

## THE “STRANGER WOMEN” OF PROVERBS

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In Prov 2:1–11, חֵכְמָה “wisdom,” תְּבוּנָה “understanding,” בִּינָה “discernment,” יְדֵעַת “knowledge,” תּוֹשֵׁייה “erudition,” and מְזֻמָּה “prudence” are listed as the antidotes

- against the רָע “evil,” תְּהַפְּכוֹת “perversities,” עֲקָשִׁים “distortions,” and נְלוּזִים “deviations” coming from those men who walk in the ways of darkness (2:12–15)
- against deceitful and seductive women (זָרוֹת) who, though smart, are disgusting and blameworthy (נִכְרִיּוֹת), having forsaken their companions and having forgotten the covenant of God. The houses of such women sink down to death; and their paths lead to the shades from which none return or regain the paths of life (2:16–19).

The feminine nouns זָרָה and נִכְרִיָּה appearing in Proverbs require careful attention. Whereas the masculine nouns זָר and נִכְרִי are translated as “stranger” or “foreigner”—without sexual connotations—the feminine זָרָה and נִכְרִיָּה are given very definite sexual nuances in a many translations. A review of the following texts from Proverbs will demonstrate this difference (the key words are in bold):

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Proverbs 2:16

לְהַצִּילְךָ מֵאִשָּׁה זָרָה  
מִנְכַרְיָה אֲמַרְיָה הַחֲלִיקָה

To deliver you from the **immoral** woman,  
From the **seductress** *who* flatters with her words. (NKJ)

Saving you from the wife of **another**,  
from the **adulteress** with her smooth words. (NAB)

τοῦ μακράν σε ποιῆσαι ἀπὸ ὁδοῦ εὐθείας  
καὶ ἀλλότριον τῆς δικαίας γνώμης

to remove you far from the **straight** way,  
and to estrange you from a **righteous** purpose.

Proverbs 5:3

כִּי נֶפֶת תִּטְפֶּנָּה שְׂפֵתַי זָרָה  
וַחֲלֹק מִשְׁמֶן חֶבֶה

For the lips of a **strange woman** drop honey,  
And smoother than oil {is} her mouth. (YLT)

The lips of an **adulteress** drip with honey,  
and her mouth is smoother than oil. (NAB)

μέλι γὰρ ἀποστάζει ἀπὸ χειλέων γυναικὸς πόρνης  
ἢ πρὸς καιρὸν λιπαίνει σὸν φάρυγγα

for honey drops from the lips of a **harlot woman**,  
who for a season pleases your palate.

Proverbs 5:10

פֶּן־יִשְׁבְּעוּ זָרִים כֶּחֶךְ וְעַצְבֶּיךָ בְּבַיִת נְכָרִי

Lest **aliens** be filled with your wealth,  
And your labors go to the house of a **foreigner**. (NKJ)

ἵνα μὴ πλησθῶσιν ἀλλότριοι σῆς ἰσχύος  
οἱ δὲ σοὶ πόνοι εἰς οἴκους ἀλλοτρίων εἰσέλθωσιν

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Lest **strangers** be filled with thy strength,  
and thy labors come into the houses of **strangers**.

Proverbs 7:5

לְשֹׁמְרֵךְ מֵאִשָּׁה זָרָה מִנְּכַרְיָה אֲמַרְיָה הַחֲלִיקָה

That they may keep you from an **adulteress**,  
From the **foreigner** who flatters with her words. (NAS)  
That they may keep you from the **immoral** woman,  
From the **seductress** *who* flatters with her words. (NKJ)  
That they may keep you from **another’s wife**,  
from the **adulteress** with her smooth words. (NAB)

ἵνα σε τηρήσῃ ἀπὸ γυναικὸς ἀλλοτρίας καὶ πονηρᾶς  
ἐάν σε λόγοις τοῖς πρὸς χάριν ἐμβάληται  
that she may keep you from the **strange** and **wicked one**,  
if she should assail you with flattering words.

Proverbs 11:15

רַע־יְרוּעַ כִּי־עָרַב זָר  
וְשֵׁנָא תִקְעִים בּוֹטֵחַ:

He is in a bad way who becomes surety for a **stranger**,  
but he who hates giving pledges is safe.

πονηρὸς κακοποιεῖ ὅταν συμμείξῃ δικαίῳ  
μισεῖ δὲ ἦχον ἀσφαλείας

A bad man does harm wherever he meets a **just man**:  
and he hates the sound of safety.

Proverbs 14:10

לֵב יוֹדַע מִרְתַּ נְפֹשׁוֹ  
וּבִשְׂמֵחָתוֹ לֹא־יִתְעַרֵּב זָר

The heart knows its own bitterness,  
and no **stranger** shares its joy.

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καρδία ἀνδρὸς αἰσθητικὴ λυπηρὰ ψυχὴ αὐτοῦ  
ὅταν δὲ εὐφραίνεται οὐκ ἐπιμείγνυται ὕβρει  
the heart of a man is perceptive his soul is sorrowful;  
and when he rejoices, he has no fellowship with **pride**.

Prov 20:16

לְקַח-בְּגָדוֹ פִּי-עֶרְבִי זָר  
וּבְעֵד נְכָרִים [נְכָרִיָּה] חֲבִלָּהּ

Take the garment of one who is surety *for* a **stranger**,  
And hold it as a pledge *when it* is for a **seductress**. (NKJ)

Proverbs 22:14

שׁוֹחָה עֲמֻקָּה פִּי זָרוֹת זְעוּם יְהוָה יִפּוֹל-[יִפְּלֶ]-שָׁם

The mouth of the **adulteress** is a deep pit;  
he with whom the LORD is angry will fall into it. (NAB)

βόθρος βαθὺς στόμα παρανόμου

ὁ δὲ μισηθεὶς ὑπὸ κυρίου ἐμπεσεῖται εἰς αὐτόν

The mouth of a **transgressor** is a deep pit;  
and he that is hated of the Lord shall fall into it.

Proverbs 23:33

עֵינֶיךָ יִרְאוּ יְרֵאוֹ זָרוֹת  
וְלִבְךָ יִדְבֵר תְּהַפְּכוֹת

Thy eyes shall behold **strange women**,  
and thy heart shall utter perverse things. (DRA)

οἱ ὀφθαλμοί σου ὅταν ἴδωσιν ἀλλοτρίαν  
τὸ στόμα σου τότε λαλήσει σκολιά

Whenever thine eyes shall behold a **strange woman**,  
then thy mouth shall speak perverse things.

Proverbs 27:2

יְהַלְלֶךָּ זָר וְלֹא־פִיךָ נִכְרִי וְאֶל־שִׁפְתֶיךָ

Let **another** praise thee, and not your own mouth,  
A **stranger**, and not your own lips.

ἐγκωμιαζέτω σε ὁ πέλας καὶ μὴ τὸ σὸν στόμα  
ἀλλότριος καὶ μὴ τὰ σὰ χεῖλη

Let your **neighbor**, and not your own mouth, praise you;  
**a stranger**, and not your own lips.

Proverbs 27:13

קַח־בְּגָדוֹ פִּי־עֲרַב זָר וּבְעֵד נִכְרִיָּה חֲבִלָּהּ

Take his garment when a **stranger** has been surety,  
and for a **strange woman** pledge it.

ἀφελοῦ τὸ ἱμάτιον αὐτοῦ παρῆλθεν γάρ ὑβριστῆς  
ὅστις τὰ ἀλλότρια λυμαίνεται

Take away the garment for a **scorner** has passed by  
whoever lays waste **another’s** goods.

These English translations of הַזָּר include (1) “strange, stranger, foreigner, alien,” and (2) “seductress, immoral woman, adulteress, harlot, another’s wife.” The translations of נִכְרִיָּה (1) include “stranger, strange woman, foreigner,” and (2) “seductress, adulteress, and immoral woman.”

In the Septuagint there is a much wider range of meanings for הַזָּר, including

- 2:16 εὐθείας “straight” (a different *Vorlage* ?)
- 5:3 γυναικὸς πόρνης “harlot”
- 5:10 ἀλλότριοι “stranger, another”
- 7:5 ἀλλοτρίας “stranger, another”
- 11:15 δικάϊω “righteous man” (a different *Vorlage* ?)

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- 14:10 ὕβρει “pride”  
 22:14 παρανόμου “transgressor”  
 23:33 ἄλλοτριαν “strange woman”  
 27:2 πέλας “neighbor”  
 27:13 ὑβριστῆς “scorner”

The MT נְכִרִיָּהּ was rendered a bit more consistently as

- 2:16 δικαίας “righteous” (a different *Vorlage* ?)  
 5:10 ἄλλοτριῶν “stranger, another”  
 7:5 πονηρᾶς “wicked”  
 27:2 ἀλλότριος “stranger, another”  
 27:13 ἀλλότρια “stranger, another”

The plural נְכִרִיָּהּ נְשִׂיִם, which does not appear in Proverbs, is regularly translated as γυναικας ἄλλοτριᾶς “foreign women”—like the masculine singular נְכִרִי and נְכִרִיָּהּ—without any sexual connotations. Fair questions to consider are “Why have the feminine singular נְכִרִיָּהּ and נְכִרִיָּהּ been translated as “immoral woman, adulteress, harlot” rather than simply as “stranger, foreign (woman)?” and “Do these translations reflect a chauvinist bias?”

### THE DERIVATION OF נְכִרִי / נְכִרִיָּהּ

The lexicons recognize three independent stems for נְכִרִי,

- Stem I “to be strange” from the perspective of the person, the family, or the land, with the Arabic cognate زار/زير (*zyr/zâra*) “to honor as a visitor or guest,” and زائر (*zâ'ir*) “visitor”; and the Akkadian cognate *zā/ē'iru* “hostile” (BDB 288; KBS I: 279; CAD XXI: 97–99).

- Stem II “to be loathsome,” with the Arabic cognate ذار (*dâra*) “to distain, to be adverse” (BDB 288; KBS I: 267).
- Stem III “to press down and out,” with the Arabic cognate زیر (*zayyara*) “to twist” (BDB 288; KBS I: 267).

Missing from the lexical notices is any reference to the Arabic زور (*zûr*) “a lie, falsehood, untruth, what is false or vain,” as in the phrases زور كلامه (*zawwar kalâmhu*) “he embellished his speech with lies” and زور الكذب (*zawwar<sup>3</sup>al-kaḏiba*) “he embellished the lie” (Lane 1867: 1268). Castell’s definition (1669: 1034) included “*Mentitus fuit, adornavit falsum quid, adulteravit; Testimonium irritum reddidit, mendacci arguit.*” Also missing is any notice of زور (*zûr*) “judgment, intellect, intelligence,” which is especially significant in view of the fact that in Proverbs this זָרָה “intelligent lady” competes with חֵכֶּמָה “Lady Wisdom” for the attention and obedience of the “sons” being instructed.

Although زائر (*zâ’ir*) “visitor” was cited in the lexicons, the notices have been too brief to be of any benefit for clarifying the use of זָרָה in Proverbs. A closer look reveals that زیر (*zîr*) means “a visitor of women, a man who loves to discourse with women, and to sit with them and to mix with them, so called because of his frequent visits to them; or who mixes with them in vain things . . . with or without evil.”

A woman was also called a زیر (*zîr*), as in the expression امرأة زیر رجال (*imra<sup>3</sup>at zîr rijâl*) “a woman who loves to interact with a man” (Lane 1867: 1269). Wehr (1979: 449) defined زیر (*zîr*) as “a ladies’ man, a philanderer” (= φιλογύναιος “lover of women”). Thus, a זָרָה/זָרָה (for the MT זָרָה) would be the equivalent of the Greek φιλανδρία/

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φιλήνωρ “a lover of men.” The feminine *زير* (*zîr*) differed from the *مريم* (*maryam*) because the latter term meant “a woman who loves the discourses of men but does not act vitiously or immorally, or commit adultery or fornication” (Lane 1867: 1204).

Thus, the Hebrew זָרָה, like its Arabic cognate, had layers of meaning which may require a paraphrase to do justice to all of the shades of meaning. Although some translate אִשְׁתּוֹ זָרָה as “another’s wife”—as if the text read אִשְׁתּוֹ זָרָה—the expression actually means “an intelligent but deceptive female who loved to lie *to* men and to lie *with* men.” She need not have been a stranger or foreigner; nor did she have to be married. Although the term אִשְׁתּוֹ זָרָה may have contributed to post-exilic Jewish xenophobia, it was probably a case of coincidental homographs which permitted זָרָה to be consistently interpreted as “stranger” while the other meanings, which survived in Arabic, became lost in post-exilic Hebrew.

### THE DERIVATION OF נִכְרִי / נִכְרִיָּה

The lexicons recognize the following two stems for נִכְרִי, which could possibly be related to each other,

- Stem I “to regard, to recognize,” with the Arabic cognate *نكر* (*nakara*) “to be shrewd” (BDB 648, 1125).
- Stem II “foreign, alien,” with the denominative verb “to act or treat as foreign,” with the Arabic cognate *نكر* (*nakara*) “to be bad, evil” and the Akkadian cognate *nakāru* “to be hostile, to be at war, to become estranged” (BDB 648; KBS 699–700; CAD XI: 165; and GKC 86<sup>h</sup> for the noun form).

A check of the Arabic lexicons shows that *نكر* (*nakira*) meant “it was disapproved, or bad, or evil, abominable, or foul, or disallowed”; and the noun *منكر* (*munkar*) was used in epithets for “any action disapproved, or disallowed, by sound intellect, or deemed or declared thereby, to be bad, evil, hateful, foul, abominable, . . . .” (Lane 1893: 2848–2851). Wehr (1979:1170–1171) cited *انكر* (*ankar*) “vile, reprehensible, abominable, disgusting” and *منكر* (*munkar*) “disowned, disavowed, disapproved, forbidden.”

Missing from Hebrew lexical notices is a reference to the Arabic *نكر* (*nakir* and *nakur*) “possessing cunning; or intelligence mixed with cunning and forecast . . . and [simply] intelligent, or skillful and knowing, and so applied to a woman” (Lane 1893: 2850). The opposite meaning of “ignorance” can also be expressed by the feminine noun *نكرة* (*nakarat*), as in the expression concerning a male, *فيه نكرة* (*fihi nakarat*) “in him is ignorance.” The cognate *نكر* (*nakur*) “intelligence, knowing” is as significant for the interpretation of *נְכִירָהּ* as is *זור* (*zûr*) “intellect, intelligence” for the interpretation of *זָרָהּ* “intelligent lady.” Thus informed by cognates, it appears that the *נְכִירָהּ*, while smart, was not good. She could be like the serpent in the garden of Eden, whose *עָרוֹם* “prudence” turned out to be nothing more than shrewdness and cunning. The *נְכִירָהּ* “lady of intellect” also competed with *חֲכָמָה* “Lady Wisdom” for the attention and obedience of the “sons” being instructed.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

According to Proverbs the choices facing Israelite young men were either to follow Lady Wisdom or to follow the man-loving “Ladies of Intellect” (זָרוֹת) and the “Ladies with Intelligence” (נְכַרְיֹת) who have only sex on their minds and seduction in their speech. Such a licentious, lascivious, promiscuous, and wanton lady could be a *foreigner*<sup>1</sup> (but need not be for נְכַרְיָה and זָרָה have other meanings), or a *harlot*<sup>2</sup> (called a זֹנָה in 7:10), or an *hierodule*<sup>3</sup> (both sacrifice and vows are mentioned in 7:14), or an *adulteress* (a husband is mentioned in 7:19).<sup>4</sup> In good Lucianic style all of these possible roles could be combined, making the lady a married foreign hierodule who got paid for her extramarital affairs with Israelite youth in her devotion to Aphrodite or Ishtar or Astarte. However, it seems wisest to permit the instructions to reference any number of different women with various social, marital, geographical, and religious affiliations.

McKane (1970: 311–341) provided a helpful summary of the debate over the cultic interpretation of Proverbs 5 and 7. Without entering the debate, I simply note that these chapters in Proverbs do not deal with a fertility cult! There is far too much death associated with the נְכַרְיָה and זָרָה for any sexual contact to have been focused on fertility. The following verses illustrate how frequently the (sexual) contact with the נְכַרְיָה and זָרָה were associated with dying, death, and Sheol.

- 5:5 “her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol”; the Septuagint reads, “For the feet of folly lead those who deal with her down to the grave with death . . .”;
- 5:9 “lest you give your vigor to others and your years to the merciless”;

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- 5:10 “lest strangers take their fill of your strength, and your labors go to the house of an alien”;
- 5:14 “I was at the point of utter ruin in the assembled congregation”;
- 7:22 “all at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter”;
- 7:23 “he does not know that it will cost him his life”;
- 7:26 “For many are the victims she has cast down, And numerous are all her slain”;
- 7:27 “Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death”;
- 9:18 “But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.”

McKane suggested (1970: 341) that

. . . the mythology of the Canaanite god Mot [Death] exercises some influence on the construction of this figure of the woman as a way of death. To be led away by desire for her is to take the road to Sheol and to arrive at a point of no return. This is a deviation from the way of life which does not admit of subsequent correction; it is a commitment to death and there is no way back to a safe road (v. 25).

The appeal to myth in the ancient world produced answers to question about life and death which today are answered by medical science and competent pathologists. When promiscuous sexual activity, such as that addressed in the father’s instruction to his sons, is identified with death and Sheol, it suggests epidemics of sexually transmitted diseases which in the past were as deadly as AIDS is in the present. To avert possible premature death, Lady Wisdom required abstinence from promiscuity, whereas Dame Folly permitted passionate

liaisons with the זָרוֹת/זָרוֹת, “the lying ladies wanting to be laid,” and the נִכְרִיּוֹת, “the shrewd strange or estranged forbidden females.” Whereas Lady Wisdom would sustain life through covenantal relationships, Dame Folly would fell the foolish through indiscriminate sexual activity.

The association of death and Sheol with the נִכְרִיָּה in these scattered texts in Proverbs may have been the source for the names given to two angels who, according to Islamic traditions, interrogate in the grave the newly dead. The angels are Munkar (= מִנְכַּר) and Nakir (= נִכְר), and their function is to prop the deceased upright in the grave and ask “Who is your Lord? Who is your Prophet? What is your Book?” Depending upon the answer given the deceased enters Paradise or is cast into hell.<sup>5</sup> These names are not in the *Qurʾan* but in tradition. Wensinck, writing on “*Munkar wa-Nakir*” in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (7: 576–577) stated, “The origin of the names is uncertain, the meaning ‘disliked’ seems doubtful. . . . Apparently these names do not belong to any old stock of tradition.”

But it seems most unlikely that the association of the נִכְרִיָּה in Proverbs with death and Sheol and the association of Munkar and Nakir with death and hell is just coincidence. If there is a connection, it would support my argument that נִכְרִיָּה/נִכְרִי had multiple levels of meaning and “stranger woman” need not be interpreted as a metaphor for an adulteress. Likewise, זָרָה/זָר had multiple layers of meaning, from “foreign” to “philanderer,” from “false” to “intelligent.” While some scholars have explained the “stranger ladies” in Proverbs by looking at the cult, greater success has come by looking at the cognates.

NOTES

1. Maxim 9 of the *Wisdom of Ani*, cited by Ringgren (1947: 135) explicitly warns against the foreign woman. It reads

Beware of the woman from abroad  
whom nobody knows in the town . . .  
A woman whose husband is far away,  
says every day to you:  
“I am beautiful” when she has no witnesses . . .  
This is a crime worthy of death.

2. Ringgren (1947: 136–137) cited the following Akkadian parallel

Do not take a harlot, whose husbands are multitudinous,  
an Ishtar priestess who has been devoted to a god,  
a hierodule whose speech is abundant.  
In thine adversity she will not lift thee up,  
in thy conflict she will be ridiculing thee.  
Reverence and humility are not with her.  
If she comes into the house, lead her therefrom;  
upon the track of a stranger let her attention be turned.

This was first published in *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* (1916) 38: 105ff.

3. See above, note 2, where reference is made to both the harlot and the hierodule.

4. Ringgren (1947: 135) cited the following lines from the *Instructions of Ptahhotep*:

. . . beware of approaching the women . . .  
A thousand men have been led aside from their good,  
a man is but mocked by their glistening limbs . . .  
death is the penalty for enjoying it

In Pritchard’s *ANET* (1955: 413), Wilson provided the following translation of a larger segment of this text which makes it quite clear that concern was about sexual contact with a woman in the household, not a foreign woman.

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If thou desirest to make friendship last in a home to which thou hast access as master [variant: ‘as a son’], as a brother, or as a friend, into any place where thou mightest enter, beware of approaching the women. It does not go well with the place where that is done. *The face has no alertness by splitting it* [variant translation: ‘he who has a wandering eye for the women cannot be keen’]. A thousand men *may be distracted from* their (own) advantage. One is made a fool by limbs of fayence, as she stands (there), become (all) carnelian. A mere trifle, the likeness of a dream—and one attains death through knowing her. . . . Do not do it—it is really an abomination—and thou shall be free from sickness of heart everyday As for him who escapes from gluttony for it, all affairs will prosper with him . . . .

5. When the Muslim responds correctly he will be shown the place reserved for him in Hell and then informed that Allah has exchanged it for a place in Paradise. An infidel, lacking the correct answers, will be hit with iron instruments between his ears and then shown what could have been his place in Paradise—after which he is thrown into Hell.

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