

It is clear who the victim really is in this sordid drama: the husband. No matter how cruel the punishment of the woman may seem, it is the husband's wounded honor that is uppermost. The husband was clearly provoked and driven to retaliate by his sense of pride and honor. Enraged by his wife's failure to appreciate his generosity and aggrieved that she plays the whore with every passerby (v. 15), the husband is supposedly justified in whatever measures he takes to restore his reputation. He gave his wife over to her lovers, who raped and ravaged her.¹⁷ Ezekiel the narrator was probably aware that the punishment exceeded the crime; the prophet elaborated on every detail of the woman's demise so as to emphasize the point that the woman got more than she deserved. He hoped to evoke sufficient horror and disgust at the woman's treatment to buttress his argument: God can be as insanely violent and jealous as God can be merciful and loving.

In Ezekiel the story of the adulterous wife is not told with an interest in portraying the

triumph of love over disaster. It is a story of the triumph of power over defiance. The power the husband (re)asserts over his wife is more an illustration of his might than a testimony to any renewal of intimacy. It is a story of a woman who is brought to her senses and who acquiesces to her husband's authority. Rather than describing a reconciliation based on romance and seduction, like those in Hosea and Jeremiah, the prophet focuses here on the woman's profound sense of humiliation and shame as the basis of their getting back together. The prophet heaps detail upon detail of spousal abuse in the hope of dissuading his audience from acting in ways parallel to an adulterous wife. It is not, according to modern standards, a romantic story. But it is an idealistic story in that it imagines power restored, control regained, and a wife's obedience renewed. According to the prophet, it is understandable that a husband who has been disgraced by his wife temporarily loses his composure and allows his wife to be subject to her lovers' depraved advances. After all, a man can take only so much.

Resisting Romance and Rape Rhetoric

We have seen the ways in which the marriage metaphor diverts attention from its violence and directs readers' attention to its vision of reconciliation, restoration, and the triumph of love, and how it caters to our wishes to believe that intimacy and love can be enduring elements within human relationships. We turn now to the more difficult question of this particular metaphor's value for contemporary liberationist discourse. Probing into the way metaphors work, we have seen how they partially illumine some aspects of human life and profoundly distort others, how they manipulate our thinking toward certain ideals, how they reflect the social agenda of their context, and how they play upon certain emotional responses while obscuring critical distortions. We must now question in the final pages of this study what, if anything, there is to gain today from continuing to use a metaphor that elevates violence against women to a theological insight. One might argue that despite

the violence against women that inheres in the metaphor, the marriage metaphor gives us a way of talking theologically about the divine–human bond and the human–human bond with language that emphasizes connectedness, intimacy, love, family, and matters of the heart. It may be possible, then, that the excessive violence of the marriage metaphor can be instructive in what it tells us about the risks of connectedness and intimacy. It certainly allows us to acknowledge those aspects of our relationship with God that remain unresolved and cannot be easily integrated into a theological tradition that emphasizes God’s nature as good and all-powerful. To risk opening ourselves up to the possibility that a metaphor which imagines women’s subjugation can still be useful to us in what it teaches about the dark side of love, we need first to consider our options as readers.¹⁸

This study has argued throughout, both explicitly and implicitly, that readers cannot hope to resist the power that religiously inspired texts of terror have over us until we understand

why and how objectionable texts simultaneously fascinate and repel us as readers.¹⁹ Until we understand how language and images play upon our fantasies, we cannot hope to begin to understand or to explain why the marriage metaphor continues to wield enormous influence over our thinking about God, about ourselves, and about what it means to be in relationship with God. To break the hold texts have over us, we must admit how much we have been shaped by them and how intricately woven throughout the fabric of our society is their vision of life.

Feminist reading theorists have called attention to the ways in which androcentric texts demand that women and other marginalized readers undermine themselves and suppress their own identities and values when reading texts by male authors. Reading texts written by men requires women—for the sake of argument—to see women and other marginal populations as demonic, as peripheral, or as invisible. In the case of the prophetic texts that are at the center of this study, women readers are expected to indulge the brutal rape and mutilation of

women in order to comprehend the ways of God. To appreciate the depth of the husband's love and compassion in reconciling with his depraved wife, one must first acquiesce to the power the husband has to dominate and penalize his wife. This can leave women readers having for the most part to read the prophets' accounts of the promiscuous wife with a bad conscience, at once attracted to and repulsed by the marital world envisioned by the authors, charmed by its promises but silenced by its assumptions.²⁰ Reading texts that terrorize women requires, therefore, a dual hermeneutic: one that helps a reader to resist the ways in which texts subjugate aspects of a reader's identity, and another that allows a reader to appreciate those aspects of texts that nurture and authorize them in their struggle for personhood.²¹

What I am describing here is, of course, much easier said than done. In the Bible, modern Western readers are confronted with no ordinary book. That is, the very text that readers who are committed to liberation are

wont to criticize—and rightly so, for its impulses to repress, silence, annihilate, and enslave—is the same text that has in some important ways shaped our thinking about freedom and justice. The Bible has exerted enormous influence over the Western imagination in that it stands as the single most inspiring text behind the founding of the American democratic society, embodying for us our highest ideals of what faith, hope, work, self-determination, and endurance entail. Indeed, it has provided for many of us as Western readers our strongest language for what a free and just society for all can possibly look like.²² Women readers in America therefore find themselves in a baffling predicament as readers and critics: the text that imagines their rape and mutilation as women is also the text that advocates their noblest ideals as citizens and as human beings.

All of this only underscores the fact that reading is not the passive, private, neutral experience that we have previously believed. To

read is to be prepared in many respects to fight defensively. It is to be prepared to resist, to avoid, to maneuver around some of the counterproductive impulses within the text. In short, reading does not mean simply surrendering oneself totally to the literary strategies and imaginative worlds of narrators. It also means at the very least that one must be conscious of the ways in which symbolic speech, for example, draws us into its designs and attempts to mold our beliefs and identity. Metaphors, as we have seen, accomplish this by exploiting associations, by drawing connections where there were none before, by organizing and reorganizing our experiences of reality, and by accentuating some attributes while ignoring others. In the case of the story of the promiscuous wife, what happens is that women, on the one hand, are typecast as loose, shameless, erratic, and not to be trusted. Men, on the other hand, are seen as loving, generous, passionate, and forgiving. In the end, not only are all the attributes and emotions associated with sexually promiscuous women imputed to

Israel. More dangerously, all the attributes associated with the deity are conferred upon husbands. If the metaphor is read uncritically, women find themselves casually accepting the ways in which they are demonized and victimized, and husbands begin demanding the authority and reverence generally reserved for deities.

It should be acknowledged that behind this study of biblical metaphors is the belief that all literature, even “inspired literature,” is created. Behind its seemingly smooth, perfectly wrought frame was an author who agonized over his subject matter, who painstakingly shaped the language and crafted each phrase, who argued with himself about the direction in which to take the work, who made a decision about the best strategy to make the work do what he wanted it to do, only to change his mind when things began to fall apart and begin anew. At every turn in the prophets’ speeches the authors made use of some literary devices that they believed would make their works

intelligible, interesting, and rewarding to an imaginary reader.

A work that bears and invites reading, rereading, and future readings for years to come is one in which the author has succeeded in at least two things. First, the author has succeeded in masking in great part the sweaty internal fight the author had within himself or herself of choosing, abandoning, and employing different techniques. So controlled, detached, and unwavering must the author, or, in our case, the prophet's voice, be that it comes across as natural and unwavering to its audience. The author's primary objective is to hide the mechanisms that went into producing the work. The language must not sweat, the seams must not show, and the author's anguish about it all must be concealed. We have observed how the prophets Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel exploited the stereotypes associated with marriage and sex painstakingly to fashion their arguments so as (1) to arrest their audiences' attention; (2) to expose what they felt were their audiences' patently false reasonings; and (3) to build upon the andro-

centric interests and power relations cherished by their male audience to rationalize divine judgment. One can almost imagine the prophets standing in the squares or at the temple gates spouting their warnings, pleas, and denunciations with seeming confidence and polish to audiences unsuspecting of the prophets' internal anguish over the most effective way to win their audiences.²³

A second way in which an author succeeds in creating a work that bears reading and rereading is when he or she is able to fashion for audience and author alike a "shareable imaginative world."²⁴ It is a world made up of the literary decisions the author has made, the social assumptions with which the author operates, and the vision the author proposes as sublime—all of which, the author insists, are worth the audience's submission.

Finding ways, as I have advocated, to step outside the reading process and to break the hold the prophets' writings have on us should not be viewed as a call for readers to rise up

against the writers of the Bible and reject everything they have written, renouncing their every rhetorical move, questioning their every motive, alert to their every literary ploy.²⁵ What is needed, rather, are ways of reading the Bible that empower readers to question writers, that help them to recognize the choices writers make in shaping their message, and that allow readers to weigh the vision that writers offer. Reading the Bible should be no less a lively conversation between writer and reader than is reading other pieces of literature. Readers should have the right to question which visions offered by the Bible's writers are worth devoting one's energies to implementing in the world. Those visions readers decide are not worth inhabiting—that is, the ones that call for slaughtering and silencing others—should be critiqued and resisted.

Reading the Bible in ways it wasn't meant to be read does not mean that one is always and automatically able to resist the influence its content has exerted on readers. Reading is a far more complex process than this discussion can

fully elucidate. Moreover, the reason why readers are drawn to some texts and not others, why they identify with certain characters while completely ignoring others, why some texts elicit a second, third, fourth, and repeated rereading and succeed in lingering in readers' minds years after they were read, while other texts are totally forgettable, is connected to the authors' skills and insight. What makes a text a memorable one for a reader has also to do with a reader's individual tastes, preferences, background, and the context in which the reader reads (e.g., scholarly guild, fundamentalist church group, literature class, seminary).

Great authors need great readers—readers who make demands upon their authors. Great readers, on the one hand, push authors to envision (literary) worlds that are worth the readers' efforts to inhabit—if only for the amount of time it takes to finish reading the work. (Truly great books leave readers changed by the author's vision and inspired to help bring about the world the author envisions.)

Great writers, on the other hand, anticipate the questions great readers invariably pose to them such as, Why should I leave the world I currently live in and surrender myself to the imaginary world created here in this work? How does the vision in this work improve on the world as I now experience it? Who benefits and who loses from a world like this? Reading texts such as the ones in the prophetic corpus that sensationalize violence against women requires readers to find out how, if at all, violence—even in the form of divine punishment—improves the world. Readers have the responsibility to examine the ways in which they are being tempted by writers to read against their own interests. When women—even for the sake of argument—are mutilated by and in religious texts, how has the kingdom of God with its promise of peace, justice, righteousness, and love been made more authentic within the world? Whatever gain there is in continuing to use the marriage metaphor, therefore, should be based at least in part on its ability to help readers perceive themselves, God, and the world

in ways that make violence and abuse intelligible, if that is possible. However provocative, enthralling, and entertaining a work may be, readers have the right to reject living in worlds that in the end diminish their humanity.



A Metaphor Gone Awry

We have seen in previous chapters that one of the important gains of the marriage metaphor is its potential to offer us an organic model of human existence. By weaving together three discourses—the religious, the political, and the social—the marriage metaphor illustrates the ways in which our religious, political, and social actions cohere with and impact one another. Whether or not we agree with the way the metaphor condemns adulterous wives and leaves the adultery of husbands completely unexamined, the metaphor declares ultimately that our moral decisions have social, environmental, and global consequences. It offers us a way to view soberly the extent to which we have wounded the world. It does this by rejecting any false distinctions that might be made between the private, domestic world of women and the public, divinely invested world of men. Sex and politics are the same, ideologically speaking, according to the marriage metaphor. That is, all of human life coheres, and the decisions made in one

sphere of our lives will eventually be felt in the other spheres of our lives. According to the prophet Hosea, the spheres affected by our (private) decisions are frequently ones we never imagined or intended.

For instance, promiscuity (idolatry) was cause for an ecological crisis that threatened to make the land dry, parched, and uninhabitable (Hos 2:3, 12). Indeed, reconciliation between God/husband and Israel/wife would reestablish the ecological balance (Hos 3:16–20), restoring stability simultaneously in the family, society, and the environment (Hos 3:21–23). Although it is lamentable that women's bodies are brutalized and their positions in society are circumscribed in order to make the point, the metaphor ultimately forces its audience to see that every decision made, whether in the public or private realm, has communal consequences.

But despite its gains as an organic model reminding us of the interconnectedness of life, and despite its capability to offer intimacy, love, and family as theological concepts, somewhere

the marriage metaphor goes horribly awry. To the extent that the metaphor is used by the prophets to rationalize and explain the destruction and demise of a nation, violence, retribution, and punishment became unavoidable aspects of the metaphor. For ancient audiences, the metaphor connoted power and authority, and its promises of reconciliation and grace were secondary themes. It ties love and intimacy to aggression, power, domination, and authority; and it makes women's bodies and sexuality the object of male abuse and control.

In view of our generation's effort to grapple with our appetite for violence, given our attempts to curb the rampant violence within our culture and the violent impulses within our own heart, and as long as women continue to be the victims of some of the most depraved and brutal impulses of violence in our society, then the metaphor of battered wife is admittedly a very risky trope to use to help shed light on questions of God's response to human failures. There is nothing compelling about the prophets'

vision: Why should I as reader leave the world where I presently live, where violence against wives is unjustifiable, to inhabit a world where violence against wives is taken for granted? The marriage metaphor is useless therefore for shedding light on the theological question of punishment and judgment. In other words, there is, as far as this writer is concerned, no similarity between battering husbands and avenging gods.²⁶

For modern audiences, then, as long as the metaphor's principle concern is to reinforce notions of hierarchy, power, and retribution, it is a problematic device for those of us committed to the work of mending the broken places in our generation and healing the damage done within our culture. If metaphors are what we live by, and if they help us to imagine who God is, then we run the risk of making ourselves into the image of the deity who threatens, mutilates, and destroys.

Metaphors Hurt

If there were doubts before, there should be none any longer that metaphors matter. Metaphors help to shape our understanding of reality by emphasizing some things over others, by organizing our way of thinking about things in ways we had not before. They help us to see ourselves and each other and to respond to what we see in ourselves and in others in new (sometimes unintended) ways. Metaphors matter because they are sometimes our first lessons in prejudice, bigotry, stereotyping, and in marginalizing others—even if only in our minds. They deserve our scrutiny because they are intrinsic to the way we live and shape reality. We are bombarded regularly with examples in literature (e.g., novels, newspapers, magazines, advertising labels) and in the media (e.g., commercial jingles, religious music, billboards, bumper stickers) of the subtle ways in which metaphors, pithy sayings, playful ditties, and puns seep into our subconscious and arrest our imagination. Before we know it, in the innocent

act of singing favorite tunes, recounting jokes, and praying prayers, we can be advocating our demise and the demise of everything and everyone dear to us—and not even know it. To illustrate the point, let me use an analogy, itself metaphorical but relevant.

Let us imagine this. A seven-year-old African American child is escorted by his mother to the front of the church for his first public speech. The young boy is nervous but has been taught to take pride in the occasion. It is February, African American History Month, and the tiny black church he attends is celebrating the history and survival of American people of African descent. This Sunday afternoon the adults are passing on to the youth rituals and traditions dear to the survival of African American people. The room is quiet, and the child's mother nods her head, signaling to him that he should begin his speech. Imagining, as his father had suggested, that the room was filled with all of his favorite stuffed animals instead of the adults and friends that make up

the tiny church, the young boy swallows the lump in his throat and begins reciting Psalm 137.

By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down
and there we wept when we remembered
Zion. On the willows there we hung up our
harps. For there our captors asked us for
songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth,
saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

For reasons only they understand, this ode to rivers, remembering, captivity, and Zion makes old women with petal hats close their eyes and rock back and forth while old men with big handkerchiefs wipe their eyes. His mother and father smile in his direction. For reasons they do not yet understand, even the boy's friends sit spellbound. The words to this favorite psalm grip the collective memory of the little black church.

“How could we sing the LORD's song in a
foreign land?”

The child repeats this line for effect. With each line, his voice grows stronger, his confidence increases until he can't remember why he was first afraid; he is buoyed by the pride on every- one's face, and his voice crescendoes with confidence and conceit as he comes to the closing lines of the psalm. He speaks slowly for the effect, repeating the lines the way he had done a thousand times in his head:

O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

A stunned silence greets the final lines. No one speaks. Awe is replaced with embarrassment on the adult faces. The boy's parents stare at each other in puzzlement. His friends return to their games in the back row, unaware of the stir about them. Several people in the audience look

down at the page in their Bibles. It seems that no one recalled ever seeing those lines attached to the end of Psalm 137. No one remembers ever hearing them recited aloud. Perhaps they have, but they certainly have never heard them on a child's lips. On a child's lips, the demand to kill other children sounds obscene. The young boy steps down from the pulpit, not sure what to make of the stir in the room. It is not until he has walked all the way back to the last row to join his friends that someone remembers to clap.

This story, like many stories in the Bible, perhaps never happened, but invariably always happens. For one thing, it dramatizes for us the dilemma of terrifying texts. It also dramatizes, in ways scholarly discourse can never explicate, how authors, readers, texts, and reading contexts intersect with one another in a drama frequently filled with tension and contemplation. Contexts shape readings, and readers respond differently to texts. There are reasons why the adults in the congregation had for all their adult life virtually

ignored the last two verses of Psalm 137, and there are reasons why they heard those verses that Sunday afternoon in a way they had never heard them before. There are reasons why the young boy was drawn to those verses that Sunday afternoon, and reasons why he and his friends were oblivious to the verses' implications for them as young readers. There are reasons why the sight and sound of a young child instigating the brutal death of other young children was startling and astounding on the lips of a child.

Metaphors matter, finally, because they teach us how to imagine what has previously remained unimaginable. In this case, the battered, promiscuous wife in the books of Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel makes rape, mutilation, and sexual humiliation defensible forms of retaliating against wives accused of sexual infidelity. Audiences are invited to imagine with the writers plausible ways of treating women; they are persuaded to believe that violence against others can be ennobling to

one's damaged reputation and that a marriage based on fear and humility is a respectable way to live with one's intimate mate. Combined with the spate of stories found throughout scripture of women's subjugation and humiliation the marriage metaphor makes violence against women not simply inevitable but theologically defensible. Before the metaphor made its way into religious discourse, violence against wives may have been prevalent but it is doubtful that it was attributable to God.

As we have seen, metaphors need not be accurate to capture the imagination, nor do they need to present matters from all angles to be convincing. They merely need to play upon stereotypes and capitalize on deeply felt emotions to be compelling. A metaphor that takes for granted violence in the home should not only matter to us; it should haunt us. We ought to be disturbed by the thought that it is possible and imaginable for us to hurt, maim, and kill those whom we say we love.

Reading texts that rationalize violence, that

eroticize violence, and that take for granted one group's power to destroy another should never be taken lightly. What the story of our hypothetical child speaker teaches us is that if we are not careful we may be plotting our own demise and not even know it. Readers are affected by what they read. Metaphors can hurt. Metaphors can distort. Metaphors can kill. Metaphors can oppress. In this study of the marriage metaphor, the attempt has been made to show the potential of metaphors also to liberate, to inspire, to galvanize, and to give us access to one another's deeply felt but inarticulable feelings.

Metaphors as Pointing Fingers

In the field of biblical studies we have barely known how to inquire into the figurative nature of biblical language. But with the help of newer methodological approaches, we are able to press beyond mere interpretation to criticism, to attempt, as much as possible, to step outside the sublime ideology of the text, to understand where the text gets its power and to find ways to challenge as much as possible the power it has over us. Our criticism does not intend to destroy the Bible, as though that were possible (and whatever that means). Rather, it is to help those of us interested in reading and interpreting the Bible to find ethical ways to read intelligibly and responsibly. Indeed, even those of us who have devoted our lives to analyzing the Bible and searching for ways to resist its distortions, by our very preoccupation with this document, show that we too remain inescapably under its influence and are unable to shake completely its hold over our thinking. However obscene may be its portrayal of women—and there are some

scenes that are unbearably obscene—the metaphor of Israel as promiscuous wife does denounce many of the injustices that are of concern to those committed to liberation: abuses by the ruling elite, political greed, moral decay, social disintegration, and imperialist policies. Yet even those committed to liberation are still unable to explain why, in view of the Bible's parochialism, androcentrism, and colonial worldviews, many of us cannot simply ignore it and create for ourselves an alternative canon that would more accurately and justly represent our scientific, moral, and social outlook. It may be because, despite its dubious origin, despite its attempts to hide the strategies that produced it, despite our dissatisfaction with the language and perspective it uses to describe itself, we still find gripping the glimpses of peace, justice, and love it offers readers, however flawed and fleeting they might be. Just as miraculous as it may seem that love can be restored in a relationship once ripped apart by betrayal and violence, equally spellbinding is the possibility that there is a kingdom where good news is preached to

the poor (Isa 61:1; cf. Luke 4:18), where the last are first, where swords are permanently transformed into plowshares (Micah 4:3), where justice rolls down like water (Amos 5:24), and where knowledge of God is unmediated by texts and human beings but is carved into the hearts of every person (Jer 31:34).

Biblical language and imagery pose serious problems when they cease to be metaphorical speech, a finger pointing beyond itself, and become the finger itself. Along with perceiving a thread of similarity between two otherwise dissimilar objects, thinking metaphorically also entails holding in tension with one another the similarity and dissimilarity, the “is” and the “is not-ness” of the signifier and the thing signified.²⁷ Problems arise when the metaphor “succeeds,” meaning that the reader becomes so engrossed in the pathos and the details of the metaphor that the *dissimilarities* between the two are disregarded. When that happens, as Sallie McFague has pointed out, God is no longer *like* a husband, God is a husband: the thing signified

becomes the signification itself. From there a risky metaphor gives rise to a risky deduction: in this case, to the extent that God's covenant with Israel is like a marriage between a man and a woman, and to the extent that divine retribution is theologically acceptable, the image of a husband physically retaliating against his wife becomes unavoidable. Such is the risk of metaphorical language. It is the risk of oversimplification and rigid correspondence. The danger is that the tolerability of one can be presumed and conferred upon the other. It is a risk against which we ought always to be on guard.

If we are willing, however, to sever the ties within the metaphor between the erotic and violence, between love and aggression, then the marriage metaphor might have the potential to shed light on a range of otherwise unexamined aspects of bonded love. We have seen elsewhere how the metaphor calls attention to the contractual character of the divine-human relationship, the stormy character of that

relationship, the magnitude of the deity's love, the interrelatedness of life, and the fickleness of the human heart. It is time now to consider the power this metaphor has to help us confess our own brokenness and to allow us to acknowledge the ways in which we have broken God's heart as well.

A Metaphor of Brokenheartedness²⁸

If as modern readers we are condemned to take metaphors as they come to us, if we have to accept the social and cultural values ancient audiences invested in their metaphors, then the metaphor of the adulterous wife will always remain useless to those of us committed to the liberation of women. But if we have the right and the responsibility to rethink the language we have inherited from the past and to reinvest that language with values and visions that will ennoble human life today, then the marriage metaphor may be helpful. It encapsulates many of the most important principles advocated by contemporary feminist theologians. For one thing, the marriage metaphor can help us turn from viewing the world through the eyes of the powerful, the dominant, and the strong. Seeing ourselves through the eyes of a woman, however defiled, depraved, incorrigible, and battered, forces us to ponder what it means to be weak, vulnerable, helpless, without voice, and oppressed. The story of her battering lets us see

the ways in which we have been wounded and the ways in which we have wounded each other—in our family relations as well as in nonfamilial connections.

More importantly, seeing our relationship with God as a marriage drama may help us finally glimpse some of the ways in which we have been wounded by patriarchy; that is, the ways in which our veneration of power, might, hierarchy, domination, and violence has encouraged us to make decisions that have caused the destruction of our environment and have distorted our sense of the self in relationship to others. While feminists have proposed a number of metaphors for human and divine interrelatedness (e.g., lover, friend, companion, body), the marriage metaphor can be particularly useful to us because in it we are allowed to think with our hearts and not just with our minds. We are permitted to feel deeply about what we have done to each other and what has been done to us by one another and by patriarchal institutions. If there is, as feminists have argued, considerable healing and

creativity that await us when we tap into our erotic potential—that is, the power that comes from being self-conscious of our interrelatedness, vulnerability, and openness to those around us—then contemplating our connectedness to one another as akin to a marriage bond gives us a way of coming to grips with the powerful emotions that erupt when communities with different backgrounds, beliefs, and competing visions of the ways things ought to be come together. Seeing ourselves as hopelessly wedded to one another and forcing ourselves to do the hard work of hearing each other out as we speak about the pain each has caused the other are what will build stronger relationships between us all. We need relationships strong enough to keep us together when we feel the urge to walk away because the pain that comes with repairing the damage of patriarchy is too great.

The marriage metaphor mirrors the ways we, women and men, have wounded each other and have been wounded by interactions marred by power, politics, and irrational expectations. All

of this has left us deeply divided and bitter—estranged from, angry at, and suspicious of one another. For once, we might be able to admit, with the assistance of this metaphor, that part of our pain is the realization that, to our shame, hurting and being hurt have been always a part of what it has meant for us to live together as women and men.

Finally, the marriage metaphor permits us to believe in the most unbelievable of all possible responses to our woundedness, namely, grace. Perhaps the reason marriage seems to us as modern readers like such an unsuitable metaphor for talking about love and mutuality is because the statistics facing modern marriages argue against believing in unmerited forgiveness. The sordid details of failed marriages are constantly before us, making us cynical about the possibility of experiencing miracles in love. But this is precisely the possibility held out in the marriage metaphor. It insists that forgiveness and mercy are as natural to bonded love as are anger and hurt. Those whom we love we forgive; and those who love us forgive us. It is a mystery.

That we risk loving again those who have wounded us, and that others trust us to try again despite the fact that we have broken their hearts—this is grace. It is a breathtaking possibility in the marriage metaphor that should humble us as readers.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this study, which examines the way a particular biblical metaphor proposes to personify divine–human relations, is also about the limits and gains of human language. By isolating and looking at marital and female sexual imagery and examining its use in prophetic literature, this study has sought to provide first an opportunity to examine the way in which the language of the prophets shocked, informed, shaped, and influenced their audiences, and the power of that language to include, exclude, silence, and maim. Second, this study has addressed questions of reading for liberation when confronted with language and imagery intended more to shock than to edify.

This study insists that claims that the marital metaphor is “*only* a metaphor” and that sexual violence is “*only* a theme of the metaphor” do not insulate either one from serious theological scrutiny. Philosophers and critics of language, among whom feminists have been at the forefront, have shown repeatedly that the impact of language—and metaphors in particular—on a culture is no small thing. Metaphors remind us what is imaginable. Language influences our thinking about what is true, real, or possible. Not only does the image of the promiscuous wife have the potential to reinforce violence against women. It also has the potential to exclude whole segments of the population from hearing and responding to the biblical message. It does this by asking women who have been raped and violated or who live with the threat of rape and violation to join with writers in inhabiting a world where women’s rape and violation are theologically justifiable. On these grounds alone, metaphors require our constant vigilance.

Moreover, one should admit that this study of the metaphor of the promiscuous wife is in many respects misleading. One might get the impression that figurative speech is rational, univocal, and transparent—so much so that its power can be easily scrutinized, classified, evaluated, and resisted. In fact, however, what makes a metaphor like the promiscuous wife so difficult to examine—which is precisely what makes it a powerfully gripping literary device for demagogues—is our complicated, contradictory response to the sexual drama embodied in the metaphor. Sex arouses a web of mixed emotions in modern audiences, as it no doubt did in ancient audiences. We don't know quite what to make of a story about a wife who engages in sexual relations with other men and a husband who strikes out at her in retaliation. With whom do we place our sympathies: the battered wife or the humiliated husband?²⁹ How are we to interpret what takes place in this drama?

Recent research in the area of the history of human sexuality has argued against the tendency

to view sexual practices as having universal meaning(s). From one culture to the next and from one period to the next, a sexual act can change in what it means to audiences. For example, just a few decades ago in this country the extramarital sexual affairs of political leaders were never spoken of in polite settings beyond a whisper and would never have found their way onto the front page of any reputable newspaper in the country. There was a gentleman's agreement between press and politicians that private indulgences were off the record and irrelevant to an official's competence and character. Today, however, every aspect of a politician's life—especially his or her sexual behavior—is open to public scrutiny and media comment. In other words, the adultery of politicians has taken on a totally different meaning from what it had a few decade ago.

Because sexual practices generate a host of meanings depending on their context, interpreters must go beyond merely describing a particular act as forbidden and asking who forbade it, to whom it was forbidden, and under what

circumstances it was forbidden. When we begin to see sex as having its own history of representation, many of the sexual practices alluded to, taken for granted, and hotly contended throughout the Old Testament can be more clearly understood. Thus, sexual practices such as taking foreign women in during war, having sexual relations with a king's wife or concubine, or abandoning one's concubine on the doorstep to be raped and ravaged by townsmen are not to be interpreted simply as universally recognized acts of moral depravity. Depending on the context and the period in which they took place, such acts can have profoundly different meanings. In the Old Testament scenes that involve sex, something more is frequently being contested than simply issues of morality. Often at stake are power, property, honor and prestige, purity, progeny, and definitions of masculinity. There are aspects of the marriage metaphor—details in the descriptions of the marriage, nuances in the husband's threats, aspects of her infidelity—that would have been immediately understood by

ancient audiences but are lost upon modern readers.

How modern readers appropriate metaphors, some of whose cultural and theological values are no longer widely assumed, depends at least in part on whether the metaphor has ceased to be a metaphor and has become a way of conceiving and structuring reality. That is, it depends on whether the metaphor has evolved over the years to be no longer one of numerous possible ways of imaging God, but has become the model³⁰ for interpreting reality. It has become *the* interpretive grid through which one relates to and conceptualizes God. Although the promiscuous wife metaphor is not *the* dominant biblical metaphor (whereby one could not think or speak about God without thinking of God as a husband), it does function as an important auxiliary metaphor in as much as it reinforces what has come to be *the* dominant image for conceptualizing God—namely, that God is male. But what happens when modern audiences are no longer willing to take the maleness of God for granted as did their ancient counterparts?

Are there ways to read the Bible that respect the humanity and intelligence of readers?

In modern times, with increasing numbers of women and other previously marginalized groups adding their voices to the theological debate, there has been increasing criticism of and attack against the oppressive, hierarchical, dualistic, male-dominated context of religious tradition and theological discourse. At the center of that critique has been the demand for religious traditions to broaden the parameters of theological imagining to include women, ethnic groups, classes, and intellectual partners who represent a more diverse, wide-ranging scope of human experience. Indeed, the growing number of women and other marginalized groups engaged in the academic study of religion is representative of the larger social, economic, and demographic changes taking place in the wider society. Thus, in the face of the ever-changing complexion of American society, every new generation is faced with the task of examining and criticizing the epistemological, cultural, and theological paradigms that have been handed

down to it by the previous generation. In view of our growing concern about the pervasiveness of violence within our culture and our increased sensitivity to the ways in which women's sexuality is demonized in our culture, biblical language about the rape and sexual humiliation of wives may be, to paraphrase Abraham Heschel, an octave too high for the modern heart to contemplate matters of justice, retribution, and power.³¹

Thanks to Israel's ancient poets, prophets, and rhetoricians, we have a wealth of biblical metaphors at our disposal to help us understand our relationship with God. The sheer range of these metaphors suggests that the ancient community was itself well aware of the limitations of human language to capture the full essence of humans' experiences with God. The audience understood that there are as many ways to speak about God and one's relationship to God as there are experiences to be lived. One finds in the Old Testament, therefore, imagery as varied as that of king-vassal, shepherd-sheep, lord-servant, woman in labor-child,

judge–defendant/plaintiff, parent–child, husband–wife; and non-human images such as lion–prey, moth–cloth, and dew–lily. Each one brings with it its own fresh and unique insight. Taken alone, each limits our vision of what it means to be human and skews our understanding of what it means to be in relationship with God. But taken together, all of them make sure that no single concept becomes a false god and that we have a variety of metaphors to reflect a wide range human experiences.³²

It is certainly true that reinterpreting marriage as a metaphor in the Bible, if that were possible, does very little to change the fact that the Bible’s culture takes for granted women’s limited roles and goes out of its way at times to reinforce the notion that women’s sexuality poses a dangerous threat to the social order. Rethinking the Bible’s representation of marriage will not change the fact that both the Bible’s culture and our own culture persistently rationalize violence against women. But as often as we are confronted in the media with

demagogues and mythmakers condemning women for the culture's instabilities, as often as we witness violence and never feel remorse, this project hopes to remind us that there is a difference between a pointing finger (marriage metaphor) and the object to which it points (God). The two should never be confused—despite the fact that sometimes the closest we seem to get to the object is the tip of our own finger. And even then we can't always make out precisely what we're looking at.