

## Devotee or Deviate

### The “Dog” (*keleb*) in Ancient Israel as a Symbol of Male Passivity and Perversion

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#### Abstract

The Hebrew word, *keleb*, “dog,” in Deuteronomy 23:19 (Eng: 18) has been commonly interpreted as a homosexual male prostitute, intuitively rather than empirically. Mesopotamian sources show the existence of male cult figures of confused sexuality, whose various sexual activities, including cross-dressing and homosexual intercourse, were expressed and tolerated in cultic and non-cultic spheres. Several interpretations of *keleb* are considered, among them a devotee of Asherah, a Canaanite cultic singer, a “temple” prostitute or a canine. The concept of passivity in the social and gender constructs of the ancient Near East is discussed, using examples from the Middle Assyrian Laws and analogies from Greek and Roman societies. It is observed that passivity in homosexual intercourse was unthinkable for the free-born male in those societies, for it reduced him to the level of slaves, women and pre-pubescent boys. In the letters from El Amarna in Egypt and from Lachish in Judah, “dog” is used to indicate submission of the inferior to the superior and as a term of insult. Depictions of such submission from Egypt and Syria are presented to demonstrate that there was an actual image behind the canine metaphor. Epithet and image were easily transferred from the dog as cringing servant to the passive homosexual prostitute proffering his backside for penetration. Thus the “dog,” *keleb*, is unworthy of offering to YHWH from his earnings, just like his female counterpart.

#### Introduction

[1] In *The He-Strumpets - A Satyr on the Sodomite Club*, published in London in 1707, John Dunton complained of the rise of male homosexual prostitution because most female whores were infected with venereal disease:

Your Tails are grown so lewd and bad,  
That now *Mens Tails* have all the trade (cited in Norton: 50).

Later in the same century an effeminate nobleman, Lord Hervey, was described as, “Fit only for the *Pathick’s* loathsome trade.” The “pathick” was the passive partner in homosexual intercourse, the “agent” was the active (Norton: 168). Neither England nor the eighteenth century was a particularly congenial place or time for homosexual activity, commercial or otherwise. If penetration was proved beyond doubt, the sentence was hanging. Curiously, the passive partner seems to have gotten off more lightly, as the one upon whom severe indignity had been inflicted or as unworthy of the full rigors of the law.

[2] Ancient Israel appears to have been no more favorably disposed to sexual activity between males, if Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 are to be believed. In Deuteronomy 23:19 (Eng: 18) the female prostitute and the “dog” are linked in much the same way as the female and male prostitutes in Dunton’s satirical complaint. Although, it has been acknowledged that the “dog” most likely signified a male homosexual prostitute, this paper will draw upon comparative cultic, legal and

linguistic sources, principally Mesopotamian and North-West Semitic, to confirm this. Various interpretations of the word will be examined and evaluated. The word will also be set within the context of gender roles and sexual expectations in the ancient Near East and related to images of submission.

[3] Deuteronomy 23:19 (Eng: 18) and its single reference present a tantalizing glimpse of a liminal figure in ancient Israelite society. It has not, perhaps, featured in contemporary discussion of homosexuality as much as the verses in Leviticus. Nonetheless, it is a vital witness to the existence of male prostitution. Female prostitution, however abhorred, is referred to often enough in the Hebrew Bible. While surrounding cultures provided religious outlets for those males whose sexuality was compromised for psychological or physical reasons, Israel was unaccommodating and unforgiving. Such outcasts could not belong to YHWH's chosen people: no better than common prostitutes, using their "tails" in like manner, they could bring no offering into YHWH's holy presence. Though the writers of the Hebrew Bible almost overlooked their existence, it is clear that Israel in this as in other matters was just "like the nations."

### Previous Understandings of the "Dog"

Deuteronomy 23:18-19 (Eng: 17-18)

There shall be no sanctuary woman (*qēdēšâ*) from the daughters of Israel,  
and there shall be no sanctuary man (*qēdēšâ*) from the sons of Israel.

You shall not bring the cost of a prostitute (*zônâ*) or the price of a dog (*keleb*)  
(into) the house of YHWH your god, for any vow, for surely both of them  
are an abomination to YHWH your god.<sup>1</sup>

[4] Few would deny that *keleb* in the context of this passage is problematic. If it means "male prostitute," as routinely translated, then this verse is its only occurrence in the Hebrew Bible. The implication is that the "male prostitute" is homosexual. The New Jerusalem Bible, for example, which literally translates "dog," adds the footnote, "a contemptuous term for male prostitute." This translation has been based on what might be termed a Jewish-Christian prurient intuition rather than on considered evidence.

[5] Sources from Mesopotamia testify to the existence of male cult figures whose sexuality was confused or liminal and who engaged in various sex-related practices. One text refers to the *sinnišānu*, literally, "woman-like," who went into a tavern and agreed to divide his earnings, presumably with the tavern-keeper (CAD, S: 286).<sup>2</sup> Taverns were permitted places of resort for

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Hebrew Bible are my own. I use the terms "sanctuary men" and "sanctuary women" rather than male and female hierodules, votaries, or devotees, because I believe that the words encompass most personnel attached to the temple who were not male priests. Furthermore, the root *qds* in its nominal form means "sanctuary."

<sup>2</sup> CAD, A translates *anzanīnu*, with whom the *sinnišānu* divides his earnings, as a "matchmaker." Given the circumstances, this is highly unlikely.

prostitutes of both sexes. The *assinnu* was a member of Ishtar's cultic staff with whom, it seems, a man might have intercourse, whose masculinity had become femininity (Erra IV 55-56; CAD, A: 341). The effeminate *kulu'u*, not a *zikaru*, a "real" man, and the transvestite *kurgarrû* sang, acted, and danced in the worship of Inanna/Ishtar. The *kulu'u* was certainly regarded as a male prostitute in the saying, *amat LÚ kulu'u ù ha-rim-ti URU*, "the word of the male or female prostitute of the city" (CAD, K: 529, 557).<sup>3</sup> W. G. Lambert argued that there was a fair amount of evidence for a cluster of male types notorious for their femininity and that they served as prostitutes. One of these, the *assinnu*, lacked libido, either from a natural defect or castration (152-53).<sup>4</sup> M. Nissinen pointed out that the cuneiform signs used for *assinnu* were UR.SAL, "dog/woman," evidently an insulting designation (32). Unfortunately, there is no evidence that the cognate Akkadian word for dog, *kalbu*, was ever employed as a metaphor in this precise context.<sup>5</sup>

[6] The frequently cited fifth-century BCE tariffs A and B from the temple of Astarte in Kition, Cyprus, include the *klbm*, "dogs," who were paid for their participation in the feast of the new moon. J. C. L. Gibson contended that the word was an alternative for *qdš*, whom he equated with the Hebrew *qādēš*, literally, "holy/sanctuary man," thus a sacred male prostitute. There is, however, no general agreement on this, and the text does not say explicitly detail the function of this person (126, 130 n. 15). He evidently belonged to the temple staff and was paid for his participation in the festival as an expense against the temple funds: this is in contrast to Deuteronomy 23:19 (Eng: 18) where the *keleb* is forbidden to bring payment *into* the house of YHWH. In that verse only the parallel with *zônâ*, "prostitute," renders the notion of commercial sex a credible hypothesis, but it is a highly significant parallel owing to the secure understanding of *zônâ*, to which *keleb* is secondary.

[7] D. W. Thomas read the two verses as exactly parallel, with *qādēš*, "a sacred male prostitute," in verse 18 (Eng: 17) as the controlling word, and understood "dog" in terms of a male adherent or the devoted follower of a deity. He argued from the use of *kalbu*, "dog," as a term signifying abject devotion in the Amarna letters. Abdi-Ashratu, a Canaanite kinglet, assured the Egyptian pharaoh that he was the "dog" of his house, to be construed as a loyal and devoted vassal, "the whole of Amurru land I watch for the king my lord." Further, a suppliant to Marduk depicted himself thus, "like a little dog, O Marduk, I run behind thee." Thomas also noted that the

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<sup>3</sup> When CAD (K: 558) infers that the *assinnu* and the *kulu'u* were neither eunuchs nor homosexuals, it ignores the evidence cited for sexual activity on the part of the former and the effeminacy of the latter (see CAD, H: 101). While the meaning "eunuch" is difficult to establish, "homosexual" is not.

<sup>4</sup> In the article immediately following Lambert's, S. M. Maul argues that their liminal sexuality allowed them to act in a shamanistic capacity, entering ecstatic trances and journeying between the realms of the living and the dead (163-66). G. Leick states that such groups chiefly consisted of those men suffering from genital malformation, hermaphroditism, or absence of external genitals. Such congenital aberrations are statistically not infrequent, and in the ancient world they could not be treated. Since Inanna/Ishtar was patron of all human sexuality, they were assigned to the goddess (158-59).

<sup>5</sup> CAD lists several examples in which *kalbu* is used as a term of self-disparagement (K: 72).

Phoenician word *klb'lm*, “dog of the gods,” was parallel to *'bd'lm*, “servant of the gods.” In the light of this evidence, he concluded that the term was neither to be understood in terms of the sexual promiscuity of dogs, nor did it carry any sense of dishonor. It meant a faithful follower, probably of the goddess Asherah, and consequently did not sit well with the writers of Deuteronomy. This conclusion was accepted by G. von Rad and A. D. H. Mayes, who understood both verses as referring to the same phenomenon, cultic prostitution carried out by devotees, which did not originally carry any pejorative connotation (von Rad: 106; Mayes: 320). P. C. Craigie, with some inconsistency, distinguished between the two verses, cultic versus ordinary prostitution, but conceded that the male prostitution might have had a cultic content (302).

[8] M. I. Gruber disputed these conclusions with vigor, observing that the two verses in effect juxtapose cultic and moral prohibitions: verse 18 (Eng: 17) forbids an Israelite woman to become a female prostitute or an Israelite man to become a “Canaanite cultic singer,” and verse 19 (Eng: 18) prohibits bringing the fee of a harlot or the wages of a Canaanite cultic functionary into the temple in payment of a vow (133 n. 1, 138-48). Gruber’s arguments here, as elsewhere, are incorrigibly tendentious, a fact also noted rather more gently by Nissinen (153 n. 15). To attribute sexuality to the prostitute, *zônâ*, and sanctuary woman, *qēdēšâ*, while denying it to the sanctuary man and the dog is to ignore the parallelism in and the intent of verse 19 (Eng: 18), whether it is connected with verse 18 (Eng: 17) or not. These are the wages of prostitution. Following Gruber’s reasoning one would be paid for prostitution and the other for singing - hardly a plausible reading.

[9] In the first of two articles on the meaning of *keleb*, O. Margalith challenged Thomas and the conventional wisdom that the word was employed as a metaphor for a faithful servant or a temple pederast. He asserted that the word had two clear but separate meanings: “dog” and “slave,” the latter a homonym. This compelled him to the rather idiosyncratic conclusion that Gideon is bidden to choose those who drink by lapping like dogs (Judges 7:5-6), which Margalith interprets as “slaves,” who apparently drank differently from free men (1983). With some disconnection, in a second article Margalith understood *kēlābīm* as male hierodules when they were in parallel to *qādēš*, and that their pairing with *zônôt* was a stereotypical phrase, male and female prostitutes. He did not seem to note that this gave his word three meanings: “dog,” “slave,” and “male prostitute.” According to Margalith, the reference to the prostitutes and the “dogs” drinking the blood of Ahab (1 Kings 22:38) was evidence of the fact that the cult of Cybele-Dionysos, with its frenzied female and castrated male votaries, had been introduced to Israel by Jezebel and opposed by Elijah. He interpreted 1 Kings 21:19 as a warning to Ahab that if he tolerated the introduction of this cult he would be its next victim, his bloody corpse devoured by the said votaries (1984). This is superficially interesting, but highly speculative.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Margalith’s conclusions were challenged by M. A. Zipor, who supported the argument that the word can mean faithful servant, that dogs do lap to drink, and that the prostitutes who washed and the dogs who drank in the pool were inadvertently contaminated with Ahab’s blood.

[10] More recently, E. A. Goodfriend asked whether *keleb* should not be taken at face value, a canine, following the traditional Jewish interpretation. Dogs, viewed as urban carnivores and scavengers, should be given no access to holiness and thus to barter one for a sacrificial animal rendered that selfsame animal, “the price of a dog,” inappropriate for sacrifice. She considered 1 Kings 23:38 with its reference to prostitutes and dogs as making the same link as Deuteronomy 23:19 (Eng: 18), that both were objects of revulsion. Finally, she offered the suggestion that *keleb* is employed to insult the *qādēš*. For her *zônâ* and *qēdēšâ* are synonyms for prostitute. However, it is difficult to ignore the precise nature of the parallelism in Deuteronomy 23:18-19 (Eng: 17-18) to which Goodfriend herself draws attention, the context of the entire passage which is devoted to people, the obvious meaning of *zônâ* as “prostitute,” and the indubitable reference to *klbm* as members of the temple staff in the Kition tariffs. Her argument appears rather biased implying that, while an ancient Israelite male might, however regrettably, be a *qādēš*, it was unthinkable that any Israelite should be a passive male prostitute. In ancient Israelite culture masculinity involved marriage, procreation, and the assumption of a dominant position in the family and community, what H. Eilberg-Schwartz calls a presumptive heterosexuality. Anything that compromised this masculine heterosexual image was suspect (95).

[11] Finally, J. Berlinerblau, like Craigie, separated the two verses: in verse 18 (Eng: 17) he accepted without demur that *qādēš* and *qēdēšâ* were cult prostitutes, though the latter in Hebrew likely signified an ordinary prostitute, following Gruber. However, he viewed the *zônâ*'s price and the *keleb*'s payment as having metaphorical intent and functioning meristically, i.e. “be it the fee of a whore or the wages of a male prostitute,” in the sense that any worthless payment is an abomination to YHWH (104-7). This is certainly an interesting observation, but it has to be countered that Deuteronomy 23 is not of a metaphorical disposition, dealing as it does with some very fundamental human activities, nocturnal emissions and excretory regulations to name but two.

### **New Evidence for Understanding the “Dog”**

[12] By introducing two new factors that have not, thus far, featured in the discussion of this verse - the concept of passivity and some pertinent iconography - it is possible to authenticate the understanding of *keleb* in Deuteronomy 23:19 (Eng: 18) as a male homosexual prostitute. Moreover, this male homosexual prostitute took the passive role, i.e. was penetrated anally in intercourse. Nissinen refers to the Middle Assyrian Laws, from some of whose provisions it may be surmised that passivity in a freeborn male either forced, connived at, or consented to, disgraced the passive one by categorizing him with females and slaves. Moreover, penetration demonstrated masculinity and mastery (24-28).

[13] The collection of cuneiform tablets known as the Middle Assyrian Laws was probably made towards the end of the reign of Tiglath-Pileser I (1114 - 1076 BCE). It was either prepared or copied from fourteenth-century originals (Roth: 153-54). Tablet A, the best preserved, contains laws concerning women that, for the most part, are about sexual matters and inheritance. Laws 12-18 cover forced and consensual intercourse, adultery, and accusations thereof.

[14] Laws 19-20 are unique in that they mention only men. Law 19 refers to a man who slanders his comrade, either out of malice or as the result of a quarrel, as one with whom “everyone has sex.” If the man is unable to prove his accusation, the punishment is nearly the same as for accusing a woman of promiscuity without proof (law 18). That an accusation of passive homosexual intercourse is meant in law 19 is clear from the fact that the same word is used in the previous law: “Everyone has sex with your wife” (law 18), and “Everyone has sex with you/him” (law 19). The root is *naku*, “fornicate,” used of initiating illicit sexual intercourse (Roth: 159). Were one to translate with the Anglo-Saxon “f” word, then the accusation would be much more realistic. It should be noted that the punishment is for unproved slander, not for promiscuity, heterosexual or homosexual, and no moral or legal judgment is made on the passive partner. However, the juxtaposition of laws 18 and 19 shows that passivity is equated with femininity.

[15] The following law (20) considers homosexual acts between male equals: “If a man has sex with his comrade . . . ,” and this is proven, then his accusers “shall have sex with him and turn him into a eunuch.” Only the active partner is punished here. This does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the crime was a violent homosexual rape, for *naku* has no such connotations. Nevertheless, as noted above, the verb does bear the sense of initiating illicit intercourse. It seems that there was always an instigator; mutuality and equality did not occur in Mesopotamian sexual relationships (Nissenen: 146 n. 31). To seduce a male equal into passive intercourse was the crime, severely punished by gang-rape and castration. A punishment for the passive partner is not mentioned. Perhaps the social ostracism that would ensue was punishment enough (in contrast to Leviticus 20:13 where both men are sentenced to death).

[16] Other analogies can be found in ancient Greek and Roman societies where there was a strong bias against passive sexual behavior on the part of the adult male citizen. Non-citizens, foreigners, slaves, and youths might be penetrated without loss of status, for they were excluded from the power structure. To adopt the role of the powerless was to share that undesirable state. The Latin poet Catullus thus boasted of his penetration of boys, but if performed on a free adult male, it was a humiliating act (Boswell: 74-75).<sup>7</sup> The assumption was that the adult male citizen’s sexual satisfaction derived solely from the penetration of his social inferiors, implying that the male who submitted to penetration was no better than a woman. There is little reason to suppose that it was otherwise in the ancient Near East, ancient Israel included. Leviticus 18:22 should be understood in this context: the free Israelite adult male who permitted penetration and

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<sup>7</sup> K. J. Dover notes that there was little doubt in Greek eyes that the male citizen who broke the “rule” of legitimate eros and adopted the passive role aligned himself with foreigners and women: “Agathokles, in his first youth was a common prostitute ( *pornos* ) available to the most dissolute . . . putting his rear parts in front of anyone who wanted” (citing Polybios; 103). He also cites the comment of Plutarch from the Roman period: “Those who enjoy playing the passive role we treat as the lowest of the low, and we have not the slightest degree of respect or affection for them” (n. 87). D. M. Halperin provides a collection of essays discussing love, sex, and gender in ancient Greece, which expands on Dover. One of the reasons advanced for the death of the Emperor Hadrian’s favorite, Antinous, is suicide because he had reached an age where, in Greek eyes, an honorable relationship with an older man could not be sustained: to have continued as the emperor’s lover would have been shameful (Birley: 249). It is worth noting that in the context of contemporary gay pornographic videos, certain “stars” make much of their masculinity by asserting that they are always “tops” - hence they are not really “gay.”

the one who took advantage of this reprehensible passivity were equally guilty. It was an “abomination.”

[17] The use of the term “dog” to signify not only fidelity but also lowly, and even groveling self-abasement, and to insult one’s enemies is well-known in the letters from El-Amarna and Lachish. In the Amarna letters (texts found in Moran), the designation “dog” is used by the petty kinglets of Canaan to their Egyptian overlord, Amunhotep III (ca. 1388 - 1350 BCE) or Amunhotep IV/Akhenaten (ca. 1350 - 1338 BCE). The letters from the great kings of Hatti (Hittite), Assyria, Babylon, and Mitanni used the language of brotherhood. For the Canaanite vassals, however, the situation was quite different. They used a standard prostration formula, “I fall at the feet of the king, my lord, 7 and 7 times,” to which was sometimes appended, “both on the stomach and on the back” (EA 63, 64, 65). The designation “dog” is employed as a term of insult when one king protests to the pharaoh about the actions of another: the king of Byblos, Rib-Hadda, levels a charge against the king of Amurru, Abdi-Ashirta, “what is A[bdi]-Ash[ir]ta, the dog, that he strives to take all the cities of the king” (EA 76, 79). Rib-Hadda used the term usually to slander his enemies who include his brother. On one occasion he is driven to the epithet “evil dog” (EA 137). Ironically, the oft-accused Abdi-Ashirta depicts himself positively as a (watch)dog who guards Amurru for the king (EA 60). In the letters from Lachish (589 B.C.E.), the designation “dog” is used by an inferior greeting a superior officer, “what is your servant (but) a dog, that my lord should remember his servant (Lachish 2, 5, 6; texts found in Lindenberger: 110-16).

[18] That there was an actual image behind this canine metaphor can be seen from one particular position often assumed by the inferior before the superior - two of the tribute-bearing Syrians before the pharaoh Thutmose III (figure 1), two servants at the adoration of Ay from El-Amarna (figure 2), and, *horribile dictu*, Jehu of Israel submitting to the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (figure 3). In these five instances the suppliant kneels with his head between his hands with raised rump. This is precisely the position of a dog, fawning but uncertain as to its reception, the head between the front paws, the rear raised exposing the animal’s anus, frequently accompanied by tail-wagging and wriggling of the hindquarters. The image of rolling from stomach to back is also telling. Thus, the line between the perception of the “dog” as a faithful or groveling servant or as a homosexual (prostitute) submitting his rear for penetration must have been a fine one, epithet and image were easily transferred.

<p>Figure 1 (Aldred: 101)</p>	<p>Figure 2 (Desroches-Noblecourt: 145)</p>	<p>Figure 3 (Collon: 27)</p>

[19] Ironically, the intuitive translation, “male homosexual prostitute,” with a pedigree going back as far as the King James Version, “sodomite,” is borne out by more recent studies of the evidence. In ancient Israel, as elsewhere in the ancient Near East, the passive role in homosexual intercourse disrupted traditional and socially immutable gender roles. The freeborn male who adopted it voluntarily deserved contempt and possibly death; the passive male prostitute plying his sexually liminal trade, was dubbed “dog” as befitting his fawning passivity and incorrigible perversity. He did not belong among the inner circle of the chosen people and his offering, bought with the earnings of his “loathsome trade,” was not allowed to sully YHWH’s presence.

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