

Chapter 2

The Challenge of Feminist Criticism of the Prophets

In the previous chapter, I suggested that the dominant trend in Christian interpretation of the Prophetic Books has been to laud the Prophets' contributions to the Christian message. Although the specifics of prophetic interpretation have changed over time, the positive role attributed to the Prophets has not.

In this chapter, I endeavor to explain what I see as a major challenge to this attitude of assent: that of feminist critique. While other voices have raised problems with the Prophets, feminism has posed the most direct and pointed challenge to the assumption that the Prophetic Books should serve as the normative model for Christian faith and practice.

Rather than follow the historical approach of the previous chapter, I instead undertake the task at hand more thematically and descriptively, attempting to explain the thoroughgoing nature of the feminist challenge. After a general discussion, I will offer the marriage metaphor of Hosea as a case study of the difference that reading as a feminist can make. The chapter concludes with examples of the resulting stalemate between feminist criticism and the dominant paradigm. Feminist critique, if taken seriously, makes traditional ways of doing theology with the Prophets extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Feminist Interpretation of the Prophets

Stated simply, feminist interpreters pay attention to the way in which the Prophetic Books describe women. In so doing, they prioritize different aspects of prophetic rhetoric than do other interpreters.

Feminists look, for example, at how prophetic literature portrays the women of the ancient world. The portrait is not a flattering one. Despite their low social status in the ancient world and their inability to own property, women receive a disproportionate amount of blame in the Prophetic Books

for the nations' sins. Amos 4 calls the wealthy women of Samaria "cows of Bashan" and announces that, like cattle, they will be led to slaughter. In her entry on Amos in the *Women's Bible Commentary*, Judith Sanderson protests:

Amos specifically condemned wealthy women for oppressing the poor (4:1) but failed specifically to champion the women among the poor. Yet both the analogy of modern times and the witness of the Bible itself strongly suggest that women were disproportionately represented among the poor in Israel. . . . As Amos singled out wealthy women—a small group—for special condemnation, a balanced analysis would also have singled out poor women—a much larger group—for special defense and a show of that solidarity of which he was so clearly capable.¹

Isaiah 3:16–24 criticizes the daughters of Zion for wearing fine clothes and jewelry, which are cataloged at length. Cheryl Exum ponders, however, "Where did the women get this finery in the first place? From their own economic endeavors, or from their husbands and fathers?"² Exum highlights the willingness of the prophets and many of their male interpreters to blame the crimes of men on women's behaviors—even on women's attitudes.³

Women do not function as independent agents in the Prophetic Books. Numerous passages criticize women's choice of worship practices (Jer. 7; 44; Ezek. 8:14). Women are victims of rape (Zech. 14:2) and violence (Hos. 13:16). When women *are* described as self-supporting, the context is one of humiliation: Isaiah portrays the dire future ahead as a time in which

Seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying,
"We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes;
just let us be called by your name;
take away our disgrace."

(Isa. 4:1)

The Prophetic Books frequently depict women reacting to crisis: they are grieving, barren, and lamenting (Isa. 32:9–14; Jer. 9:20).

As depressing as the fate of real women in the prophetic literature may be, more striking (and of greater interest to feminists) is the prophetic use of female metaphors. Repeatedly, cities, countries, behaviors, and attitudes appear in a woman's dress. Extending far beyond the use of feminine pronouns, the Prophetic Books elaborately compare cities to daughters who are dependent on male saviors and cities/countries to whores who flaunt their sexuality and who deserve (and receive) violent punishment, often sexual in nature. In Zech. 5:5, evil itself takes the form of a woman, thrust into a basket and deported from the land.

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Of the many female metaphors, some of which I will explore in later chapters, the prophetic comparison of Israel/Judah to a wife has drawn the most consistent and scathing feminist criticism. This "marriage metaphor," in which the relationship between Yahweh and the nation is compared to that between a man and a woman, runs throughout the Prophetic Books—explicitly in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea, and perhaps implicitly in other books such as Malachi.⁴

Although the metaphor turns even more violent and demeaning in Ezekiel 16 and 23, feminist attention often focuses on the book of Hosea because scholars believe it reflects the earliest example of the metaphor. To demonstrate the severity of the feminist critique of prophetic metaphor, then, I offer a consideration of how Hosea 1–2 fares with feminists.

The Case of Hosea

An Overview of the Metaphor

Hosea 1 quickly establishes the "marriage metaphor." God tells the prophet to take an unfaithful woman not because he loves her or in order to turn her life around but rather to make a point: Israel, like the woman, has been unfaithful. After Hosea takes Gomer as wife, he then is instructed to act in ways toward her that mirror the way in which God acts toward Israel. The names given the children borne of their union indicate God's displeasure with Israel: they are Lo-ruhamah ("Not pitied"), Lo-Ammi ("Not my people"), and "Jezreel" (the site of a bloody coup in the time of Jehu).

The vocabulary used for Gomer/Israel's unfaithfulness is sexually loaded. She is called a "harlot" (RSV) or a "whore" (NRSV) or an "adulteress" (NIV). The Hebrew word used comes from the root *znh*, which refers literally to a prostitute, but elsewhere in the Old Testament it can function as a slur for a promiscuous woman. Its usage here might be more akin to the crass colloquial term "slut."

Hosea 2 outlines the punishment that the whoring woman deserves. God/the prophet instructs the children to warn their mother that if she does not return to her husband,

I will strip her naked
and expose her as in the day she was born,
and make her like a wilderness,
and turn her into a parched land,
and kill her with thirst.

(2:3)⁵

32 Challenging Prophetic Metaphor

The children themselves will receive no pity, and the wife will find no escape from the punishment she deserves. Her many lovers offer no refuge, but her husband "will uncover her shame in the sight of her lovers" (2:10).

In 2:14, the tone of the husband turns tender. Words like "allure" and "tenderly" replace his earlier rage:

Therefore I will allure now her,
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her. . . .
There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. . . .
I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you
for my wife forever.

(2:14-19)

This "second honeymoon" witnesses the reunion of husband and wife and the father's reclaiming of the children.

In Hosea 1-2, the metaphor remains consistent. The prophet acts toward his wife as God acts toward Israel. *He* is hurt and jealous but also forgiving. *She* is unfaithful and deserving of death. The woman can credit her restoration not to her own merit but solely to *his* willingness to forgive.

The Feminist Critique

For at least twenty years feminist interpreters have argued that Hosea's marriage metaphor arises from and perpetuates patriarchy and that, in turn, it hurts women and men's attitudes toward women. Various features of the text illuminate this pervasive patriarchy.

The Metaphor Equates God with Male

Feminists have long decried the dangers of depicting God in exclusively male terms. Identifying God as masculine not only limits human understanding of the divine but also reinforces the godlike nature of human males. In the (in)famous words of Mary Daly, "When God is male, male is God." When only men are allowed to imagine themselves as truly created in God's image, women suffer in social status and in self-esteem.

Hosea's marriage metaphor intensifies the male identification with God. God's masculinity is established not only by the use of masculine pronouns, but more strikingly by the comparison of God to a *particular* human male: God is like the male prophet Hosea. Hosea and God are one in action, thought,

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and emotion. God is like Hosea. Hosea is like God. A man is like God. By the very nature of the metaphor, Gomer remains the antonym, the other side of the equation. God is not like Gomer. Gomer is not like God. God is not like a woman. A woman is not like God.

The Metaphor Gives Divine Sanction To Male Hierarchy

In Hosea's metaphor God acts, thinks, and feels like a human *husband*, and God's relationship with Israel compares to that of a husband's relationship to his wife. Even a cursory reading of Hos. 1–2 reveals that the "marriage" in question is not an egalitarian one but instead a relationship with clear, unequal rules. The woman "owes" sexual allegiance to her husband, who retains authority over her and their children. The husband "takes" the wife, names the children, threatens the wife, and assumes the right to strip and even kill her; he decides if and when to "take" her again and what the fate of the children will be. Nowhere in Hos. 1–2 does the woman speak directly; her only words are those which the husband claims that she *will* speak. Her desire for the relationship—either before or after the marriage—is assumed, or perhaps irrelevant.

Read in ideological perspective, this inequality both gives rise to the metaphor and also remains its ongoing legacy. In the ancient context, in order to confront readers with the intensity and appropriateness of God's anger against Israel, the writer appealed to a relational hierarchy already understood: because Israel owes Yahweh the same allegiance that a woman owes her husband, Israel deserves Yahweh's punishment as much as an unfaithful wife deserves punishment by her husband. As this "evident" truth continues to be repeated in the present, the metaphor reinscribes in readers the authority of a human husband. To recast Daly's dictum, "When God is husband, husband is God."

The Metaphor Reinforces the Domestic Violence

Countless feminists have insisted that the ideology of Hos. 1–2 fits the classic pattern of domestic abuse, not only because it sanctions violence against women but also because it reflects the entire constellation of behaviors and attitudes identified by social workers as abusive. According to numerous publications from women's shelters, governmental agencies, psychologists, and counselors, the spokes in the wheel of spousal abuse include the following:

1. *Emotional and verbal abuse*: The abuser calls the victim names, manipulates situations and emotions, and seeks to humiliate the victim in public.

2. *Isolation*: The abuser exhibits extreme jealousy and insists that the victim not see her friends or family members. Some abusers prevent women from access to car keys and money, or lock women inside the home. (While men as well as women can be victims of domestic violence, research continues to find that the overwhelming majority of battered partners continue to be female.)
3. *Threats*: The abuser threatens violence against the woman, her children, and even family pets; or he threatens to kill himself if she leaves.
4. *Blaming the victim*: The abuser blames the woman for making him angry, forcing him to act in violent ways.
5. *The "honeymoon"*: In some cases of domestic abuse, the abuser follows outbursts of physical violence with a period of tenderness and lavish attention. He promises never again to be violent and behaves temporarily as an ideal husband.⁶

These patterns are disturbingly evident in Hos. 2. Throughout, the husband threatens the woman—with stripping, starvation, isolation, and death (2:3, 6, 10–13)—and announces that he will not have pity on the children (2:4). He shows extreme jealousy, accusing the woman of taking other lovers and envisioning her promiscuity (2:5, 7, 13). Her only possessions are those he provides (2:8–9). In the “happy ending” of the chapter, he isolates her in the wilderness (2:14) and promises her safety. When viewed in light of the classic pattern of spousal abuse, this new period of closeness becomes a temporary, not a permanent, cessation of violence.

In attempting to distinguish Hos. 2 from domestic abuse patterns, some stress that in Hosea the male only *threatens* the woman; he never exhibits physical violence. Threats, however, are considered by most social workers as effective as actual physical abuse in controlling behavior:

The existence of emotional and verbal abuse, attempts to isolate, and threats and intimidation within a relationship may be an indication that physical abuse is to follow. Even if they are not accompanied by physical abuse, the effect of these incidents must not be minimized.⁷

Reading Hos. 2 with the awareness of the realities of domestic violence transforms it into a “text of terror.” Sympathy shifts away from the prophet/God to the woman. Outrage turns away from the woman to the one who holds her in the cycle of abuse.

The Metaphor Is “Pornographic”

One of the earliest feminist critiques of Hosea lambastes the book in yet stronger terms. In 1985, Drorah Setel made the case for labeling Hos. 1–2 as

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"pornography." She first summarizes previous feminist analysis of pornography and then names the following characteristics of the genre:

(1) Female sexuality is depicted as negative in relationship to a positive and neutral male standard; (2) women are degraded and publicly humiliated; and (3) female sexuality is portrayed as an object of male possession and control, which includes the depiction of women as analogous to nature in general and the land in particular, especially with regard to the imagery of conquest and domination.⁸

Setel then proceeds to identify all three elements of pornography in Hos. 1-2. First, the book clearly portrays female sexuality as negative by calling the woman a whore, by assigning the male prophet the role of God and the woman the role of promiscuous Israel, and by fantasizing about the woman's relations with lovers. Second, the husband threatens Gomer/Israel with public humiliation in 2:10, described in the sexually loaded term "uncovering." Finally, throughout Hos. 1-2, the woman/Israel remains under the control of the prophet/Yahweh. Especially in Hos. 2, the woman's identity fuses with that of the land. The threat that the prophet/God will "make her like a wilderness, and turn her into a parched land" fits not only Israel as a nation but also the woman as a "creature of nature."

According to Setel, the degree to which this prophetic pornography objectifies women exceeds all earlier precedents. The prophets did not simply parrot cultural assumptions but helped to create a new form of misogyny, making these books uniquely problematic for women readers of the Bible. While Setel does not explicitly offer her own response to these texts, she does acknowledge that readers would be justified in concluding that

the "pornographic" nature of female objectification may demand that such texts not be declared "the word of God" in a public setting.⁹

For Setel, because Hosea is pornographic, women assent to its authority only to their peril.

Other feminists have followed Setel in deeming not only Hosea but indeed a wide range of prophetic materials "pornographic," tracing even further connections between prophetic materials and pornography. The acceptance of this feminist insight has given birth to the catchy and damning label "pornoprophetics." Since its appearance in Athalya Brenner's comparison of the book of Jeremiah with *The Story of O*, a French pornographic novel,¹⁰ the label has become part of the standard vocabulary by which feminists describe the sexualized violence against women that characterizes the prophetic materials.

The Significance of the Feminist Challenge

While I have focused on Hosea as a case study, feminist criticism is not limited to a few "problem passages" in the Prophetic Books. Rather, feminists have engaged the expanse—and the very core—of the prophets. For example, while the first edition of *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets* (1995) focused primarily on Hosea, the second series (2001) extended feminist analysis to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Malachi, Nahum, and Daniel.¹¹ Similarly, apart from articles by Beth Glazier-McDonald and Marsha White, all treatments of the Prophetic Books in *The Women's Bible Commentary* object to prophetic descriptions of women.¹² A growing number of monographs, commentaries, and articles thoughtfully and directly pose the feminist challenge.

But rather than continue to name feminist interpretations, I turn to assessing their significance for the task of doing theology with the Prophetic Books. How might feminist criticism affect Christian theological thinking about these books?

If taken seriously, feminist criticism opposes, at almost every turn, the dominant trend of Christian interpretation described in the previous chapter. It clearly opposes those who praise the Prophetic Books as the pinnacle of biblical ethics, but feminist critique also raises additional issues that deserve sustained attention.

"Reading as Male"

Feminist analysis reveals the extent to which previous critical and theological treatments of the prophets have been selective readings. Interpreters have been able to name the prophets as ethical giants only because they have focused on some parts of the prophetic message at the expense of others. Particularly, the dominant paradigm has identified (usually unconsciously) with the perspective of the male prophet and of the male God that these books describe.

Not only does "reading as male" often completely ignore the way in which women are depicted, but it also predisposes the reader to accept uncritically the perception of the male character. Seeing Yahweh as loving and kind in Hos. 1–3 requires taking the perspective of the prophet/God and seeing the situation from his vantage point. Only if the reader sympathizes with *his* plight, feels *his* pain, can the metaphor convince its audience that Israel deserves what *she* gets. "Of course God is angry at Israel's unfaithfulness; I certainly would be angry if my wife were unfaithful to *me*." The question of

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the woman's pain or perspective must remain unconsidered for the metaphor to function properly.

In her discussion of American literature, feminist critic Judith Fetterley has described the way that women readers, just as much as male ones, are trained to adopt this masculine perspective; and she has shown that to read as a feminist requires becoming a "resisting reader":

Clearly, then, the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us.¹³

Cheryl Exum, following Fetterly, has traced the same dynamics that women face in reading prophetic texts:

Female readers are placed in a double bind. On the one hand we are asked to sympathize with God and identify with his point of view. To the extent we do so, we read these texts against our own interests. On the other hand, by definition we are identified with the object that elicits scorn and abuse. This involves acceptance if not of guilt, then at least of the indictment of our sex that these texts represent.¹⁴

Texts work differently when the reader identifies—or is identified by others—not with God but with the denigrated woman.

By revealing how prophetic rhetoric sounds to woman-identified readers, feminist critics have shown that the value placed on prophetic texts by earlier interpreters is less a function of the texts themselves and more a function of those readers' allegiances. Patriarchy, or at least androcentrism, in interpretation leads to the explicit or implicit acceptance of patriarchy in the text.

Patriarchal Ideology

Feminist analysis also denies the long-standing claim that prophets stood against—and ethically above—their culture. As outlined in the previous chapter, since at least the mid-nineteenth century the dominant strand of Christian interpretation has cast the prophets as men who opposed the corruption of their culture. For Ewald, Duhm, and Wellhausen, prophets were the lone voices of ethical monotheism; for Eichrodt and von Rad, they were lone voices against "naturalistic" Canaanite religion and other challenges to God's freedom; for Brueggemann, they were lone voices against royal ideology. For all of these interpreters, the prophet's message arrived, unprecedented and unbidden, from God alone.

Feminists, on the contrary, demonstrate the degree to which the prophets themselves or at least the books that bear their names remain fully ensconced within their culture's most enduring ideology: that of patriarchy. Prophetic rhetoric depends on patriarchal assumptions. Feminists disagree whether the prophets simply replicated or intensified the misogyny of their culture. As noted above, Setel has argued that by developing pornographic literary forms the prophets raised the stakes of misogyny in the ancient world. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, on the contrary, has insisted that ancient Israel did not invent or perfect patriarchy.¹⁵ And yet, all feminists agree the prophets were not immune to, much less challenging of, patriarchal ideology. Despite the claims of earlier interpreters, the prophets cannot be seen as wholeheartedly countercultural nor as wholeheartedly committed to challenging *all* ideologies that make humans into gods.

Theological Language Is Political Language

Along with other ideological critics, feminists underscore that in the Prophetic Books as in the rest of life, language about God operates simultaneously as language about humans and the dynamics of power in those relationships. Denying the possibility of "pure theology" or of "merely descriptive" characterizations of God, feminist critique points to the political and social implications of God language. The marriage metaphor speaks about—and to—human gendered relationships, as do prophetic depictions of Jerusalem as a dependent daughter and of Nineveh as a whore deserving of rape. To the secular feminist claim that "the personal is political," Christian (and Jewish) feminists add, "and so is the theological."

Denying the possibility or even desirability of objectivity in interpretation, feminist critics unapologetically stake their claim to advocacy. They explicitly identify female experience as a key criterion for evaluating the Prophetic Books and call to task any evaluation of the Prophets that does not take into account their demeaning portrayals of women and images of violence against them. Prophets cannot be ethical giants if they are not ethical toward women.

Clearly, such a criterion leads to reevaluation not only of the Prophets but also of previous interpretation of the Prophets. Those who present overarching theories about the Prophets as mere descriptions of the text itself receive not praise from feminists but censure, as do those who treat those descriptions as revealing the "true" facts of God's nature. Cheryl Exum laments not only the way in which male interpreters reinforce the gender hierarchy of the prophetic texts but, even more, the influence that these "expert" interpreters

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exert on those who read their commentaries.¹⁶ As I will explore in my discussion of God as father, at least one Jewish theologian suggests that giving theological priority to divine sovereignty derives from patriarchal thinking, a thinking that continues to paralyze Jewish theological responses to the Holocaust.¹⁷

Challenging Normative Authority

Feminist analysis defines the task of prophetic theology not as deriving theology *from* the Prophetic Books but as engaging theological reflection *alongside* or even *against* them. Almost to a man, the interpreters highlighted in the previous chapter found in the prophetic writings support for their own understandings of the Christian life. In the patristic and medieval periods, prophets authorized the structure and doctrine of the established church; in the Reformation, they supported the authority of the Bible; in the Enlightenment, they underscored the importance of individual genius; in the twentieth century, they insisted on the sovereignty of God against totalitarian institutions. Even when interpreters initially chafed at prophetic language, they always found reading strategies that allowed them to agree with Scripture. For example, when Origen struggled against the literal sense of Scripture, he always found the spiritual sense of the text to yield fruitful results.

Feminist criticism marks one of the first cases in prophetic interpretation in which the interpreter overtly resists at least certain aspects of the text's presentation of God. Based on the "What about women?" criterion, feminists insist that not all of what the prophets say faithfully describes the "real" nature of the divine. Feminist analysis introduces a disjunction between what the Prophets say about God and who God "really" is. In contrast to earlier interpreters for whom description of what the Prophets say *itself* constitutes theology, feminists approach the Prophetic Books as (flawed) human testimonies that must be tested for their value.

Clearly, feminist analysis challenges the normative authority of these texts. Judith Sanderson takes such a position in her reflections on Nah. 3, in which God is depicted as sexually assaulting woman Nineveh:

No aspect of God's relationship with humankind can be represented in the modern world by an image that depends on a destructive view of women's bodied selves.¹⁸

Despite the claims of text and tradition, these texts cannot be embraced as clear windows through which to see God.

The Resulting Polarization of Prophetic Theology

Clearly, feminist criticism opposes the dominant way in which Christians have found theological meaning in the Prophetic Books. It does not offer minor corrections to the tradition, but rather challenges tradition at almost every turn.

Given the intensity of that challenge, contemporary Christian interpretation has struggled to integrate feminist critique of the Prophetic Books with theological reflection. Rather than integrative, discourse on the prophets tends to be polarized: most interpreters either (a) ignore, deny, or minimize the feminist critique of these books or (b) claim that, based on feminist critique, the Prophetic Books have no contemporary value. While in his *Theology of the Old Testament* Brueggemann identifies the current impasse in Old Testament theology as that between the unifying approach of Eichrodt and the pluralistic approach of von Rad, I see a more formidable impasse: one between (a) approaches that understand prophetic texts, when read properly, as faithfully witnessing to God; and (b) those that underscore the danger of prophetic texts and the need to develop alternative understandings of God. I read this polarization in academic treatments of the Prophetic Books. I hear it in sermons, in classrooms, and in churches. I listen to it in the discourse of those outside of the Christian church. Positions on the Prophets take one extreme or the other. Some positions claim to do both—to appreciate *and* critique the Prophets—but, in fact, they fail to recognize the difficulty of the task.

For examples of this polarization of assent and protest, I return to the case of Hosea. These examples drawn from academics as well as preachers show how much difficulty most Christians find in *both* valuing Hosea *and* recognizing its danger for women.

Hate It

On the “dissent” pole I point to Gerlinde Baumann’s *Love and Violence*. Baumann, a German scholar and pastor, insists that Hosea and similar biblical texts damage the image of women—both in terms of women’s own self-esteem and their esteem within society. “The marriage that is presented there offers no positive image for the mutual life of a woman and a man.”¹⁹ Additionally, she argues that Hosea’s portrait damages the image of God, casting the holy one as a “righteous perpetrator of violence and a ‘legitimater’ of male violence.”²⁰ Baumann concludes that the marriage metaphor of the prophets has no positive—or even neutral—value for contemporary believers. The metaphor is too dangerous, to women and to men, to be used: “Only permanent outrage is an

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adequate response to an outrageous image of God."²¹ She initially concludes that we avoid all human metaphors for God: since no human metaphor is non-hierarchical or egalitarian, she claims, "the field of metaphors drawn from human social life must be abandoned."²² But, in the closing sentences of her volume, she grants the possibility that some human images might avoid hierarchy: God as friend, lover, self-transforming clown.²³

Love It

While other interpretations might fall further toward the extreme end of the pole, I offer Brueggemann's treatment of Hosea in his *Theology of the Old Testament* as an example of "assent." In the 750 pages of his volume, Brueggemann speaks often of Hosea, particularly Hos. 1–2, which is key to feminists. Hosea not only provides Israel's testimony that Yahweh is faithful to the covenant with Israel²⁴ and the countertestimony that Yahweh can be deceptive,²⁵ but it also reveals Yahweh's commitment to the renewal of creation.²⁶ For Brueggemann, the "honeymoon" stage that begins in 2:14 is the core of the chapter: "This vow [of renewed love] on the part of the husband-Yahweh to wife-Israel completely overcomes the negativity of vv. 2–13,"²⁷ and the behaviors in verses 10–13 that Baumann deemed "abuse" are described by Brueggemann as an "act of abandonment."²⁸

At several turns, Brueggemann demonstrates his awareness of the feminist critique of Hosea. He acknowledges that feminists find Hosea's marriage metaphor problematic and mentions selected feminist writings. Yet he confines this acknowledgment, with one exception, to footnotes. In his treatment of the positive aspects of the marriage metaphor, the footnote reads:

Obviously such imagery is profoundly problematic if it is taken as a model for sexual roles in human transactions. In my judgment, we must read this poem in its positive intention, but not with any naiveté about its ideological undercurrent.²⁹

In its discussion of the punishment of the woman in Hos. 2, Brueggemann's footnote acknowledges that feminists such as Renita Weems and Gail Yee have found the image abusive,³⁰ and in a note to his discussion of the marriage metaphor he recognizes that it bears the inherent problems of "sexism and abusive patriarchy."³¹ In neither case, however, do these acknowledgments alter the way in which Brueggemann interprets Hosea in the body of the text. For example, while his footnotes on the husband-wife metaphor acknowledge its problems, in the body of the volume itself Brueggemann claims that the prophetic presentation of Yahweh's character "requires" precisely this metaphor.³² In the

one case in which Brueggemann does discuss feminist criticism of Hosea in the body of his volume, he does so to downplay its significance:

We are, however, alerted by feminist hermeneutical considerations to pay careful attention to the terms of the reversal (in Hos 2) now proposed by Yahweh. . . . Feminist literature notices the potential for implicit violence present in the husband imagery for Yahweh. Very likely, this is an overstatement of what is in the text.³³

Although Brueggemann obviously knows and to some degree accepts feminist critique of Hosea, it does not affect the way in which he does theology with the Prophetic Books. He mentions the problems but does not take them seriously. Even though Brueggemann is willing to admit that the Prophetic Books portray God as "hidden" and even "deceptive," he does not admit that they are sexist.

In his failure to engage seriously feminist criticism of the prophets, Brueggemann is not alone among academics or among pastors. In the sermons collected in *Preaching the Eighth Century Prophets*, every single preacher presents the prophet's word as good news to be embraced and followed. Royce Dickinson Jr.'s sermon on Hos. 1–3, "Heartbroken for the Heartless," remains silent on feminist critique. For him, this text confronts Christians with the quandary of "How can God disclose himself to us in the disgusting imagery of steadfast love for a heartless whore?"³⁴ The scandal of the text is not its treatment of women, but, rather, "the real scandal of Hosea is that of a heartbroken God who absolutely refuses to stop loving a heartless people."³⁵

More to the point of the polarization of prophetic theology, however, is Craig Bowman's sermon "Living in Hosea." Bowman cites feminist critics of Hosea by name—Mary Mills, Phyllis Bird, and Cheryl Exum—and describes their critique of the marriage metaphor as harsh. But for Bowman, the harshness of the critique becomes grounds for disregarding it. He claims that these critiques are too negative to be useful and explains that he "prefers" the writings of Renita Weems, Gale Yee, and Katharine Sakenfeld:

[These] more positive constructive feminist readings of Hosea enable us to read the book as the word of God and sustain us as we move through offensive objections raised against female imagery.³⁶

While one might argue with the way in which he has understood the interpreters he favors, Bowman obviously accepts only feminist interpretations that remain "positive" and allow readers to assent to biblical texts.

Not even the insights of Weems, Yee, and Sakenfeld, however, inform Bowman's presentation of the message of Hosea. In the sermon, he compares

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his own marriage with that of the prophet; like Hosea/God, he was able to forgive his own unfaithful wife, Patti. Through the book of Hosea, Bowman heard God tell him to forgive Patti: "Love her as I love her."³⁷ Clearly, despite his apparent awareness of feminist critique, Bowman embodies the very types of self-serving interpretation that feminists decry. In his application of the metaphor, *he* is like the prophet/God; *she* (his wife) is errant Gomer/Israel. The healing of the relationship comes from *his* willingness to take on the role of Hosea/God; he, not his wife, becomes the human model for God's forgiveness. Nowhere does Bowman distinguish Patti's perspective from his own: his own relationship as well as the biblical text is seen from only a male perspective.

Love and Hate

While on the one pole Baumann can find nothing positive to say about Hosea, on the other Brueggemann and Bowman can find nothing substantively to resist. The chasm between these poles is vast. It is a chasm between appreciation and critique, assent and dissent, acceptance and rejection.

Renita Weems's treatment of Hosea in numerous publications attempts to bridge this divide between critique and assent. In *Battered Love*, her critique anticipates that of Baumann: she claims that women read the marriage metaphor against their own interests and that this text ultimately terrorizes women.³⁸ But, like Brueggemann after her, Weems explains that the metaphor does provide insight: no other metaphor equals it in expressing that (1) Israel owes God allegiance and (2) even the most unfaithful might be welcomed home and loved. Weems also recognizes the popular appeal of the metaphor, especially the romanticized restoration at the end of Hos. 2. Readers like to believe in the strength of family and the power of love: that love can overcome anything and that men can be vulnerable in love.

Weems concludes that the real problem of reading the marriage metaphor is that readers have exalted Hosea's image of God as husband into a false god, forgetting that it is a metaphor.³⁹ What was intended to be metaphorical and poetic has been literalized and fossilized, a name for God rather than a creative comparison. The metaphor becomes especially dangerous, Weems claims, when it is the only one used for God.

The volume concludes by affirming what is good about Hosea's marriage metaphor. The comparison Hosea makes between a marriage and Israel's relationship with God insists on human responsibility—to God, to others, to the earth—and it teaches that we can risk to love again after being wounded. How does a reader hold in tension the good and bad of Hosea's language? Weems's

answer is that great authors need great readers. We must talk back to texts, engage them in conversation.

By acknowledging both the good and the bad of Hosea's marriage metaphor, Weems appears to find the classic "middle ground" between ideological critique and constructive theology. She clearly takes the problems of the text seriously yet still finds the text valuable for contemporary readers. But Weems does not truly engage theology in light of feminist critique. Rather, she recognizes the problems of the text and warns readers of its danger, but she concludes that the text is so valuable that it must nonetheless continue to be read—problems and all. That is, Weems places the positive value of the marriage metaphor in one hand and its negative value in the other and weighs them against one another; theology and ideology become two separate voices that the reader/believer must negotiate. Indeed, Weems, Brueggemann, and Baumann all approach Hosea in this way, disagreeing only in the relative weight to be given theology and ideology.

In all three approaches, theology remains in tension with ideological critique. To find theological value in Hosea, the reader must deny its problematic ideology (Brueggemann) or that ideology's ultimate weight (Weems). To read ideologically, for the sake of the abused, the reader must abandon Hosea in order to do responsible theology (Baumann). In none of these commentators does theological reflection follow from ideological critique.

The Medium Is the Message

Another way to talk about Hosea's marriage metaphor and the approaches of these commentators is by using the vocabulary of metaphor theory. Scholars of metaphor often distinguish between the vehicle of a metaphor (the medium by which a message is delivered) and its tenor (the message itself). In the case of Hosea, Israelite marriage is the vehicle of the metaphor while the author's claims about God and Israel are its tenor.

The linguist George Lakoff further claims that the vehicle of a metaphor always invokes a "frame."⁴⁰ By "frame," Lakoff means the conceptual framework that undergirds the vehicle. For example, to label response to terrorist activity as a "war on terror" implies that the rules of warfare are appropriate to combating terrorism. Lakoff's definition of "frame" is similar to what I have been calling "ideology." In Hosea, patriarchy (and specifically patriarchal marriage) is the frame invoked by the comparison of God's relation to Israel to that of a man and his wife.

According to language theorists, the vehicle and the tenor of a metaphor are inseparable. To change the vehicle is to change the meaning; and if we

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were to try to express a different meaning, we would need a new vehicle. According to Lakoff, a comparison is never value neutral; it always invokes a frame and the ideologies that support it.

Applying this language to the commentators discussed previously reveals the differences between them, as well as why their approaches fall short of full engagement with the problems of Hosea's metaphor.

Baumann

In arguing that Hosea's metaphor continues to support the values of male privilege, Baumann shares with Lakoff the understanding that any use of this metaphor, intentionally or not, supports the frame of patriarchy. Her argument that the metaphor is unusable for those committed to gender equality logically follows from this understanding.

When, however, at the end of her book Baumann suggests that we might consider God as friend, lover, and self-transforming clown,⁴¹ she attempts to hold on to the value of speaking of God in the language of human relationship while distancing herself from the hierarchy and violence of this particular metaphor. But, as metaphor theorists show, she simply substitutes one set of problems for another. First, the use of a new vehicle would change the tenor of Hosea's speech. To abandon the hierarchy of the image would take away Hosea's claim about Yahweh's power and change the nature of the pathos attributed to him.⁴² Second, any other metaphor for God will itself invoke a new frame. Images of God as friend or lover, advanced by Baumann and by theologians such as Sallie McFague,⁴³ may avoid the cultural assumption of hierarchy that is built into the God-as-husband metaphor, but, like all metaphors, they are colored by human experience. Many people have been betrayed by friends or abused by lovers, and in contemporary thinking both relationships are considered optional and nonbinding. All human relationships are complicated by the dynamics of power and human failings. All carry cultural and ideological weight. None is innocent or pure.

Given the complications of human metaphors for God, one might conclude that the best solution is to use nonhuman ones instead. After all, as noted in the introduction, the prophets describe Yahweh as maggot and rock, and the book of Psalms is filled with images of God as fortress, cup, and shield. But nonhuman metaphors for God are also problematic. Understandings of "nature" and objects are no less culturally encoded than are understandings of human relationships. Ideologies construe perceptions of "nature," imposing gender (e.g., construing cats, butterflies, "ladybugs," and cars as feminine) and isolating one aspect as the "essence" of an object (e.g., focusing on the hardness of a rock but not its tendency to erode or crash down a mountain).

But, more importantly, nonhuman metaphors for God lack the intimacy, the relationality that comes with human metaphors. From infancy to death, relationships (and/or lack of relationships) profoundly shape our sense of ourselves and our world. Christian theology's affirmation of the goodness of creation, including human creation in the image of God, as well as of the incarnation—the insistence that God took on flesh and interacted with others as a human—values the divine potential of human relationships. Indeed, the presupposition of Hosea's metaphor—and indeed of much of the Bible—is that our experience of human relationships can provide glimpses of the divine.

Metaphor theory also insists that no message can be communicated without the use of some vehicle. Because we cannot describe the infinite except through our own finite and limited language, all God-language is metaphorical, even the language that we don't usually view as such. As the analytic philosophers have shown, even simple statements such as "God sees everything" or "God knows everything" rely on attributing to a nonphysical deity physical organs and senses. Saying Hosea's message in a different way would simply bring with it a new frame. That frame may be more acceptable than the one used in Hosea, but it will not communicate in the same way.

Even more significant for many readers of the Bible, Baumann's decision to "just say no" to Hosea's metaphor leaves unanswered a major question: What then do I do with the Bible? Can I simply reject anything in the Bible that I dislike? Her solution does not offer any reason to read the book of Hosea, other than to critique it.

Brueggemann (and Yee)

In the language of metaphor theory, Brueggemann focuses on the tenor of the marriage metaphor while downplaying its vehicle. For him, the message of Hosea is so important that the problems of its vehicle cannot be allowed to override the truth it conveys.

A similar conclusion is reached by Gale Yee in *Poor Banished Children of Eve*. Yee argues that Hosea's metaphor was a powerful critique of economic oppression in eighth-century Israel, one that can become lost when too much attention is placed on the vehicle of the metaphor:

The regrettable result of employing a gendered trope for a socioeconomic critique of the *status quo* was that issues of class and colonialism became obscured by gender for later interpreters.⁴⁴

By treating the marriage metaphor as an unfortunate choice of comparison, a case of missing the forest for the trees, both Brueggemann and Yee underestimate the power of the vehicle to invoke the frame of patriarchy. The ideol-

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ogy that undergirds domestic abuse is so familiar, so real, so contemporary, that to gloss over it is an obscene thing to do—equivalent to overlooking how the value systems of racism or heterosexism expose themselves in the language many people speak. While it is true that the individuals who offhandedly comment, “That’s so gay” might not be consciously heterosexist, still the language only makes sense within such an ideological frame. Language matters; frames reveal our true values and reinforce them. Indeed, often the language that comes most naturally is that which is most shaped by cultural values.

Making the “honeymoon” of 2:14–20 the core of Hosea’s message, such as Brueggemann does, makes the “frame” of patriarchal marriage appear sweet and romantic—even though these words reflect only the husband’s perspective and even though, as domestic abuse education insists, the arrival of the honeymoon does not end violence but begins a new cycle of building tension. Unfortunately, this approach is encouraged by the Revised Common Lectionary when it lists Hos. 1:2–10 (or 1:1–11) as a reading for Year C and Hos. 2:14–20 for Year B. The Year C reading offers the establishment of Hosea’s metaphor and the Year B reading the “honeymoon”: missing from the lectionary is the bulk of Hos. 2, which makes the frame of domestic abuse most obvious.

When Hos. 2:14–20 is read apart from the rest of the chapter, the pathos of God masks the power of God. Such a selective reading makes the metaphor sound deceptively contemporary, even allowing a reader to imagine the marriage being described as a modern, egalitarian one rather than an ancient patriarchal one. It can even make the book appear less gender specific than it is: interpretations that focus only on unfaithfulness and hurt feelings suggest that any partner (male or female, gay or straight) could provide the image of a wounded God. As we have seen, however, altering the vehicle of the metaphor changes its message. Should the husband of Hosea become an equal partner with his wife, the book’s claim of God’s superiority to humans would disappear and the dangers of the violence of Hos. 2 would intensify. In Hosea’s formulation, hierarchy in the marital relationship explains and normalizes violent punishment for infidelity: only if a husband can properly strip, expose, and kill his wife can the threats of chapter 2 carry weight and can the Deity’s angry punishment of Israel be justified. In an egalitarian reformulation of the metaphor in which husbands and wives are equal partners, God’s punishment of Israel either would lose its justification or Israel would gain equal right to jealousy and abusive behavior. On the human side of the ideological dynamic, the metaphor would normalize the violent behavior of wives as well as that of husbands. Attempting to read Hosea through the lens of egalitarian rather than patriarchal marriage would not mitigate but intensify its problematic nature.

Weems

If Baumann rejects Hosea's language because of the danger of its vehicle and if Brueggemann and Yee embrace Hosea's tenor while sidestepping its vehicle, Weems can be described as both critical of the vehicle and appreciative of the tenor. Rather than providing a synthesis of the two positions, however, she actually treats vehicle and tenor as separate, perhaps irreconcilable, aspects of Hosea's metaphor. Throughout *Battered Love*, Weems insists on how dangerous Hosea's metaphor is, but ultimately she cannot let go of it. She counsels that we accept it with caution, fully aware of what we are getting.

Weems's approach, while understandable, leaves the reader in perhaps the most dangerous position of all: compelled to remain with a metaphor that continues, every time it is used, to reinforce an abusive frame. This position is hauntingly similar to that of the battered women that Weems describes in *I Asked for Intimacy*: while in moments of clarity they can remove themselves from their abusive partners, they eventually find the appeal of their abusers irresistible and are drawn back, again and again.⁴⁵ They, or at least part of them, refuse to believe that the way that the abuser acts provides a true measure of his character: they believe that while abuse may be the vehicle of his affections, the tenor of the man is quite different.

Conclusion

This experience of feeling torn between the good and the bad of the text may feel familiar to other readers of the Bible. How can a person like the Bible and at the same time admit that at times it can be downright horrible? Is there a way to step out into the chasm between appreciation and critique without crashing on the rocks below?

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Challenging Prophetic Metaphor

*Theology and Ideology
in the Prophets*

Julia M. O'Brien

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