

“Yet I Will Remember My Covenant with You”

The World of Romance and Rape



In this final chapter we turn from examining the ways in which the prophets used the marriage metaphor to shape the thinking of their intended audiences—namely, Hebrew men—to considering the metaphor’s implications for and effects on *unintended* audiences. The world of the prophets Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel was one where men had absolute power over women’s bodies, a world where women’s sexuality was considered threatening and dangerous to male honor, a world where rape and mutilation were potentially erotic, and where battery and rape culminated in romance and

reconciliation. As clever rhetorists, however, the prophets must surely have suspected that there would be members of their audience who would question whether the parallels they drew between public policies and women's sexuality were fair, reasonable, or accurate. What they probably did not suspect—because they never had any reason to do so—was that their audiences might question the very morality of the metaphor. That is, the prophets probably never imagined themselves talking to audiences that would object to the metaphor's depiction of women, its assumptions about female sexuality, and its justifications for assaulting women. This brings us to a question undeniably at the heart of this and similar studies on biblical imagery, and that is what to do with a metaphor that promotes a world that is hierarchical, that demonizes and marginalizes women, and that rationalizes violence, a world that many modern readers cannot—even for the sake of argument—abide.

If the image of a promiscuous and raped wife fails to be fully convincing to a lot of modern

readers two millennia and more after it was first introduced, it is because some readers are no longer willing to submit uncritically to the ethics, assumptions, and visions enshrined in the imagery. Indeed, part of the privilege of reading is that one has the opportunity to step back and weigh an argument, accepting portions of the argument and rejecting others. But to resist the almost irresistible rhetoric of prophets such as Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel calls for more than merely excavating the social and historical origins of the language they use (which has been the focus of the previous chapters). To resist rhetoric of rape and romance one must break the hold that images of battered, mutilated, naked female bodies have over the imagination. To break their hold means taking seriously the influence that romance, the erotic, and religious texts exert upon our culture. Part of that requires examining how the metaphor colludes with larger structures within our own culture (both material and theoretical) and how it taps into prevailing values, attitudes, and prejudices.

Put simply, what does pairing divine judgment with rape and battery of women do to audiences who are unwilling to live in such a world? What effect does reading descriptions of women battered, mutilated, and raped as a poetic device for divine judgment have on audiences who have been raped and battered and who live daily with the imminent threat of being raped and battered? These questions turn our attention away from rhetorical tactics of authors to the reading tactics of audiences.¹

Texts affect different audiences differently. Some of the variations in reaction can be attributed to gender. For example, it is quite possible that descriptions of women's rape and battery do not affect women and men in the same way.² This means that the imaginative worlds the prophets proposed to female audiences would have been different from the ones they proposed to male audiences. Female audiences were asked in the prophets' speeches to endorse a world where their rape and mutilation were normal, legitimate, and

conventional ways for men to assert their power over women. It was a world where husbands had power over their wives to do with them whatever they wanted, where husbands forgave their wives' adultery, wives forgave their husbands' battery, and both lived happily ever after. Whether women in ancient Israel could have identified with the lurid descriptions of women's rape and mutilation that appear again and again in prophetic rhetoric is a question that has been carefully avoided until this point, but now must be faced squarely. And the answer on one level is obvious.

There is no reason to doubt that the world of brutality, rape, and subjugation that the marriage metaphor assumes was a world with which Hebrew women were well acquainted. Indeed, the overwhelming evidence of Hebrew laws and narratives is that women were subordinate to men in both the public and private domains.³ Not only is male dominance assumed in the Old Testament; it is not questioned. As one writer has pointed out, "[male dominance] was part of the social order

of the world that the Bible did not question. The Bible has a new religious vision, but it is not a radical *social* document.”⁴ This means, then, that not only does the metaphor of the adulterous wife play upon male fantasies and fears about female sexuality. The metaphor also reinforces androcentric notions about wives as husbands’ property and promotes patriarchal visions of marriage as a hierarchical arrangement where husbands clearly have the upper hand. The image of the battered promiscuous wife caters to patriarchal thinking in that it leaves unquestioned husbands’ presumption that they have the authority to degrade and silence their wives when the latter act in ways that allegedly bring shame on their husbands. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that the rhetorical world the prophets proposed to ancient Hebrew women through the marriage metaphor was purely a creation of the prophets’ literary imagination. There is no reason to suspect that the marriage metaphor had no basis in Hebrew social reality.⁵ In all likelihood, the world of romance and rape taken for granted in the

prophets' sexual rhetoric was not a world inconceivable to ancient Hebrew women. Indeed, in a world where it was conceivable that women could be made to marry their rapists, it is quite possible that women also found themselves having to reconcile with husbands who battered and mutilated their bodies.⁶ Thus, it is quite imaginable that women in biblical antiquity—to the extent that they were permitted to stand in the squares where prophets harangued or were allowed into religious quarters where prophets shouted their proclamations—did not find the speeches preposterous, unimaginable, or beyond the pale of possibility. Speeches that romanticized and rationalized the random rape and mutilation of women in the name of divine judgment were probably not unthinkable to Hebrew women.

But to say that the image of the promiscuous and raped wife was comprehensible to female audiences in ancient Israel is not to say that it did not meet with any resistance within those ranks.⁷ There may have been women in biblical antiquity who in their own ways took great

exception to the rhetorical portrayals of battered women, but their resistance probably went unnoticed or was dismissed by men. But rhetoric, no matter how persuasive, is still just that—rhetoric. It still has to pass the tests of audiences. That is, audiences ultimately decide on the merits of authors' literary strategies and prophets' religious ploys.

There is evidence in biblical literature that there were women who understood the power of rhetoric. They understood the danger and potential of rhetoric to sway audiences' thinking and even to distort reality. We find several examples of women in the Old Testament who opposed patriarchal rhetoric by denouncing androcentric edicts and by challenging what they believed to be illegitimate claims to power.⁸ There is no reason to doubt that these women were representative of a small number who would have objected to the prophets' eroticization and rationalization of violence against women. These women knew that rhetorical rape can be as dangerous as actual

rape and that language does indeed shape reality.⁹ Rhetorical, or literary, rape is especially menacing because it teaches audiences how to imagine women in humiliating situations and how to perpetrate violence against women.¹⁰

Unfortunately, we do not have access to the writings of biblical women to test out our assumptions. We are forced to speculate that (some) ancient women heard the metaphor of the promiscuous wife differently from the way (some) men heard it. We are left to hope that they found ways to resist this rhetoric—if only to walk hurriedly away from the ranting of obscene prophets. We have only our own modern experiences to draw on, fully aware that there are worlds of differences between our lives (my own life, for one, as a North American woman of African ancestry who was born in the southern part of the United States and now teaches at a southern university) and the lives of ancient Hebrew women. Female readers in modern times, nevertheless, continue to be shocked, outraged, and frightened by the violence against women that goes virtually without

comment in the Bible. Indeed, one of the reasons feminist scholars return again and again to this metaphor is in an attempt to demystify the language and undermine its hold on our imagination.¹¹

Till Death Do Us Part

One cannot deny that generations of readers have been fascinated by and attached to the marriage metaphor. The reasons for this are many. Some have to do with the way readers have all been socialized: we have been taught to identify with the intense antiwoman sentiments found in much of classical literature, including the Bible. To read many of the classic texts of Western literature, one must be willing to identify with male interests and male values and not question the absence of strong women, not notice that those women who are strong wind up killed, branded, or left insane. We must not think it odd that in classic literature whereas women find their identity in marriage, men in search of themselves find their identity by first deserting the women they are related to (e.g., mothers, wives, sisters). In other words, the image of the subdued wife and the conquering husband is a familiar scene in Western literature.

But social conditioning to a male perspective

accounts for only a part of the reason why readers see in marriage the epitome of the divine–human bond. We have also been taught to identify with the metaphor’s utopian vision of romance and reconciliation. The portrait of the reconciled husband and wife caters to what we have all been taught to believe in—the strength of the family and the power of love. In its own misguided and disturbing way the marriage metaphor expresses that love triumphs in the end over catastrophe and destruction. The metaphor reassures us that love conquers all and that marriage is forever. No matter how bad things get in a marriage, there is always a possibility that love can be rekindled, vows renewed, and the marriage restored. Here, the betrayed forgives the betrayer, the battered forgives the batterer, and everyone lives happily ever after. Symbolizing more than just power and punishment, the marriage metaphor has come to embody some of our most cherished hopes as a society. As a literary trope, it has endured because it also appeals to what is perhaps a universal desire—to read literature that is inspiring, literature that

leaves us feeling more optimistic about the future and about our own lives than we did before we read. Despite the vast differences in our life-styles and in our views of the world, and despite whatever ambivalences modern audiences might have about texts that romanticize violence, both ancient and modern readers can identify with the metaphor's portrayal of the vicissitudes of love, the pain that intimacy causes, the wounds that family relations inflict, and the healing power of forgiveness. One can hardly resist its portrait of love that triumphs over adversity.

The image of the promiscuous wife and the hand-wringing husband touches readers at some of the deepest levels of our conditioning. It assures us that relationships that have suffered a profound breach in trust can heal and triumph over their adversity. Not only does such an imagery reassure readers in the domestic sphere of their lives; it also comforts readers as citizens of a commonwealth. It promises readers that it is possible for a nation to find security and to regain its greatness amid towering superpowers.

For Israel, the metaphor dramatized the notion that no matter how far the nation strayed from God there remained the assurance that God would remember God's covenant, forgive the nation, and restore order, stability, and peace to its borders. The idea of God's unconditional love prevailing over human failure and weakness has made the image of God as husband and humankind as wife a sacred way of imagining the divine-human bond. The marriage metaphor insists that domestic abuse can be redeemed through romance, seduction, and courtship. Never matter that the woman's punishment is brutal and borders on the pornographic. Never matter that the punishment in many respect exceeds the crime. The point is that the metaphor lures audiences into believing that despite their hopeless abject ways, there is a God who ultimately loves them and cares for them so much that—after a brief period of punishment—God will forgive them and reunite with them.

The Vulnerable Male

So hauntingly commonplace is its portrait of the ups and downs of marital intimacy that one almost forgets to question the morality of the battery the woman endures. The reconciliation of husband and wife is described in such tender, heartwarming ways that it is almost easy to forget that retaliation, according to the metaphor, is a prerequisite to reconciliation. The fact that the entire marital drama is told from the perspective of a man is not insignificant. Everything we know about this marriage is told by the husband; it is a love story from a man's point of view. The story of love, seduction, betrayal, abuse, and reconciliation narrated by a brokenhearted man can seem fascinating to readers accustomed to the portrait of the stoic, detached, sensible man. In their construal of marriage as a metaphor for the divine-human bond, the prophets provide readers with one of our rare glimpses of the man in love, the sick man, hand-wringing, pleading, and heartbroken. It is an image in classic literature usually reserved

for women. His nostalgic longing for the early days of their marriage and his account of his desperate attempts to reason with his wife offer us a portrait of male vulnerability. If modern audiences have tended to overlook the husband's threat against his wife and his rationalization of how to deal with his depraved, stubborn wife, it is because we, like our ancient ancestors, have tended to find stories about men in love irresistible. In fact, it is usually only in affairs of the heart that men are permitted to be irrational, out of control, and vulnerable. The world of women, sex, and heterosexual love repeatedly threatens in classical literature to undo great men (for example, the stories of Samson and Delilah, David and Bathsheba, Mark Antony and Cleopatra), leaving them to suffer the loss of their reputation and their position, and to be perpetually distracted from their true purpose in life. The image of the strong, stoic male is so deeply embedded in our patriarchal cultural heritage that the legal system in this country and elsewhere in the world has failed to punish in any consistent manner men who

batter wives and lovers. The image of the jealous, controlling, possessive husband is one of the most popular images there is of the man in love. We can forgive him almost anything, even violence against those whom he loves. This point can be illustrated by looking at how each prophet neutralized the extravagant violence against the promiscuous wife with what may seem to some equally fantastic depictions of male longing, love, and romance.

“I Will Seduce You” Romance Rhetoric in Hosea

Nowhere is the image of the battered but romanced wife more cleverly deployed than in the book of Hosea. Only in Hosea does the emotion evinced in the oracles of destruction (2:1–13) match the emotions evinced in the oracles of deliverance and salvation (2:14–23). The strident, menacing mood of the first half of chap. 2 gives way to gentle, seductive wooing in the second half of the chapter. Indeed, in vv. 1–13 the husband hurls one accusation after another against his wife, denouncing her as an adulteress and threatening to humiliate and kill her before those she claims are her lovers. But by vv. 14–23 he is no longer imagining his wife’s death; instead he is looking forward to their reconciliation, when she will acknowledge him as her husband and true benefactor. The juxtaposition of the two speeches, one filled with disdain and threats of punishment and the other filled with affection and promises of reconciliation, balances the emotions. The gentle, seductive tone in the second half of the chapter

all but compensates for the vicious threatening tone earlier. By the time his promises come to a close in vv. 14–23, the husband in the eyes of a reader is no longer a threatening, menacing stalker. He is a man who temporarily lost his composure and overreacted. He never meant to murder his wife, despite his threats; instead, his words in vv. 1–13 were the innocent desperate pleading of a man in love. Understood in this way, then, when the husband imagines in 2:14 luring his wife into the wilderness and talking sweetly to her, the husband's earlier threat to strip her and leave her as barren as a wilderness is no longer as threatening as before.¹² It was simply the harmless rambling of a man who was tormented by his wife's betrayal. What audience does not sympathize with the torment of love?

Further, many of the same extended metaphors from the natural world in 2:9–13 are alluded to and assumed in 2:18–22. In the former, the husband hisses at the nature festivals the wife takes part in, and threatens to

banish her from them and from any other rituals that might occupy her time. To deflect attention away from his previous threats of isolating her, the husband turns around in 2:13f. and describes their reunion in language reminiscent of an outdoor wedding ceremony. Wild animals, birds, creeping animals are all invited to join with them in this covenant-making ceremony, witnessing their oaths and sharing their joy.

In the end, despite their differences, love triumphs over battery—or so the logic of the unit goes—and mutuality prevails over mutilation. The measures the husband takes, as violent as they might be, only demonstrate the extent to which a man of honor is prepared to go to preserve his marriage. The rationale for the husband's otherwise extreme behavior is clear: "This is what I did for love." ¹³ Audiences who value marriage over divorce are sure to empathize with the husband's distress and shame, and those who are moved by images of a man desperately in love will forgive and understand him (and God) for his bouts of irate

jealousy. After all, the very fact that the husband in the book of Hosea elects to “reason” with his wife and does not opt to divorce his wife or to have her stoned to death is further proof of his benevolence. As for the assault, well, who doesn’t know that love sometimes drives a man to do foolish things?

“I Have Loved You With An Everlasting Love” Romance Rhetoric in Jeremiah

In the book of Jeremiah, images of female sexuality, marriage, and promiscuity are scattered throughout the brief poetic units in the book. In many cases, units are hardly developed enough to show a systematic development of an idea. We have already seen how the brief allusion to the marriage metaphor in Jer 2:2–3 functions as a preamble to idealize a specific moment in Israel’s past (the Exodus-Sinai wilderness) and to provide a standard against which subsequent behavior is measured. In other words, 2:2–3 sets the tone for the rest of the book in that the prophet allows the romanticization of Israel’s past to conjure up a range of emotions, attitudes, and values that had to do with marriage, family, and romance against which all subsequent images, scenes, and counterarguments in the book would be weighed.

In Jeremiah, promises of reconciliation do not follow immediately on the heels of threats of

exposure and humiliation as they do in Hosea. The book of Jeremiah is largely devoted to threats, warnings, and laments over Jerusalem's impending and actual ruin. In the first twenty-five chapters of the book, which are filled largely with poetic oracles, one finds only scattered hints of the possibility of Israel's renewal (e.g., 3:11–18; 16:14–18; 18:1–16; 23:1–8). Indeed, there seems to be a deliberate attempt to prevent any false hopes that Jerusalem had any chance of remaining intact (e.g., 8:8–13; 14:13–16; 18:18; 23:9–40). Not until Jeremiah 30–31 is a sustained attempt made to describe in grand terms the possibility of God's forgiveness and Israel's restoration.¹⁴ The nation's hope and renewal are at the outset summed up by God's pledge of God's undying love, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built" (31:3–4a). In these chapters and verses, female imagery abounds as the prophet describes the rapture, the joy, the comfort, the marvel, and the permanence of Israel's restoration. The image

of the promiscuous wife gives way to that of Beloved Zion. The images that parade before the audience are of women poised for healing: the incurably wounded Beloved Zion abandoned by her lovers, left vulnerable and unattended, who is now promised restored health (30:12–17); the exultant virgin, who upon hearing of her benefactor's unceasing love takes her tambourine in her hands and dances (31:2–6); mother Rachel, consoled and reassured about her children's welfare (31:15–17); the women encircling warriors (31:22).¹⁵ The emotions stereotypically associated with women (e.g., hysteria, glee, giddiness, excitement) are characteristic of the emotions exuded in the time of restoration.

In Jer 31:31–34 the prophet actually describes the nature and character of Israel (the wife) and God's (the husband) renewed covenant. It will be a renewed relationship based on mutual knowledge and trust. Female imagery is noticeably absent, even though scholars have long noted that the Hebrew word *ydc*, "to know"

(31:34) connotes the knowledge acquired through intimate contact. Marital imagery is implied throughout the unit, surrounded as it is by language of romance and reconciliation. On one occasion, in v. 32, the speaker even identifies himself as Israel's "husband" (*ba'al*, "lord"). According to this passage, Israel and God will renew their relationship with a stronger, better covenant built on profoundly intimate knowledge of each other, replacing the former marriage which has been all but annulled by the wife's former transgressions. All of her sins have been obliterated from her husband's memory.

What audience can resist such love scenes? Who would be callous enough to hold the husband's former anger and bitterness against him? Who could possibly doubt his honor? After all, he who loves much forgives much. The distraught husband in the first chapters of Jeremiah has been replaced with the generous-hearted husband, and scenes of female debauchery and promiscuity have been replaced with heart-rending scenes of emotion-filled mothers and virgins. The prophet was confident

that the sight of women content to find meaning in their lives as mothers, wives, and virgins would be comforting and irresistible—enough to make one almost forget their past indiscretions.

“My Fair Lady” Romance Rhetoric in Ezekiel

Ezekiel 16 and 23 are two of the most violent chapters in the whole of the Hebrew Bible. In a testament full of stories of wars and punishment, nowhere is a person or group's ruin so lavishly detailed and described as it is here in these two chapters of Ezekiel. Here the imagery of sexual violence permits the author to exploit the potential sex has to generate a range of emotions in his audience: fear and worry, shame and guilt, and contempt and prejudice. The implication is that punishment and destruction extract as great an emotional toll upon a people as they do a physical toll. Going beyond Jeremiah, however, Ezekiel is interested in the marriage metaphor's ability to portray Israel as deviant and incorrigible.

The woman's punishment in Ezekiel is so savage and outrageous that it is difficult to imagine anyone hearing of her plight and not feeling empathy for her and disgust at the way she is treated. It is almost impossible to believe

that anyone could conclude that this woman, or anyone else for that matter, deserved to be treated as cruelly as she is in the Ezekiel narrative (e.g., stripping her, gang raping her, hacking her, cutting off her nose, slaughtering her children). What kind of audience did the author imagine would find this brutality to be a just recompense for adultery? Who could have harbored such hostile misogynistic feelings against women, even promiscuous women? What kind of audience would not pause to protest that the punishment in no way fits the crime?¹⁶ Who is convinced by the summary “‘You must bear the penalty of your lewdness and our abominations,’ says the LORD” (16:58), or “‘They shall repay you for your lewdness and you shall bear the penalty for you sinful idolatry; and you shall know that I am the LORD GOD” (23:49)? Finally, who benefits from such cruel treatment of women?

A relatively brief amount of attention is devoted to Israel’s reconciliation and renewal in Ezekiel 16 (16:59–63), and there is no reconciliation drama in chap. 23. The prophet

appears to have concentrated most of his attention on justifying the wife's demise rather than imagining the reunion of the couple. There is more interest in arousing sympathy for the dishonored husband than in pointing to the possibility of a reconciliation. The prophet goes to great lengths in chap. 16 to describe the husband's honor and his endless expressions of generosity and compassion toward his wife. It began when he rescued the woman as a foundling child, cleaned her up and cared for her, and lavished gifts upon her (vv. 1-13). She matured into a beautiful young woman and became his fair lady, of sorts. Whatever status and reputation she acquired were the result of his largess and compassion, not the result of anything the woman had done on her own (v. 14). Despite her husband's generosity, however, the fair lady abused her husband's love and brought dishonor upon him by pursuing affairs with other lovers. She indulged her every imaginable depraved desire, including sacrificing her children to foreign gods.