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Psychiatry in the Old Testament

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

George Stein

The word *zar* 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 *homiyah* 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.

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