



BRILL

JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF JUDAISM 52 (2021) 1–31

Journal for
the Study of
Judaism
brill.com/jsj

(Ad)Dressing Foreign Women: Ancient Exegesis of Numbers 25 and Roman Prostitution

Atar Livneh | ORCID: 0000-0001-8126-657X

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel

livnehat@bgu.ac.il

Abstract

Does the infinitive לַזְנוּת in Num 25:1 suggest that the foreign women were prostitutes? Analyzing four Roman-period Jewish sources—Biblical Antiquities 18:13–14; Philo, *Moses* 1.294–304 and *Virtues* 34–50; and Sifre Numbers 131—this article demonstrates that the public exposure of naked bodies in LAB reflects Roman norms relating to prostitutes. Philo even more explicitly depicts the women as brothel prostitutes, projecting the Roman repugnance towards upper-class men openly entering such establishments onto the Israelites and presenting them as immoral by dressing them in the elaborate costume typically worn by courtesans in Greek sources. Sifre Numbers 131 is a satirical variation on the theme, the Israelites being tricked into entering the prostitute's cubicle due to their ignorance of the (male elite Roman) stereotyping of female vendor markets as prostitutes and old women as bawds.

Keywords

Numbers 25 – Biblical Antiquities (LAB) – Philo – Sifre Numbers – foreign women – Roman prostitution – dress

Over the past thirty years, numerous scholars have turned their attention to Greek and Roman attire and clothing cultures.¹ Adopting a broad definition of

1 My thanks go to Yakir Paz for his valuable comments on an earlier draft of this article, and to Helena Sokolovskaya for the drawing. I am also indebted to Menahem Kister, Haim Weiss, Julia Ostinova, Yana Tchekhanovets, Eran Viesel, and Michal Bar-Asher Siegal for their constructive suggestions.

While not arguing that modifications to and supplementation of the female body are significant to the same extent or in the same “fashion” in all the ancient Jewish accounts, this case study has hopefully demonstrated the benefits of “addressing” the attire ascribed to the heroines. This scholarly endeavor not merely deepens our understanding of the narrative in its own right but also in the broader Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural contexts.

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