleazer forcibly taking the censers of Korah and the other rebels in order to hammer into sheets with which to overlay the altar. Connecting the women of Exod 38:8 to the sexual offence in 1 Sam 2:22, accordingly Greenstein suggests that the bronze mirrors were forcibly removed from the women as punishment for cultic prostitution, a severe infraction in ancient Israel.[32]

What we find then, is a disjuncture in the scholarship concerning the role of these women and the nature of their donation. Are the woman cultic functionaries or are they cultic prostitutes, and are the mirrors gifted by or forcibly removed from them? The

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[30] Manfred Görg, "Der Spiegel Dienst der Frauen (Ex. 38,8)," *BN* 23 (1984) 9-13.

[31] Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1977) 159; cf. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 466-467.

[32] Greenstein, "Recovering the Women Who Served at the Entrance," 171-173.

question of whether these women are cultic prostitutes, in particular, has been controversial, and a number of scholars have programmatically argued against this interpretation.[33] More broadly, scholars have argued against the existence of cultic prostitution in ancient Israel.[34] The question, however, is not whether or not there were

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[33] See e.g., Durham, *Exodus,* 487-488; Houtman, *Exodus*, 572; Everhart, "Serving Women and Their Mirrors." The interpretation of the women as prostitutes is in contrast to many ancient interpretations of the verse, which instead have tended to emphasize the piety of the women. Ibn Ezra, for example, argued that the gift of the mirrors was tantamount to a rejection of vanity: these women prayed instead of beautifying themselves. In part, Ibn Ezra is arguing against the common assumption that mirrors, along with cosmetic preparations and bodily adornments, should be understood negatively, drawing on a number of places in both the Hebrew Bible and later rabbinic material where these items are condemned (see e.g., Isa 3:16-24; Jer 4:30; Ezek 16:15-18, 23:40-42; Amos 6:6; Eccl 7:1; *B. Shab*. 34a, 62b; etc.). This is even more explicit in the interpretation of the verse in *Midrash Tanḥuma*, and in Rashi, who seems to draw from the Midrash. Both argue that the gift of the mirrors had originally been rejected by Moses, for precisely the reason that the items connoted vanity and worldliness. But God intervened, reminding Moses that the women had used the mirrors to beautify themselves in order to seduce their husbands, and hence to multiply the Israelites: mirrors thus have a life-giving purpose. On the reception of the verse in ancient Judaism, see Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot in the Context of Ancient and Modern Jewish Bible Commentary* (trans. A. Newman; Jerusalem: Ahva Press, 1976) 691-694.

[34] See e.g., Eugene J. Fisher, "Cultic Prostitution in the Ancient Near East? A Reappraisal," *BTB* 6 (1976) 225-236; Hans M. Barstad, *The Religious Polemics of Amos* (VTSupp., 34; Leiden: Brill, 1984) 26-34; Mayer I. Gruber, "Hebrew *qĕdēšāh* and her Canaanite and Akkadian Cognates," *UF* 18 (1986): 133-148; and Christian Frevel, *Aschera und der Ausschliesslichkeitsanspruch YHWHs: Beiträge*

cultic prostitutes in ancient Israel. Rather, when translating our texts, our task should be to understand the various cultural discourses evoked by particular tropes. Comparative evidence again proves to be productive in understanding the contexts in which mirrors could be donated to temples in the ancient world, suggesting that our verse is part of a well-established trope of mirror-gifting as votive offerings attested across both material and literary evidence.

Comparative Evidence from the Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Greek Worlds

The earliest datable mirrors from ancient Egypt are found already in the Archaic period, ca. 3200-2700 BCE. They constitute metal discs, usually copper, with handles made from a different substance, typically wood shaped into the form of papyrus. The Early Dynastic examples are codiform (heart-shaped).[35] By the Old Kingdom, the number of discs found increases exponentially, and we also begin to find two dimensional representations of mirrors too.[36] Bronze, which is less fragile than copper when beaten, becomes the dominant metal utilized in mirrors, and the preferred shape switches from codiform to

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zu literarischen, religionsgeschichtlichen Aspekten der Ascheradiskussion (Weinham: Beltz Anthenäum Verlag, 1995) 629-737. More recently Jessie DeGrado ("The *qdesha* in Hosea 4:14: Putting the (Myth of the) Sacred Prostitute to Bed," *VT* 68 [2018] 8-40) has renewed this argument. Though she suggests that the Hebrew term commonly taken to refer to a "sacred prostitute," קדֵשָׁה, can indeed refer to prostitution and to female cultic practitioners, nevertheless she argues that the two meanings "prostitute" and "priestess" are always separate.

[35] Derriks, "Mirrors."

[36] Robert Stephen Bianchi, "Reflections of the Sky's Eyes," *Sources: Notes on the History of Art* 4 (1985) 10-18, here 10.

elliptical.[37] In the Middle Kingdom, the persistence of mirror-finds continues, while numerous depictions of mirrors are found on both stelae and sarcophagi. In this artwork, mirrors often depict nude female dancers.[38] In particular, mirrors are found as part of the funerary equipment of the deceased, buried alongside their owners, especially among women.[39] By the New Kingdom (ca. 1450-1050 BCE), bronze mirrors had become exquisitely crafted objects of art. Many feature handles in the shape of naked females. Some mirrors bear the titles of priests and priestesses, indicating their use in shrines and temples.[40] Indeed, mirrors were frequently associated with the goddess Hathor, especially in New Kingdom period.[41] Both the grave statistics, as well as the depictions of women using mirrors, suggest the association of mirrors with women.[42] By the Late Period (post 720 BCE), we have evidence from paintings on temple walls from the reign of Ptolemy II until the reign of the Roman emperor Caracalla for a special ritual concerning the votive offering of mirrors by priestesses to a goddess, either Hathor or

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[37] Derriks, "Mirrors."

[38] Christine Lilyquist, *Ancient Egyptian Mirrors from the Earliest Times Through the Middle Kingdom* (Müncher Ägyptologische Studien, 27; München: Deutscher Kuntsverlag, 1979) 72-73.

[39] Ibid, 76, 79; Bianchi, "Reflections of the Sky's Eyes," 1.

[40] Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat, "A Mirror Belonging to the Lady-of-Uruk," in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William M. Hallo*, ed. Mark E. Cohen, Daniel C. Snell and David B. Weisberg (Bethesda: CDL Press, 1993) 163-169, here 165.

[41] Mirrors inscribed for priestesses of Hathor have been found at Giza, Saqqara, Mitrahineh, Dara, Dendera, Hu and El Kab. See Lilyquist, *Ancient Egyptian Mirrors*, 97.

[42] Ibid, 97.

Isis. In this ceremony, the goddess stares at her beauty in the mirror and rejoices. The mirrors reflect the celestial bodies, and the goddess returns this light to the king, ensuring his supremacy over the universe.[43] While our evidence for this ritual is late, its roots are thought to be very ancient, evidenced by iconography that links the heavenly bodies to mirrors throughout Egyptian art.[44] In Egyptian texts, mirrors are often equated with still bodies of water, such as in Papyrus Leiden 344, where a statement on the recto reads: "she who looked at her face in the water is possessor of a mirror."[45]

Metal objects clearly used as mirrors have been recovered at sites in southern Mesopotamia ranging from as early at the Uruk period (late fourth millennium BCE); by the second millennium, evidence for mirrors is found across western Asia.[46] While Old Akkadian and Ur III texts describe mirrors made of copper, bronze, silver and gold,[47] by the first millennium bronze dominated,[48] bronze having been introduced as a

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[43] Constance Husson, *L'offrande du miroir dans les temples égyptiens de l'époque gréco-romaine* (Lyons: Audin, 1977); Bianchi, "Reflections of the Sky's Eyes," 10-18; Nemet-Nejat, "A Mirror Belonging to the Lady-of-Uruk," 165.

[44] Derriks, "Mirrors."

[45] Lilyquist, *Ancient Egyptian Mirrors*, 49.

[46] Pauline Albenda, "Mirrors in the Ancient Near East," *Source: Notes on the History of Art* 4 (1985) 2-9, here 2.

[47] Nemet-Nejat, "A Mirror Belonging to the Lady-of-Uruk," 164.

[48] A letter addressed to Sargon II (721-705 BCE) describes two newly made bronze mirrors. See Robert Henry Pfeiffer, *State Letters of Assyria: A Transliteration and Translation of 355 Official Letters Dating from the Sargonid Period (722-625 BCE)* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1935), no. 146.

commodity into Mesopotamia early in the third millennium BCE.[49] In modern Syria, there are no geologically attested copper sources, however there were copper mines in ancient Palestine which seem to have been an important source of copper at the local level.[50] This preference for bronze mirrors is borne out by the Sumerian term for mirror, which refers to the material of manufacture: $^{(urudu)}$NÍG.ŠU.ZABAR, "a bronze instrument of the hand."[51] This term is equated with the Akkadian terms utilized for "mirror,"*nāmaru*, from the root *amāru*, "to see;" and *mušālu*, from the root *mašālu*, "to be like," so an instrument in which one's likeness appears.[52] Several finds from North Syria, dating to the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, depict tanged bronze mirrors, while a bronze mirror has also been recovered from Gezer.[53] Also in the first millennium BCE, we begin to find artistic representations of mirrors, in particular depicting a standing female holding a tanged mirror.[54] The evidence bears out two main types of Mesopotamian mirrors: handled or tanged and socketed, typically consisting of a metal disc with a handle of different material.[55] Most of our Mesopotamian mirrors have been recovered

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[49] Roger S. Moorey, *Ancient Mesopotamian Materials and Industries: The Archaeological Evidence* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) 252.

[50] Ibid, 247.

[51] Nemet-Nejat, "A Mirror Belonging to the Lady-of-Uruk," 164.

[52] See CAD N_1, 219-220; and CAD M_1, 356

[53] See R.A. Stewart Macalister, *The Excavation at Gezer 1902-1905 and 1907-1909*, Vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1912) figs. 154-155.

[54] Albenda, "Mirrors in the Ancient Near East," 3.

[55] Ibid, 5.

from female burials,[56] and this, alongside the iconographic representation of mirrors being held by women, either human or divine, suggests that mirrors were typically connected to a female domain.[57] This is also true of Syria, where the image of a woman holding a mirror seems to have been particularly popular.[58] Texts such as NCBT 72, from the Enanna archives, which describes the golden mirror of the Lady-of-Uruk, indicate that mirrors were used as votive offerings.[59] This golden mirror was clearly an important attribute of the goddess, and sometimes had to be sent to the workshop for repairs.[60] Mirrors, then, were an important aspect of goddess worship in the ancient Near East.

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[56] Nemet-Nejat, "A Mirror Belonging to the Lady-of-Uruk," 163.

[57] On the connection between women and mirrors in the ancient Near East, see Harry A. Hoffner, "Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity: Their Use in Ancient Near Eastern Sympathetic Magic Rituals," *JBL* 85 (1966) 326-334; Albenda, "Mirrors in the Ancient Near East," 7; Nemet-Nejat, "A Mirror Belonging to the Lady-of-Uruk," 164; Sherry Lou MacGregor, *Beyond Hearth and Home: Women in the Public Sphere in Neo-Assyrian Society* (SAAS, 21; Helsinki: University of Helsinki Press, 2012) 114-116; Martin Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East* (trans. Helen and Mervyn Richardson Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016) 32.

[58] Albenda, "Mirrors in the Ancient Near East," 3.

[59] Nemet-Nejat, "A Mirror Belonging to the Lady-of-Uruk," 167. See also TCL 12 39:2, which lists a golden mirror among the belongings of the Aramean Ištar, Aḫlamâtu; ABL 1246 r. 3-4 and 8-9, which describes a mirror given to Ningal, the wife of Nanna and the mother of Inanna/Ištar; and NCBT 72, which describes the votive offering of a mirror to Ištar. See ibid, 167.

[60] Nemet-Nejat, "A Mirror Belonging to the Lady-of-Uruk."

Almost as soon as mirrors were introduced into mainland Greece, probably from the Near East, they became objects of art.[61] In mainland Greece, three types of mirrors were typical: the hand mirror, sometimes called the "Peloponnesian type;" the stand mirror, or "Argive-Corinthian type;" and the box or "compact" mirror. The oldest examples are hand mirrors, found in Mycenaean excavation sites from about 1400 BCE. The hand mirror was typically made of a polished bronze disc, with a tang that could be inserted into some other material such as wood or bone.[62] Some are so small in size that they can only have served a votive or ritual purpose.[63] The "Argive-Corinthian" style are larger and more complex, with a large reflecting disc and handle cast in one piece. Considerable time and labor in production would have been necessary to render these highly elaborate forms.[64] Like the ancient Egyptian exemplars, some Greek mirrors also made use of the image of a three-dimensional human form for the handles of both hand mirrors and stand mirrors.[65] In mainland and eastern Greece, these were almost always female figures.[66] Early examples frequently feature nude females and include ritual sashes and castanets, suggesting that the figures are supposed to represent temple

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[61] Winifred Lamb, *Greek and Roman Bronzes* (New York: Dial Press, 1929) 125.

[62] Lenore O. Keene Congdon, "Greek Mirrors," *Source: Notes on the History of Art* 4 (1985) 19-25, here 19.

[63] Lamb, *Greek and Roman Bronzes*, 126.

[64] Keene Congdon, "Greek Mirrors," 22.

[65] Ibid, 20.

[66] Alexandra A. Carpino, "Mirrors," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Michael Gagarin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

dancers. Later fully-robed examples perhaps depict goddesses themselves, with attributes such as doves, pomegranates, sirens, sphinxes, etc.[67] Containers made from polished metals could be filled with water and utilized as a type of mirror.[68] Certainly the iconography of mirrors and paterae, shallow pans made of metal, consistently utilize similar forms. The paterae are usually round like the mirror-disc, while similarly often featuring naked youths on their handles, equivalent to the caryatid mirror supports. While mirrors could be stood upright, the patarae would be rested upon the table, with the image reflecting back from the water.[69] Perirrhanteria, the water basins which were placed outside Greek sanctuaries, may have also have had such a function; they are also frequently supported by female figurines, like the mirrors and patarae.[70] This is particularly interesting in the context of our Exodus verse, in which basins are associated with mirrors and to be placed outside of the sanctuary.

Artistic representations of mirrors on vases show mirrors in conjunction with women and women's activities.[71] In particular, mirrors were frequently utilized by women as votive offerings, especially the caryatid type.[72] Mirrors were dedicated to wide

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[67] Ibid, 21.

[68] I owe this helpful observation to Dr Ava Shirazi (personal communication).

[69] Lamb, *Greek and Roman Bronzes*, 131.

[70] Matthew Dillon, *Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion* (London: Routledge, 2002) 54.

[71] Keene Congdon, "Greek Mirrors," 19.

[72] Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway, "Ancient Greek Women and Art: The Material Evidence," *American Journal of Archaeology* 91 (1987) 399-409, here 402-403; and Uta Kron, "Priesthoods and Euergetism: What Part Did Religion Play in the Political and Social Status of Greek Women?" in

range of deities, especially those concerned with marriage, fertility and childbirth, including Artemis, Athena, Eileithyia, Demeter, Hera and Persephone.[73] While most of the objects found at shrines were uninscribed, a few have been found containing the names of female worshippers.[74] Indeed, such were mirrors associated with female votive offerings that by the Hellenistic period, a literary genre had arisen that utilized the popular image of the mirror as a female votive offering in order to comment on the pathos of old age. Multiple epigrams, the brief poems in elegiac couplets that became extremely popular in this period, describe the lament of an aged prostitute, donating her mirror to the temple upon retirement. Several examples attributed to Julianus, prefect of Egypt, describe Laïs of Corinth, a prostitute known to have practiced her trade into late life, donating mirrors to various goddesses:

> Laïs, her loveliness laid low by time, hates whatever witnesses to her wrinkled age. Therefore, detesting the cruel evidence of *her mirror*, she dedicates it to the queen of her former glory. "Receive, Cytherea, the circle, the compassion of youth, since thy beauty dreads not time" (*Anth. Pal.* 6.18).

> Thou grantest beauty, Cytherea, but creeping time whithers thy gift, my Queen. Now since thy gift has passed me by and flown away, receive, gracious goddess, *this mirror* that bore witness to it (*Anth. Pal.* 6.19).

Religion and Power in the Ancient Greek World, ed. Pontus Hellström and Brita Alroth (Stockholm: Umqvist & Wiksell, 1996) 139-182, here 159.

[73] Carpino, "Mirrors."

[74] Ibid.

> Laïs took captive by her beauty Greece, which had laid in the dust the proud shield of Persia. Only old age conquered her, and the proof of her fall, the friend of her youth she dedicates them to Cypris. She hates to see even the shadowy image of those grey hairs, whose actual sight she cannot bear (*Anth. Pal.* 6.18).[75]

In these epigrams, the mirror stands as a symbol for the beauty of the young woman. In her age, the mirror serves as a reminder for what once was,[76] and so she donates it to a goddess instead. The same prostitute is utilized in another example, wrongly attributed to Plato (*Anth. Pal.* 6.1). Other prostitutes beside Laïs feature in similar texts, suggesting the association of the prostitute in general with mirror offerings. An epigram attributed to Leonidas of Tarentum describes the various offerings made by Calliclea:

> Calliclea, her wish having been granted, dedicates in thy porch, true Cypris, the silver statuette of Love, her anklet, the purple caul of her Lesbian hair, her pale-blue bosom band, her *bronze mirror*, and the broad box-wood comb that gathered in her locks (*Anth. Pal.* 6.211).[77]

Although the epigrams are clearly exploiting the image of the aged concubine and her redundant mirror as a literary trope, votive offerings were very often utilized to mark a

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[75] For the text and translation, see William Roger Paton, *The Greek Anthology*, Vol. 1: *Books I-VI* (LCL, 67; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 306-309.

[76] See also *Anth. Pal*. 6.210.

[77] For the texts and translations, see Paton, *The Greek Anthology*, 408-409.

change in professional status.[78] A number of the mirrors dedicated to Aphrodite feature inscriptions that confirm their owners were courtesans.[79] A mirror from the late fourth century BCE recovered from a grave in Corinth portrays an image of human lovemaking, and some scholars have suggested that the item depicts a famous Corinthian courtesan.[80] While these epigrams utilize the image of the mirror as a female religious dedication in order to comment upon the pathos of aging and loss of youth, it seems that mirrors were particularly associated with courtesans in ancient Greece.

Recovering the Women and Their Mirrors

Earlier, we noted four problems with interpreting and translating Exod 38:8: 1) the translation of מראת as "mirrors;" 2) the substance from which these mirrors were composed, either from bronze, copper, or brass; 3) the role of the women at the entrance to the tent of meeting; and 4) the nature of the donation, whether gift or taken as punishment. The comparative evidence is suggestive with regard to each of these questions, although the suggestions themselves must remain speculative. The material finds from across the eastern Mediterranean and ancient Near East confirm a marked preference for bronze as the material substance of the ancient mirror, suggesting that "bronze mirrors" is indeed the best translation for נחשׁת במראת. In fact, we also noted an interesting connection between metal mirrors with bodies of water, especially when

[78] See Laura K. McClure, *Courtesans at Table: Gender and Greek Literary Culture in Athenaeus* (London: Routledge, 2003) 224, n. 4.

[79] Carpino, "Mirrors."

[80] Ibid.

poured into reflective metal containers. This suggests that the basins placed at the entrance to the tent of meeting may have also been utilized for their reflective quality, serving both as mirror-basins as well as washing-basins for the cleansing of the priests. Indeed, it is this association between bronze mirrors and bronze basins in the ancient world that could have given rise to the detail of the verse in the first place. This recalls the comments of Ramban, who noted in antiquity that mirrors were particularly well suited to be repurposed as basins due to their smooth, hollowed out surfaces, and thus among commentators ancient and modern came the closest to recognizing the relationship between mirrors and basins.[81]

It was also demonstrated that women were particularly associated with mirrors, and that they could utilize them in ritual and votive contexts. The women of Exod 38:8, then, provide another example of this well-established trope of female mirror-offerings, gifting their mirrors to the temple. The associations made in the Hellenistic literary epigrams between votive gifts of mirrors and aging prostitutes are particularly interesting in light of the connections some scholars have seen between the women of Exod 38:8 and the sexual offences of the women in 1 Sam. 2:22. Nevertheless, it is not possible to posit any kind of literary relationship between the epigrams and Exod 38:8. If the women of Exod 38:8 are indeed understood as prostitutes, it could well be that the Exodus text is utilizing the same image of the aging prostitute gifting her mirror to the deity that governed the later epigrams. Both textual materials craft scenes of pathos for beauty and youth lost by their parodic twists upon the typical female votive offering of the mirror. The action of the women in gifting their mirrors must be understood as a

[81] On Ramban's interpretation of this verse, see Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot*, 691.

particularly female religious expression, and this provides access to an otherwise unattested aspect of women's worship in ancient Israel.[82] Indeed, the frequency with which priestesses of the ancient Near East were associated with mirrors in the evidence discussed above could well suggest a cultic role for the women of Exod 38:8 too, although it is not possible to unpack the precise function of that role any further.

All in all, when seen against the comparative material and textual evidence of mirrors from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece, it becomes apparent that far from being a problematic addition to the description of the tabernacle basins, Exod 38:8 is entirely appropriate in its depiction of the women gifting mirrors. In the ancient Near East, mirrors and metal water basins had an equivalence as reflective surfaces, a connection that may have governed the imagery of Exod 38:8. While commentators have been unsure of the precise metallurgic make-up of the Exodus mirrors, the prevalence of polished bronze for mirrors across the eastern Mediterranean suggests that bronze was also the substance imagined by the authors of Exod 38:8 for the women's mirrors. Mirrors as votive offerings were a common phenomenon in the ancient world, a religious practice

[82] While the Hebrew Bible itself is fairly reticent concerning the existence of votive practices in ancient Israelite religion, the large number of archaeological finds which must be interpreted as votive offerings from Bronze and Iron Age cultic sites across the Levant suggests that votive offerings were an important aspect of Israelite and Judahite worship. See Christian Frevel, "Gifts to the Gods? Votives as Communication Markers in Sanctuaries and other Places in the Bronze and Iron Ages in Palestine/Israel," in *"From Ebla to Stellenbosch:" Syro-Palestinian Religions and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Izak Cornelius and Louis Jonker (Abhanlungen des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins, 37; Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2008) 25-48.

particularly associated with women in all periods discussed; by the Hellenistic period, the gift of a mirror to a deity by a prostitute had become a literary trope exploited in the various epigrams. While evidence does not permit us to unpack the precise nature of the "service" provided by the women in Exod 38:8, it could well be that this same image of the aging prostitute is being developed. While this must remain speculative, nevertheless the gift of mirrors by women to a temple or deity can be said to comprise a typical aspect of women's worship. In gifting their mirrors, the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting were performing a common cultic practice that would have been well understood by the ancient audience of the text – though the later ancient versions as well as the modern commentators have been perplexed by Exod 38:8, a comparative approach has demonstrated the common imagery of the mirror as a female votive offering that governed this once elusive verse.

To close, I'd like to make a few points relating to my larger project on mirrors, cosmetics, and other items in the biblical world. To begin with, throughout most of the first millennium BCE, mirrors were made of polished bronze. This is an important recognition. Unlike mirrors today, which reflect a highly accurate image of the viewer, these bronze mirrors did *not* provide a particularly accurate reflection.[83] This very different type of reflective medium shaped discourses about visual experience in the

[83] I owe this important observation to Dr Ava Shirazi (personal communication). Shirazi has considered the role of mirrors in ancient Greek culture in her dissertation, "The Mirror and the Senses: Reflection and Perception in Classical Greek Thought," (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation; Stanford University, 2017).

ancient world, reflected in the title of this paper: "through a glass, darkly," from the traditional King James translation of 1 Cor. 13:12:

> βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι᾽ ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι, τότε δὲ πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον· ἄρτι γινώσκω ἐκ μέρους, τότε δὲ ἐπιγνώσομαι καθὼς καὶ ἐπεγνώσθην.
>
> For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then, face to face; now I know in part; but then I shall know, even as also I am known (KJV).

But as we have seen, mirrors in the ancient world were made of bronze, not glass, and ancient Near Eastern texts frequently compare images seen in prophetic visions to the blurry images reflected in metal mirrors. Viewing oneself clearly must always be mediated by the other; the default in the ancient world was not the individual but the corporate. We must integrate this recognition into our understanding of how the self is viewed and how objects work in relation to the self in biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts.

Secondly, many of the problems the commentators that we considered seem to have had with our Exodus verse stem not so much with the translation of the Hebrew text itself, but with the idea that mirrors were utilized in order to furnish the tabernacle, or that women could serve at the Temple. This relates more to modern gendered assumptions about the role of women in religion than with the ancient texts that we are attempting to understand. While cosmetics and other items are certainly considered ill-favorably in several biblical prophetic texts, on the other hand both Esther and Ruth make

use of cosmetic oils in the books that bear their names, and receive no such censure.[84] Critics cannot assume that cosmetics in the ancient world were utilized in the same ways as they are today. While beautification was certainly a function of ancient cosmetics, both perfumed oil and eye-paint were also used in *ritual* contexts. This is also the case with mirrors, as we have seen. Perfumed oil and eye-paint were also considered to be *medicinal*, and were worn by both women *and* men. A treatment of all this assemblage that takes seriously all of its functions in the ancient world is needed to properly understand the biblical references to mirrors, cosmetics, perfume, clothing, and jewelry.

[84] On cosmetic oils in these books see L. Quick, "Decorated Women: A Sociological Approach to the Function of Cosmetics in the Books of Esther and Ruth," *Biblical Interpretation* (forthcoming); the same can be said for cosmetic oils in two other Jewish texts preserved in the Greek Septuagint, the book of Judith and the story of Susannah in the Additions to Daniel, see *idem*, "'She Made Herself Up Provocatively for the Charming of the Eyes of Men' (Jdt. 10.4): Cosmetics and Body Adornmnet in the Stories of Judith and Susanna," *JSP* (forthcoming).