The essa zarah, the strange women of the Book of Proverbs

George Stein

The word zarah means strange, but it originally referred to being married to someone outside the tribe, beyond the geographical border. More recently, essa zarah has been translated as a loose woman. She is sexually provocative (7:10 ‘Then a woman comes towards him decked out like a prostitute, wily of heart’) and quite dramatic (11 ‘She is loud and wayward’). Here the Hebrew word for loud is ishomiyyah which also means ‘clamorous, noisy, or boisterous’.

She also displays an inner restlessness and is desperate for male company and affairs: ‘11 Her feet do not stay at home; 12 now in the street, now in the square and at every corner she lies in wait’.

She is impulsive and is visibly angry in her face: 13 ‘She seizes him and kisses him and with an impudent face she says to him – (she then goes on to seduce the man) – 17 ‘I have perfumed my bed with myrrh aloes, and cinnamon,’ 18 ‘Come let us take our fill of love until morning: let us delight ourselves in love until morning’. 19 ‘For my husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey’. Adultery in those days was punishable by death and having repeated affairs would have been a highly risky type of behaviour.

Though seductive, her relationships are brief and the love soon becomes bitter: 5:3 ‘For the lips of the strange woman drip honey, for her speech is smoother than oil’. 4 ‘But in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two edged sword’.

She leads a chaotic life and possibly has some kind of identity disturbance: 5:6 ‘She does not keep straight to the path of life, her ways wander, and she does not know it’.

This seems to be quite a good description of borderline personality disorder; the woman displays many DSM–IV borderline and histrionic features. Other scholars suggest she may be an allegorical figure, a foreign prostitute, a diatribe against inter-marriage, or a mythological femme fatale.## Psychiatry in the Old Testament

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