

○ SOLOMON AND THE TWO PROSTITUTES

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In popular consciousness, the occupation of the women in the Solomon judgement story of 1 Kings 3:16-28 is generally absent. This is often true of biblical criticism as well. The prostitution aspect is downplayed by being portrayed as a naturalised component of ancient Israelite society, effaced by emphasising the women as mothers or elided by focusing upon the story as mainly about Solomon's virtuoso display of wisdom. Thus the significance of the story as one about and/or ideologically impacting prostitutes is not usually in the spotlight. What are the consequences of foregrounding the story element of prostitution? There are many analogies and similarities between the justice seeking prostitutes in 1 Kings 3:16-28 and stories of modern day activist prostitute women who are demanding justice and protesting the coercion and violence they experience in relation to current judicial/legal systems. This paper utilises feminist standpoint theory in order to read a biblical text in conjunction with the social experience of activist sex workers. This strategy privileges the non-hegemonic theory of sex work of prostitution rights activists in the San Francisco Bay Area. The activists of the Sex Worker Outreach Project (SWOP,) interpret with me, a biblical scholar, this biblical story of Solomon and the two prostitutes in 1 Kings 3:16-28.

A major challenge for the future is to prepare a theology that takes this culture into account, that considers prostitution through the exegesis of the prostitute in the bible. (Gabriela Leite 1996: 425–26; Brazilian prostitutes' rights activist)

'Have you heard the story about King Solomon and the two prostitutes?' As I ask around about the story of Solomon's Judgement in 1 Kings 3:16-28, framing it as a story about prostitute women, people universally claim ignorance.¹ They tend to smile, expecting something different, a joke perhaps. However, within a few sentences of my narration people recognise the story and exclaim, 'I never knew that was a story about prostitutes!' I am referring here to the story of the two prostitute mothers who come before King Solomon to settle their dispute over who their baby belongs to. King Solomon displays his wisdom by commanding that the baby be cut in half. The 'real' mother is discerned when one of the prostitutes gives up her claim to the child thereby saving its life. This biblical story still widely circulates in popular culture and alluding to it is rhetorically effective. That this story has been parodied on the television programs *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons* is a testament to its popular cultural currency. In the *Seinfeld* version, the disputants are not prostitutes, but instead Elaine and Kramer, Newman is Solomon, and the baby is a bicycle.² When stalemated, Newman threatens to cut the bike in half. Elaine shrugs off his threat as ridiculous, but Kramer gives up his claim in order to save the bicycle, revealing himself as the better bike owner. In the closing credits, Newman rides off on the bike with Elaine angrily chasing after him, a wry insight into how the judge can profit from such peer conflict.

In popular consciousness, the occupation of the women in the Solomon judgement story is generally absent. Indeed, this is often true of biblical criticism as well. Stuart Lasine (1989: 70) exemplifies how this elision works. He says 'far from inviting us to explain the women's behaviour in terms of their profession and low station, the fact that the women are harlots is designed to

focus our attention precisely on the fact that their distinguishing characteristic is motherhood'. Most readers need to be convinced that 'prostitute women' is what the biblical text really says. Even still, the prostitution aspect is usually downplayed by being portrayed as a naturalised component of ancient Israelite society or effaced by emphasising the women as mothers so that a comforting certitude of maternal nature can be discerned. According to John Gray (1970: 128), 'Harlots were a regular institution of the ancient Near East, about which the Hebrews had apparently no inhibitions', and 'prostitution was not considered morally wrong', says Jerome Walsh (1996: 79). According to Carole Fontaine (1994: 155): 'The *zonôt* of 1 Kings 3 are functional "widows," that is, types of poor or dispossessed mothers who had to appeal to authority figures on their own behalf. For Annelies van Heijst (1994), the good mother's renunciation of her maternity claim is theologised as an example of 'women's wisdom' that avoids divided thinking. She reads from a mother's perspective, but not a *prostitute* mother's perspective. Another way the prostitution aspect is downplayed is by focusing upon the story as mainly about Solomon's virtuoso display of wisdom. Thus the significance of the story as one about and/or ideologically impacting prostitutes is not usually in the spotlight.

In order to foreground the story aspect of prostitution, I sought a means of getting at the distinctive consciousness from within prostitute culture asserted by Gabriela Leite in the opening quote (Leite 1996: 425–426). There are many analogies and similarities between the justice seeking prostitutes in 1 Kings 3:16–28 and stories of modern day sex worker activists. In order to produce a reading that privileges the non-hegemonic views of prostitutes rights activists, I have utilised the methodological approach of feminist standpoint theory in order to extend a preferential hermeneutical option to prostitutes. Such an interpretive option for prostitutes is something not yet fully explored in liberation hermeneutics.³ Thus, I read the story of Solomon's Judgement with activist prostitutes of the Sex Worker Outreach Project (SWOP) with the help of standpoint theory.

STANDPOINT THEORY

Standpoint theory is a feminist materialist method. Standpoint epistemology has been used and developed successfully by feminist theorists to get beyond the androcentric, racial and class biases embedded in many mainstream tools of social sciences. Feminist theorist Sandra Harding (1991: 120, 176) describes the traditional Marxist social analysis as rooted in the standpoint of the genderless, but nonetheless male proletarian. In contradistinction, standpoint theorist Nancy Harstock (1983: 232) inserts gender into this Marxist 'proletarian' standpoint to develop a specifically *feminist* historical materialism. Her basis for the gender specification is that there exists in every human society a gendered division of labour and this division has 'consequences for epistemology'. Harding (1987: 6–9) also characterises three features of feminist methodology as 1) utilising women's experiences as new empirical and theoretical sources, 2) committed to doing research for the explicit benefit of women, and 3) locating the researcher on the same critical plane as the overt subject matter of research rather than keeping her hidden from view. Feminist standpoint theory thus adapts the Marxist materialist mode of analysis to focus on the particular experiences and viewpoints of women, which tend to be omitted in traditional methodologies. Due to this omission, the specific ways that oppression is organised for various groups of women, especially those most marginalised, never gets analysed or described. This is especially true for

those who experience multiple intersecting oppressions such as African American women. Thus, feminist Patricia Hill Collins (2000) employs a standpoint approach to get at the distinctive group standpoint of African American women. Collins' most recent work tackles the issue of Black sexual politics and the challenges posed by getting beyond a sexually conservative 'politics of respectability' towards a more progressive African American sexual politics (Collins 2004: 71–75 and 305–306).⁴

Dorothy Smith (1999), another standpoint theorist, might characterise the situation of prostitution discourse as a 'text mediated discourse' or 'T-discourse'. T-discourses are organised by certain ideological codes which structure behaviour and thought into specific molds and patterns. The Bible, law and commentary, not to mention volumes of social scientific text are prime examples of such T-discourse, specifically focused on prostitution. Smith (1999: 158) discerns certain "ideological codes" that order and organise texts across discursive sites, often having divergent audiences, and variously hooked into policy or political practice'. One way to break out from their power is to begin sociological investigations from the everyday lives of those for whom the discourse is a *problem*, to utilise these subjects as primary sources and then work backward to the institutional systems and texts that find the ideological codes necessary and useful. This strategy is to do what she calls 'institutional ethnography', that is, an ethnography of oppressive institutions and their impact on poor and oppressed people (Smith 1987: 160). Smith uses the 'Standard North American Family' or SNAF as an ideological code that is often problematic for single mothers and other deviants from its norm (Smith 1999: 170).

I here instead utilise Marcella Althaus-Reid's concept of the binary decency/indecent as an ideological code comparable to Smith's SNAF or Collins' 'politics of respectability' in how it organises the T-discourse of prostitution even within feminist and liberation theology (Althaus-Reid, 1999: 42). Althaus-Reid (1999: 39) argues that the dialectic of this binary is 'at the root of theological control of behaviour that is admissible for women'. Indecent theology is 'a positive theology that aims to uncover, unmask and unclasp that false hermeneutics that considers itself 'decent' and as such, proper and befitting for women especially in sexual matters'. With a hermeneutic that utilises 'indecent subjects' (prostitutes) as a methodological strategy for interpretation, I hope to flesh out some of the operations of this ideological code of theological decency from the perspective of those for whom it is a problem: prostitutes. Althaus-Reid (1999: 49) proposes that we engage in sexual storytelling from the margins in order to 'learn from the voices of women and men how the system in which we live is organised by making the unusual usual, that is, by enforcing gender constructions considered normal by legislative means, in order to disrupt and tame the different manifestation of sexual behaviours in society'.

I did biblical interpretation with a prostitutes' rights group, the Sex Worker Outreach Project (SWOP), in Berkeley, California. This group pre-existed my study and has an elaborated political position and theory of prostitution that differs from many other mainstream feminists. I sought out this group, whose views are representative of the prostitutes' rights framework internationally,⁵ and offered to help with their campaign to decriminalise prostitution starting in Berkeley, California. In terms of Sandra Harding's defining characteristics of a feminist standpoint approach, I endeavoured to meet all three criteria: 1) I explicitly sought to have SWOP members apply their elaborated standpoint to biblical texts of prostitution, 2) I wanted to do this in a way that benefited their self-defined struggle, and 3) I was a participant observer in their political project, endeav-

ouring not to objectify my friends and to maintain their status as subjects and agents of change from whom I had much to learn.

A PARODY OF WISDOM? AN INDETERMINATE ECONOMIC MODE OF PRODUCTION

Scholarship exists which is concerned with the economic context of the Solomon narrative or that works in support our prostitute activist reading, that is, readings that detect hints of critique or parody of Solomon's reign. In what follows I survey what SWOP found to be useful for a prostitute reading. The text of Solomon and the prostitute women is located at the beginning of the narrative that recounts the reign of Solomon in 1 Kings 3-10. Because of the numerable contradictions and indeterminacies in the account of the career of Solomon there exists no easy-to-utilise scholarly consensus regarding the text's date, author, audience or ideology. Indeed, Stuart Lasine (1995) uses this piece of narrative as a premiere example of 'textual indeterminacy'. Often at stake in current scholarship is the nature of Solomon's reign and whether or not it is a positive portrait of his political economy (Jobling 1991; Newing 1994; Parker 1992; Lasine 1995; Meyers 1983). David Jobling's (1991) very useful deconstructive reading of this narrative could be enhanced by including prostitution into his account of Solomon's political economy. Other scholars wonder if perhaps there is Deuteronomistic 'lampooning' at work in the Solomon narrative (Newing, 1994). Lasine reviews differing possible historical contexts for the Solomon narrative and concludes that the diverging positive and negative evaluations of Solomon's rule by biblical scholars are created by the indeterminate text itself. The exception, however, is the story of Solomon's judgement. Lasine sees a more determinate textual ideology, given the folk origins of the story, which can supposedly transcend placement or historical situation. He categorises the story of 1 Kings 3:16-28 as a popular folk-riddle and its ideology is seen by him to be an example of 'strain ideology' that is trying to resolve social uncertainty about deceit and truth telling in unstable times (Lasine 1995: 105-106 note 5; Lasine 1989: 78). The riddle is resolved by Solomon's insight into maternal nature, characterised by either self-sacrifice or envy. He exempts this story from the overall general indeterminacy of 1 Kings 3-11 for which he argues.

Other characterisations of the folk story genre would allow for much greater plasticity of application and contextual meaning. For example, Burke Long (1984: 70) asserts 'because it is a question of folk story, we must be open to the obscurity of origin and a multiplicity of setting and occasions on which such a story might have been told'. The modern example from *Seinfeld* certainly allows for parody. Scholars who categorise this story as popular folk tale/story/riddle usually mention its many parallels in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, none of which include prostitutes as the protagonists, but more often, widows of one husband (Gressmann 1907; Gaster 1981). It might be possible that the widows were transformed into prostitutes for ironic effect to make a mockery of Solomon's political economy and courtly wisdom. The prostitution aspect could be an invisible trace of a Deuteronomistic moustache drawn upon a more respectable widow petitioner story.⁶ If it is possible to read the overall narrative as a negative or even simply indeterminate portrait of Solomon's rule, why exempt this aspect from consideration? Given that Solomon prays for an understanding mind to govern this 'great people' (1 Kings 3:9) in the preceding passage, it is perhaps significant that the only narrated example of his judicial practice is done for prostitutes.

The key question, however, comes from Hugh Pyper (1993: 31). He asks ‘what are two prostitutes doing in the court of Israel’s wisest king?’ This question crystallised my own emerging question regarding the role of prostitution in the overall political economy of Solomon. This role is especially interesting in light of the possibility that biblical widows needing justice, economic or otherwise, may be among the very types of women who might resort to prostitution to survive economically.

Since one of the primary undecidable sites of debate in the Solomon narrative regards the nature of his political economy, it is into this unresolved space that I can contextualise the institution of prostitution as part of a political economy and gendered division of labour. In a move away from theories of prostitution that are rooted in personal morality or pathology – such as promiscuity, nymphomania, genetics, post-traumatic stress, incest, or the uncontrollable male sex drive – recent scholarly attention has also focused on the role of prostitution within gendered economies, especially in economies of gross inequity, maldistribution, or crisis; that is, a feminist materialist analysis. Conditions or factors that are often correlated with the proliferation of prostitution are connected to changes or disruptions in economic modes of production such as land consolidation and loss, urbanisation, migration, debt-bondage, colonialism, nationalism, warfare and militarism, and uneven economic development that results in great disparities of wealth (Brock and Thistlethwaite 1996; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Enloe 1990; Sturdevant and Stoltzfus 1992; Troung 1990; White 1990; Bullough and Bullough 1987). In a good example of this linkage, Maria Mies (1998: 137–142), a feminist political economist, gives the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) the nickname of ‘International of Pimps’. This nickname is due to the role of international development agencies in the growth of sex tourism worldwide in the new International Division of Labour or IDL: ‘The most blatant manifestation of the new IDL with the neo-patriarchal or sexist division of labour is sex-tourism’ (Mies 1998: 137). The activists of SWOP also urge a re-examination of the determinacy of Solomon’s riddle proposed by Lasine. For SWOP prostitutes, this riddle is a parody of justice.

SEX WORKER STANDPOINT ON SOLOMON AND THE TWO PROSTITUTES

Contemporary prostitutes frequently deal with the criminal justice system as ‘criminals’ and as ‘unfit mothers’. When SWOP activists read this story, two levels of justice are immediately operative: first is the risky, corrupt justice system that exists and second is the desire for authentic justice and relief from the violence that motivates prostitutes, like those of SWOP, to organise politically. In the corrupt court system that exists prostitutes experience another level of violence in addition to the daily violence associated with their jobs. This violence is bolstered by the sad truth that perpetrators of crimes against sex workers generally receive immunity from persecution. Prostitutes, as indecent subjects, are commonly seen as ‘getting what they deserve’ when they are assaulted, raped, murdered, coerced or blackmailed. It was very clear from the onset that this story of Solomon is a negative depiction of justice for prostitutes or even mothers in general, because Solomon uses violence to dispense justice. Scarlot Harlot⁷ is emphatic about emphasising the violence: ‘Yeah, it was a bluff. It’s still abusive and it’s still sick... to turn around and say you wanna push the heroism of a prostitute in a story that really should be focused on this violence... I still say that the overriding situation in this is that it is ridiculous that this king is going to cut the baby in half!’

In the SWOP reading the prostitute identity was lifted up and analysed as significant. Most of our readers agreed that the women were named as prostitutes for a reason and that we needed to explore that emphasis since popular understanding totally omitted the mothers' identity as prostitutes. Veronica Monet asserted a good explanation echoed by many:

The reason, in my opinion, that they have to be prostitutes is really clear, because of the fact that you were either with your father or you were with your husband and if you were with your father or your husband you wouldn't even be allowed an audience with the king. You would be back at the home and your father or your husband would speak for you and put the moral quandary before the king. You'd be at home; you wouldn't get to talk anyway.

Thus, the reason the women are identified as prostitutes is to explain why they live together and why no man represents their petition to the king. For Carol Stuart, 'all women that are not invisible are whores'. Since any woman outside the family structure would be seen as a prostitute we shouldn't give this identification too much weight, argued Carol. 'So they are whores! They live together, maybe they are lesbians'. Scarlot asserted that 'we have to assume there was a specific reason that they were named as prostitutes. We have to, it is not just because there were a lot of prostitutes and there happened to be carpenters and prostitutes, factory workers, no? Not just 'cuz there were so many that it didn't matter. So what are they even trying to say in the story, we have to figure that one out'. An attempt also was made to be in sympathy with the 'other mother', not just the one deemed in the story as the real mother who gave up her claim to save the child. The text is ambiguous on this point of true biological identity but very clearly wishes to show us how the most deserving mother must behave. The good prostitute mother is pitted against the bad prostitute mother. For this reason we were suspicious as to how they are depicted. In summary, the key themes that went into SWOP's interpretation are: prostitute mothers, their bad experiences with the judicial system, and if/how to empathise with the 'other mother'.

Our SWOP interpretation session of the Solomon story followed on a reading of the Rahab story in Joshua 2 and 6, so the situations of the prostitutes in both texts were comparable to our readers. Robyn Few exclaimed: 'Martyrs; Martyrdom! Women are martyrs. We have Rahab who gives up her whole town to save her family. And now we're talking about another woman who will give up her own fucking child. Martyrs!' Scarlot agreed that this story was, in fact, constructing how good mothers should behave, 'they want mothers to be totally selfless'. A mother who behaved in the expected manner will perhaps get what she wants but a rebellious mother would be totally shunned. This strong expectation that mothers should make sacrifices caused Sweet to wonder if perhaps the first mother knew this and played the game correctly and therefore won: 'if she is knowledgeable about how justice is being doled out up to that point, who's to say she is not being manipulative of what the likely outcome would be?' The traditional reading of this story that praises the Wisdom of Solomon simply cannot see the violence of his courtroom. Veronica summed it up aptly: 'he is allowed to even suggest murdering a baby without being a bad guy but if she calls his bluff she is an evil mother'. Since so many readers can read this story positively as an example of justice, 'even to a pair of disreputable prostitutes' (Nelson 1987: 39), shows how naturalised such abuse of prostitutes is for many people.

It was puzzling that a pair of prostitutes would even go to Solomon's court, especially to a judge known for violence. This is a good reflection of the different levels of desire for justice and systemic corruption. Robyn wondered: 'they went before him with this argument; they took the argument to him. So there was that much trust. I mean, I don't know that I would take my argument to an invading conqueror that I didn't trust'. Kimberlee Cline's first response was 'why aren't they going straight to jail for reporting themselves as prostitutes?' Veronica was stunned by the fact that the prostitutes were even allowed to be mothers because in today's world prostitutes have their children taken away: 'our government operates as the husband and takes the children away if you're a prostitute. So I actually thought this is a bit of a more progressive culture, isn't it, because the baby gets to stay with its mom, the prostitute was allowed to keep her child'. Another SWOP reader, Shemena Campbell, had experienced custody battles from the point of view of the child being fought over. Shemena's mother fought to keep custody of her children despite the court's declaration of her unfitness due her mental health struggles. For this reason Shemena cheered for the mother who refused to give up her claim even though such insistence on justice is often considered selfishly harmful to the child. Another real life parallel that helped everyone to frame the situation of the two mothers was the example of San Francisco rights activist Daisy Anarchy. Daisy Anarchy has been in a long custody battle to get back her child. She has unsuccessfully sued several strip club owners for illegal labour practices. She also has some controversial strategies of activism with which not all SWOP readers could agree. Nonetheless, nearly everyone had to admit that she was a sister in the struggle for sex worker rights. Robyn insisted: 'what about the Daisy Anarchy mothers? Daisy Anarchy is a resistance fighter! OK come on, there is a fight, it is a fight for justice'.

Kimberlee wondered with some feminist scholars if perhaps the text needed the mothers to be prostitutes because of common assumptions that prostitutes are immoral: 'they had to be of ill moral character to be willing to go and steal another woman's baby and replace it with [a dead one]'. Assumptions about the immorality of prostitutes are commonplace. There is a popular assumption – and the Bible is not exempt from this (see Proverbs 5:3, 7:5, 21) – that a prostitute's word has questionable or no truth-value and this can have extremely negative consequences. In the case of the San Francisco woman, Erica Baldwin, who was nearly hammered to death by the serial rapist Jack Bokin, not believing the word of prostitutes can have death dealing consequences. Baldwin was attacked while Jack Bokin was out of jail on low bail for allegedly raping two other prostitute women and having a history of sexual violence (Zamora 1997, Douris 2000). His subsequent trial, which I monitored with the US Prostitutes collective (USPROS), dwelled excessively on the credibility of the victims as truth tellers. Another example is the Green River Killer, Gary Leon Ridgeway, who murdered as many as 70 prostitutes over two decades in the Seattle area. Ridgeway had actually been identified very early on by a prostitute (Reichert 2004: 131). A pimp also identified the killer in 1983 but this lead was not followed up on by police (Reichert 2004: 103). Failure to believe prostitutes has the consequence that violent criminals get away or are acquitted.

The easy use of violence is also contiguous with the commonplace of prostitutes as liars. The failure of Solomon to use other methods of inquiry to discover the truth is sometimes noted by scholars (Hens-Piazza 1996: 147; Lasine 1989: 63–66). Solomon could have cross-examined the women, looked for other unknown witnesses, character witnesses, or he could have looked for physical evidence such as the babies' navels. If the babies were born several days apart, the degree

of healing where the umbilical cord was severed would indicate relative age. But Phyllis Bird (1989: 183) concludes ‘he does not attempt to discern the truth through interrogation – a hopeless approach with habitual liars’. Claudia Camp (1992: 100) also reads this assumption with the help of wisdom writing that characterises harlot speech as deceitful: ‘female sexuality that exists outside of male control functions as a metaphor for deceitful speech, and the character of the “harlot” thus poses the ultimate test of kingly wisdom’.

Due to this problem of being unable to solve the dilemma of one prostitute’s word against the other, Solomon is rarely criticised for his violent judicial scare tactics. They are excused as or assumed to be a trick, ruse, trap, or bluff. But since Solomon is the only person in the story wielding the actual power to sever the child in two, the common criticism of the mother who says ‘let him be neither mine nor hers, sever’ (1 Kings 3:26) is misplaced. Scholars who point out the violent, justice betraying behaviour of Solomon’s sword, as a travesty of his life protecting role, get closest to validating the experience of today’s prostitute women who seek justice (Hens-Piazza 1996: 145). According to Gina Hens Piazza, Solomon’s sword ‘blackmails motherhood’ (153). Although Lasine (1989: 66 and 79 n.6) discusses the possible travesty of the sword symbolism he dismisses its significance because Solomon is ‘just pretending’. For sex workers currently demanding justice, such violence of the legal system is the main problem they wish to rectify. Many re-experience violence when coerced into well-meaning but ill-conceived ‘rehabilitation’ programs instead of jail time. The institutional threat of losing custody is frequently used to blackmail the motherhood of prostitutes, and poor women in general, to coerce certain behaviours demanded by the state. The alternative professions that are urged upon arrested prostitutes are the exact same low paying jobs they had before pursuing sex work: generally in factory, private domestic work or the garment industry.

The scholarly feminist reading of biblical prostitution that presupposes that prostitutes are liars was ultimately rejected as harmful by SWOP readers. This stereotype is extremely dangerous to the health of prostitutes and needs to be avoided by feminist biblical scholars. When I raised the issue, Carol Stuart immediately reacted strongly: ‘That’s awful, that’s awful. No, that’s horseshit. Is this Melissa Farley? Horseshit!’ When I immediately explained that the biblical scholars don’t say this is true but note that the text of Proverbs does depict prostitutes as deceitful, Veronica still wants to know: ‘do the feminists think that that is a true assessment of prostitutes? And do they find fault with that supposition is my question?’ This is important because Melissa Farley is a San Francisco anti-prostitution feminist who does not find fault with that presupposition because she vehemently denies the truth value of the words of SWOP rights activists. Farley argues that all prostitution is inherently abusive and argues that SWOP activists must suffer from false consciousness or be in the employ of pimps if they deny their victim status and demand rights rather than rescue.⁸ Feminist biblical scholars perhaps need to be more explicit about what theory of prostitution they operate with since it is such a controversial issue among feminists. Many seem to operate with an implicit anti-prostitution framework without knowing how contested this stance is by sex worker activists.

A materialist reading which includes prostitution as part of the economy and gendered division of labour is favoured by SWOP readers. Thus, a reading such as that of David Jobling’s (1991) analysing the political economy of Solomon’s reign should include sex work. Sex workers assert that ‘prostitution is a job that a lot of women get into because they are starving, because they

have to feed their families and take care of it', as Robyn puts it. Or, according to Gayle: 'What else can they do to make money and to support their family? Usually they are single mothers and they have kids and they are women of colour. So what are they gonna do except a regular job pays 'em \$10 an hour 'cuz they don't have the education. That is the crime'. To be rehabilitated into the previous situation of non-living wages which so many mothers are rejecting by entering the sex industry, is, quite frankly, ridiculous. Unfortunately, it is a consequence of viewing prostitution as a moral problem and not a political economy problem. Rights activists want the economic contextualisation of prostitution front and centre in all theorising and policy making about prostitution.

CONCLUSION

A sex worker standpoint exposes the corrupt and violent nature of Solomon's court. This is invisible even to many liberation oriented biblical scholars. Prostitutes' lack of equal access to a justice system is also not generally apparent to most people in our own culture. Thus SWOP members uncover this institutional injustice in both contexts. Acceptance of this state of affairs hinges on common assumptions that only sexually 'decent' or 'respectable' women are worthy of justice or have a right to resist violence. What I have come to see is that prostitutes' rights activists actually have an image problem similar to the unpopular 'other mother' who won't give up her justice claim. The mother who gives in, who vacates her claim to custody for the sake of the child is much more palatable in a feminist politics that sees prostitutes as victims. Shamelessly demanding rights controverts that victim image and it is at that point that many withdraw support for the plight of prostitute mothers. Damienne sums it up this way: 'that whole thing of like, if you're a victim then we feel sorry for you, we need to get you out of this work, then you will be OK and you shouldn't be criminalised, but if you're somebody who likes it, and you're fine with it, and don't want to quit, and succumb to their idea of who they think you should be, then you're an evil, fallen, horrible person'. A conventional religious morality of sexual 'decency' feeds into this state of affairs.

Making visible the systemic economic circumstances that make prostitution a viable option for so many mothers, either in the time of Solomon or now is also a key issue for rights activists. SWOP activists object to the implicitly 'decent' understanding of motherhood in Solomon's riddle offered by Stuart Lasine and many feminist readers. What prostitutes urge us to see is that if the exploitation is to end, sexual decency *and* the economic system it supports needs to be questioned. Viewing the riddle of Solomon as a parody of justice is a step in this direction.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ A version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on 20 November, 2005 in the Gender, Sexuality and the Bible Group. Many thanks to Roland Boer for his help with this article.
- ² *Seinfeld*. Episode title: 'Seven', <http://www.sonypictures.com/tv/shows/seinfeld/tvindex.html>.
- ³ An attempt in this direction is chronicled by Margaret Guider (1995). However, throughout the book, tensions between the views of the prostitutes and the pastoral agents are apparent. Leite (1996) also discusses some of these conflicts in her article and it is from her critique of that liberation project whence the idea for this article came.

4 For the concept of the ‘politics of respectability’ Collins utilises the work of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993: 185–229).

5 There exists a growing amount of literature since the rights movement began in 1970’s that expounds the politics of prostitute or sex worker rights as opposed to the so called ‘abolitionist’ framework. A few representative examples: Jadet 1980; Pheterson 1989; Pheterson 1996; Nagle 1997; Chapkis 1997; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Delacoste and Alexander 1998; and the International Prostitute’s Collective 1999.

6 G. H. Jones (1984: 131) outlines the issue of the date of incorporation of this folk unit as being related to varying judgements about why there seem to be no traces of Deuteronomistic elaboration in the episode. Some scholars see this as a clue to its post-Deuteronomistic, post-Chronistic date of insertion. Others see the unit as being attached to Solomonic traditions in pre-Deuteronomistic time (i.e. already in the source ‘Book of the Acts of Solomon’ mentioned in 1 Kings 11:41, Jones 1984: 58) and escaping Deuteronomistic tampering because the story conformed to an accepted image of ‘Solomon’s charisma’.

7 I have written permission to use all the quotes of the sex workers that participated in my research. The names of those listed are both real and pseudonyms: I use the names given on my signed release forms, some of which are stage names or professional names. For example, Scarlot Harlot is the stage name of Carol Leigh, a published author; see her work *Unrepentant Whore: The Collected Works of Scarlot Harlot*. San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2004. Other participants in my study have biographies posted on the SWOP website <http://www.swop-usa.org> with real or pseudonymous names given.

8 Prostitutes rights activists have also complained about Farley’s research methodology which they say has often distorted the views of sex workers who participate in her studies, in other words, they claim that her research is unethical. One activist reports that ‘Melissa interviewed prostitutes that our friends in South Africa--SWEAT--helped recruit and Melissa was dishonest in what she told the outreach project and when the findings came out (they were told she did participatory research and they would be able to comment on her analysis, but were not given that opportunity) they felt like she totally misstated what they had said’.

See Melissa Farley’s website at <http://www.prostitutionresearch.com> and a book she recently edited *Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress*. NY: Haworth Press; 2003 for a theory of prostitution that currently is influencing lawmakers worldwide to create more stringent legal penalties for the sex industry. For example in the US, the new ‘end demand’ amendments of the 2005 reauthorisation of TVPA or Trafficking Victims Protection Act. These amendments have created new felony penalties for prostitutes who cross interstate borders within the US because this action is now defined as ‘trafficking’. For more information from a sex worker rights perspective go to:

<http://www.bestpracticespolicy.org/policyupdate.html>. Many other countries such as Finland, UK, and South Korea are currently enacting or proposing similar increases in criminalisation. Rights activists are opposed to more criminalisation and find it harmful to prostitutes and even to the task of combating trafficking and child prostitution which are already illegal for other reasons, i.e. child abuse and slavery are different crimes.

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