

Chapter 4

God as (Abusing) Husband

In chapter 2, I explained the key role that the marriage metaphor of Hosea has played in the development of feminist critique of the Prophetic Books, and I offered Hosea as an example of the polarization of “love it” versus “hate it” responses. Because interpreters have encountered such difficulty in valuing Hosea while taking feminist critique seriously, I offer it as my first attempt at engaging prophetic metaphor. What value can come from allowing the feminist critique of Hos. 1–2 to inform the theological task? What can readers find life giving in ideological critique of the marriage metaphor?

As suggested in the previous chapter, these questions have ancient, contemporary, and theological dimensions.

Ancient Dimensions

Critique reveals that *patriarchy is not an incidental feature of this metaphor but rather its very core*. My introduction to the feminist critique of Hosea’s marriage metaphor in chapter 2 highlighted the pervasiveness of patriarchal ideology within the comparison. The discussion here reviews that exposition and goes beyond it, to show even more patriarchy in Hos. 1–2 than readers usually recognize.

This metaphor shares with the Old Testament as a whole the presumption that a man can and should control “his” women and children. Old Testament texts indicate that in ancient Israel, the oldest male member of a family (usually the father) was presumed to hold authority over the household—a unit tellingly referred to as the *bêt āb*, the “house of the father.” This man held the prerogative to decide where the family would live, whom the children would marry, and how problems facing the unit would be resolved. For a daughter, this meant that prior to her marriage she owed full obedience to her father.

After marriage, however, the daughter would reside with her husband's family and come under his authority.

Numerous biblical narratives reveal that women could influence family decisions in indirect ways, as when Rebekah aids Jacob in deceiving his father to order to procure the rights of the firstborn (Gen. 27) and when Tamar deceives Judah into fulfilling his family obligations to her (Gen. 38). These stories demonstrate, however, that women could only influence major decisions by trickery or by otherwise circumventing established rules. In Israel, the default position of power (if not always the realized one) belonged to the oldest male family member.

Interpreters of the Old Testament disagree about whether it treats women as property. On the one hand, women are given status as persons in their own right. As Tikva Frymer-Kensky outlines in her entry on "Deuteronomy" in the *Women's Bible Commentary*, the Ten Commandments include women in the religious requirements to keep Sabbath and to refrain from murder and theft; honor is due mothers as well as fathers.¹ Moreover, women's status may have varied in different periods of Israel's history. Carol Meyers and others have argued that women enjoyed more status in Israel's early period than during the monarchy, when landholding and power shifted from the family to the bureaucratic and militaristic state.²

Despite these caveats, however, few deny that in ancient Israel, as in other cultures of the ancient Near East, *rights to sex with a woman* were owned by the man in authority over her. Biblical law recognizes the right and the responsibility of the father to ensure that his daughter remains a virgin until marriage, and if she is raped, payment comes to him (Exod. 22:16–17). After marriage, rights to sex with a woman transfer to her husband; if she has sex with another man, both she and the offending man are to be put to death. Women in the ancient world were not considered free agents when it came to their sexual partners.

Given how the male-female relationship was configured and transacted in ancient Israel, calling the relationship described in Hos. 1–2 a "marriage" is a matter for debate. Not only did these ancient relationships not look like modern ones, but also there is no word in biblical Hebrew for "marriage"; instead, a man is said to "take" (*lqh*) or "rule over" (*b'l*) a woman. Whenever "marriage" or "marry" appears in an English translation of the Old Testament, it has been added by a translator. Similarly, the English translation "wife" reflects the Hebrew word *'išā*, which technically means "woman," and the word usually translated "husband" is *ba'al*, or "master."

Clearly, the relationships between a man and "his" woman in ancient Israel were not egalitarian matters. The woman owed sexual allegiance to her hus-

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band, who retained authority over her and their children. Men could have multiple sexual partners, as long as those women were not themselves the sexual property of other men, but women could not.

The difference in ancient Israel's rules for male and female sexuality also can be seen in the Old Testament usage of the word translated in the NRSV as "whore." Literally, the Hebrew root *znh* refers to a professional prostitute: it is the same term used to describe the activities of Tamar (Gen. 38) and Rahab (Josh. 2), and its prohibition is paralleled with that of a male prostitute in Deut. 23:18. By extension, however, *znh* refers to any promiscuous woman. In Deut. 22:21, for example, a young woman found not to be a virgin is called *znh*, and Ezek. 23:3 uses the term to accuse young women of promiscuous behavior. Isaiah 57:3, Jer. 3:8, and Hos. 4:13–14 place *znh* in parallelism with *n'p*, "commit adultery." In most of these cases, it seems, the term *znh* functions as a slur, much like the contemporary American usage of "slut"—a term that demeans women or men being compared to women.

These features are painfully evident in Hos. 1:2. Yahweh tells the prophet, "Go, take [*lqh*] to yourself a woman [*'išā*] of whoredom [a form of *znh*]" (my trans.). The prophet/God not only takes (*lqh*) the woman/Israel without her consent, but also alone chooses when to dissolve and when to resume their relationship. The man alone names the children and alone determines their fate. The NRSV translation of Hos. 2:19–20 describes Yahweh's relationship with Israel as "betrothal," but the Hebrew word in question (*'rs*) does not refer to the kind of romantic engagement that the English translation implies. The term literally means "to pay the bride-price for." When the word appears in Exod. 22:16, it is more accurately translated in the TNK translation than in the NRSV:

If a man seduces a virgin for whom the bride-price has not been paid, and lies with her, he must make her his wife by payment of a bride-price. (Exod. 22:15 TNK)

When a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged to be married, and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. (Exod. 22:16 NRSV)

Literally, the Hebrew of the first phase of Hos. 2:19 reads, "I will pay the bride-price for you for myself forever." The NRSV and other translations add "as a wife" to both verses.

As outlined in chapter 2, the man also assumes his right to punish his wife for infidelity. Even if the acts of violence in Hos. 2 are understood as verbal threats rather than actualized physical violence, the threats only take on power

because they appear *credible*. The threats of 2:1–13 make evident the patriarchal assumptions running not only through the establishment of the metaphor in chapter 1, but, more important, through the “honeymoon” phase of the relationship of 2:14–23. While in the new period of tenderness the husband may cease physical violence, he remains in control of their relationship and implicitly retains the right to punish in the future. The husband’s actions toward the woman in the “honeymoon” are not a change in his earlier behavior but an extension of it.

The patriarchy of Hos. 1–2 is not a minor blemish on an otherwise pure text nor a minor matter to be delegated to footnotes. Rather, the hierarchy built into the metaphor of (ancient) marriage provides the basis for the author’s comparison of the bond between God and Israel as that of a man who has taken a woman. The author seeks to convince readers that Israel owes Yahweh not only affection but also obedience, that Israel deserves punishment for attachments to other deities, and that after the punishment Yahweh might again choose Israel. The vehicle for those claims is a metaphor in which one party holds power and privilege over another, in which one stands as the unquestioned superior. In the world of this text, God and Israel are not equal partners in a mutually chosen relationship; neither are men and women.

The feminist demonstration that patriarchy remains inseparable from Hos. 1–2 has important implications for Christian teaching and preaching about this text. Particularly, it points to numerous dangers that arise from apparently good-hearted attempts to downplay or even “fix” the patriarchal ideology of Hosea. First and most obviously, such readings pass off selective readings of the text as “biblical.” Interpretations that point to some of what Hosea says but remain silent about its key features do not faithfully represent the biblical text but rather (even if unintentionally) grant biblical authority to other ideologies. Second, readings of Hosea that do not take its patriarchy seriously allow readers to ignore the very features of the metaphor chosen by the author to make his theological point. When Bowman’s sermon, for example, assumes that Hosea’s marriage is like his own,³ he misses the full import of the book’s claims about God: through this metaphor, the author underscores that God remains in control over Israel, that Israel owes Yahweh its allegiance and faithfulness, and that God’s physical punishment of Israel is justified. Changing the vehicle of the metaphor into that of modern, affectionally based, egalitarian marriage changes its message. Third, mentioning only the “positive” aspects of this text leaves readers insufficiently sensitive to how even the love in Hos. 2 is couched in patriarchal terms. Limiting the reader’s exposure to Hosea to God’s profession of love in 2:14–23, as does the Revised Common Lectionary for Year C, does not erase the patriarchy of Hos. 1–2 but instead

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allows it to pass as normal. Keeping invisible the violence of the beginning of the chapter serves to mask the patriarchy of the "honeymoon." Feminist critique of Hosea's marriage metaphor calls Christians to acknowledge the way that this biblical text and others were shaped by the world in which they were produced.

Contemporary Dimensions

Feminist critique of Hosea reveals the *patriarchal ideologies within readers*. Such critique underscores not only the deep-seated patriarchy within the world of the text but also, and perhaps even more important the powerful ways that patriarchal ideology influences readers. The ease with which readers accept the terms of Hosea's metaphor, as well as its continued appeal for those who attempt to resist it, reveal the family resemblance between ancient and modern ideologies of marriage.

As I explained earlier, feminists have argued that a reader must adopt the male perspective of Hos. 1–2 in order to evaluate positively the image of God that it presents. Reading *with* and *for* the male protagonist of the text makes it "work": readers accept his feelings as justified and his desire for revenge (even if not its actualization) as understandable. Readers consider a woman's choice of multiple partners as whoredom and her husband's willingness to forgive her as magnanimous only when they assent to the patriarchal assumptions on which the metaphor depends.

In over twenty years of teaching this text, I have rarely found a Christian who does *not* read Hosea in precisely this way. In the classroom and in churches, the majority of readers cannot see the patriarchy in the text until it is painstakingly pointed out to them. In encountering the feminist critique of Hosea, some are shocked not to have noticed these features before; but even more struggle to comprehend even the basic dynamics of patriarchal ideology in this text.

In my experience, although more women than men come to see the patriarchy in the text, the dividing line between the responses is not neatly drawn by gender. Some women defend the purity of Hosea as fervently as do some men, but with an added zing: "*I'm a woman, and this text doesn't bother me!*" Of course, several factors inform such reactions. Most Christian women as well as most Christian men accept the Bible as an authority for their lives and believe that it faithfully reveals God's own intentions for the world; especially for women who turn to the Bible for support against a sexist society, viewing a biblical text as working *against* their liberation is painful if not impossible.

Moreover, women as well as men react in different ways to the adjective with which I introduce the issues: the f-word, *feminism*. Feminism is so caricatured in our culture that few are willing to accept the label or align themselves with what they see as its negative evaluation of contemporary culture.

I do believe, however, that the most significant reason that women as well as men struggle to see Hosea as patriarchal is that all people internalize patriarchal ways of looking at the world. Although our culture often contrasts "men's perspectives" with "women's perspectives," most of us remain well aware that positions on social matters are not so easily identified with a single gender. For this reason, patriarchy is most accurately understood as an ideology; a set of rules; a way of thinking, feeling, and behaving into which both women and men are socialized. Both girls and boys learn early, usually before they can talk, how to sort people, clothes, toys, and jobs by "girl" or "boy," and to apply the appropriate rules to each. Girls also learn early to accept male perspectives as normative. Girls will watch "boy" TV shows and movies, while boys find more difficulty in identifying with female characters. Long before adolescence, girls learn not only to groom themselves to be admired by the male gaze but also to gaze at themselves in the same way, to evaluate their appearance as they believe men would evaluate them.

Socialization happens so early, so consistently, and sometimes so subtly that it usually remains unnoticed as such. In the case of all ideologies, the more that patriarchy remains under the radar, the more we believe that we act as free agents. What is learned best feels to us most normal: "I don't wear makeup to please men. It just makes me feel good about myself." "I know God doesn't have a gender, but it just doesn't feel right to call God a 'she.'"

Some women (I have been calling them feminists) resist patriarchal socialization, with varying levels of intensity; so do some men. Some women find nothing wrong with their socialization, see it as a minor factor in their lives, or disagree with my description of the process altogether; so do some men.

But awareness of socialization does not erase its influence. Most feminists acknowledge that they cannot escape the appeal of patriarchal images and literature. For example, Brenner concludes her discussion of pornoprophetics with this confession:

As a F[emale] reader, I can resist the fantasy [of pornography] by exposure, by criticism, by reflection. But within the present cultural system, I do so at my own peril. I was raised and educated to comply with that male fantasy and to adopt it as my very own. Like other F[emale] readers, I may deconstruct myself at times; the temptation to reciprocate this M[ale] fantasy, even to appropriate it, may still be there. Awareness helps, but the odds are against me.⁴

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The difficulty that some people have in seeing patriarchy in Hosea comes from their difficulty in seeing patriarchy in their own culture, and from their difficulty in acknowledging that their own "gut" responses are shaped by presumptions of male privilege. Most readers never question Hosea's right to punish Gomer and the children or question the character of a man who threatens to kill his wife for infidelity. That "of course" response indicates that patriarchal frames of marriage continue to pass as normal, even for those whose own relationships are more egalitarian.

One positive function that recognizing patriarchy in Hosea can have is to train readers to see patriarchy in the present. For many people, hearing familiar patterns of relationship called "sexist" or "abusive" invites a reconsideration of their own lives. It invites them, too, to reflect on the sheer power of patriarchal ideology—in their culture and in themselves. When the author of Hosea sought to convince ancient readers of the legitimacy of God's punishment of Israel, he found an easily usable cultural analogy: patriarchally framed marriage. Why does that analogy continue to be so effective for many people? Why, in the past and in the present, is gender such a highly effective means to describe hierarchies of power?

Engaging Hosea in light of feminist critique also reveals the degree to which interpreters' responses to Hos. 1–2 are driven by modern ideologies of romantic marriage. Having recognized the vast differences between the relationship described in Hos. 1–2 and that of contemporary marriage, readers are confronted with the question of why interpreters insist on reading Hosea as a modern tale of love, betrayal, and reunion.

I previously named several ways that contemporary interpreters have collapsed the difference between ancient and modern marriage. The trend, I suggested, is evident in the translation of the book. English translators render the Hebrew word *'išâ* as "wife" even though its most basic meaning is "woman"; they add "as a wife" to God's command to Hosea to "take a woman"; and they use vocabulary such as "engage" and "betroth" to describe the ancient practice of sealing an agreement with a bride-price. This tendency to translate in "marriage-friendly" ways runs throughout modern English translators of the Old Testament. In a careful though not exhaustive study of English translations, I found that the more recent a translation is, the more likely it is to add "in marriage" or "as wife" to the Hebrew phrase "to take a woman." For example, the NRSV translation (1989) uses some form of the English word "marry" (including "marrying," "marries," "married," "marriage," "marriages") 92 times in its translation of the Old Testament, while the earlier RSV (1952) only lists 64 occurrences. Some form of "marry" appears in the KJV (1611) 20 times, but in the NIV (1984) 134 times.

A selective reading of the metaphor, as described above, also makes the relationship of Hos. 1–2 appear more like a modern marriage. The priority given to the wooing at the end of chapter 2, such as in the choice of verses in the Revised Common Lectionary and in Brueggemann's focus on the theological importance of these verses, allows the romantic dimensions of the relationship to become the "meaning" of the metaphor, to the exclusion of its other, more central features. Ideological critique challenges readers to consider the contemporary factors that go into making Hos. 1–2 into a romance.

It would be difficult to overstate just how strongly notions of romance factor in contemporary understandings of marriage in the United States. This is a society that insists that people should only marry if they are in love and coaches men on how to make romantic proposals of marriage. Most Americans believe, too, that romance within marriage can and should be lifelong. Should the spark of romance go out, magazine articles, TV shows, the Internet, couples seminars, flower shops, and whole malls sell remedies to rekindle the flame. Partners who do not love one another any more, who are "stuck in a loveless marriage," are seen as prime candidates for divorce or at least pity. Given how romance saturated contemporary pictures of marriage are, it is little wonder that readers are taken by—and actually help create—Hosea's expression of love. Despite all that Hosea's metaphor involves, seeing only love in Hosea becomes easy, given what many of us are taught about marriage from an early age.

Viewing Hos. 1–2 through the lens of romance also allows the modern reader to minimize the threats of violence in chapter 2 as "natural" anger in response to marital infidelity. While feminist critique suggests that the two halves of chapter 2—the threats and the honeymoon—are two dimensions of male control, "hopeless romantics" understand the two divine emotions as two dimensions of romance: because God/the prophet loves Israel/Gomer, he erupts in anger when she betrays him with another. The threats arise from the same passion as the coos of love.

Such a depiction, of course, follows particular gender scripts. The man responds to betrayal with rage, although the woman's feelings about being abandoned by her lovers and stripped by her husband receive no attention. The man does not respond with other "understandable" emotions: sadness, grief, or depression in response to loss. Readers socialized into patriarchal ideologies of marriage and romance do not register surprise at these features of the text because they have learned to expect men to lash out in anger against affronts to their honor and refusals of their affections.

This "gendered sympathy" runs throughout contemporary movies and literature as well. In the 2002 film *Unfaithful*, a woman's affair with another man

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baffles and then enrages her husband. The husband (played by Richard Gere) tracks down her lover, initially out of curiosity, but in a moment of rage kills his rival. In a powerful scene, the husband confronts his wife (played by Diane Lane) and confesses, "I wanted to kill you." Although she is initially appalled by his confession, she comes to consider his act of violence and his threat against her as acts of love. The couple becomes closer, and the movie closes with them driving away together. The husband's angry violence has been rewarded by greater intimacy with his wife. A key difference between this film and Hosea is instructive. While in *Unfaithful* the husband murders his wife's lover in blind rage, in Hosea the wife alone bears the brunt of her husband's anger. Yet the same contemporary scripts regarding infidelity, anger, and violence allow *Unfaithful* and Hosea to find a ready audience.

It is the "hopeless romantics" who most need the ideological critique of Hosea. By insisting that we read the metaphor as a whole and as wholly patriarchal, feminist criticism forces readers to see how they allow the romance they impute to Hosea to obscure violence and domination—both in this text and in contemporary human relationships. It reminds readers of things they know but tend to forget when the language turns to love: that perpetrators of spousal battering often blame their actions on their wives: "She made me so angry that I hit her"; and that the jealousy which sounds flattering on the surface can quickly turn predatory and terrifying. Many people know, or have at least read about, women who have been threatened or killed by jealous husbands or boyfriends. If domestic violence statistics are accurate, one out of every three women has experienced some form of domestic abuse. Why, then, it is so easy to forget these realities when the language turns romantic?

Unfortunately, the patriarchal assumptions of Hosea's metaphor are so familiar to many of us that they remain invisible. Most readers accept, without recognition, the male privilege on which the comparison of Yahweh's relationship with Israel to that of a husband with his wife depends. Because we know the scripts so well, we feel Yahweh's pain, we sympathize with his plight, we feel the pathos of the situation. Patriarchy is the "fishbowl" in which we swim.⁵

Feminist criticism offers an opportunity to look at the structures of our thinking. Why are modern notions of romantic marriage so powerful that readers will find them in Hosea, despite their absence in the text? Why are readers so insistent on finding stories in which love triumphs over all and relationships weather the storms of betrayal and anger? Why do they like to see men woo women, to be a little jealous, maybe to exert just a little force? Why are these scripts so powerful that they can fuel not only the wedding industry but also the reading of biblical texts?

Feminists have shown that when readers collapse the distance between ancient and modern relationships in order to give biblical sanction to their own constructs, they do so at the price of ignoring the violent, hierarchical, patriarchal parts of the Bible—and of their own culture. Acknowledging both the similarities and the differences between the contemporary world and that of Hosea forces readers to acknowledge that the patriarchy of Hosea is not only in the *text*: it is often deeply embedded within *readers* as well. Feminist critique cautions us to pay the most attention to texts that evoke our sympathies and inflame our passions, for they may teach us the most about the ideological scripts that we follow while thinking we are free to feel and act as we choose.

Theological Dimensions

In my understanding, all of these reflections have theological dimensions. Clearer understanding of the nature of the Bible, as well as of self and culture, directly informs an understanding of the world and the human condition. I do point specifically, however, to two aspects of this discussion that I believe have particular bearing on theological discourse and reflection.

First, reflection on the feminist critique of Hosea reveals the extent to which patriarchy is not an incidental feature of the Bible, of Christian tradition, or of the believer's response to either. As I have demonstrated, the patriarchal ideology of this text runs far deeper than the fact that it talks about men and that it calls God "he." In Hosea, God is not simply grammatically male but also identified with a particular human male and with particular male behaviors, attitudes, and emotions. The starkness of patriarchy in Hosea is valuable in calling the Christian church to acknowledge that the patriarchy of our tradition is not something easily remedied. No simple shift of pronouns for God will alter this consistent picture of God as enjoying male prerogatives of power.

Feminist critique of Hosea also underscores that this pervasive patriarchy is dangerous. Christians who truly believe in the equality of human beings before God, who believe that all are created in God's image, are called to respond to Hosea's metaphor of God as a husband with more than the spoken affirmation that it is "the word of the Lord." They are called to acknowledge that exclusive masculine language for God, intentionally or not, reinforces male privilege in the human realm. Hosea painfully shows us that the masculinity of God is intertwined with human dynamics of power.

As we have seen, however, the matter goes far beyond the substitution of pronouns for God. Simply switching masculine pronouns to feminine ones in Hosea or comparing God to a wife and Israel to an erring husband would not

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address the problematic nature of this text: how one partner owns another; how children are treated; how anger justifies violence; how happy endings resolve all problems. The patriarchy of Hosea, and of the Bible as a whole, is not a layer of meaning that can be stripped away. Rather, feminist critique calls the church to rethink its understanding and use of the Bible. By forcing Christians to acknowledge the humanness of the Bible, the way in which it is shaped by both ancient and modern culture, such critique offers an opportunity to talk about the power of the Bible to inform human life rather than the Bible as a authoritative set of rules.

This discussion also suggests, however, that only addressing the Bible's patriarchy is insufficient. Because patriarchy also is internalized within readers, it must be addressed in culture as well. Just as recognizing patriarchy within the Bible might make patriarchy in culture more evident, so might greater awareness of the forms that patriarchy takes in their own cultures and psyches allow Christians to see something important, if perhaps painful, about their traditional texts.

Ideological critique challenges Christians to take responsibility for all God language, both the language inherited from tradition (language that feels right and comfortable) and also any new language forged in attempts to respond faithfully to new insights and sensitivities. What does our God-talk imply about others? About the world? What ideologies does it support? As we have seen, metaphors of human relationships come with particular risks, because they carry the most culturally specific ideologies; we find it easy, and dangerous, to equate human and divine prerogatives.

Feminist analysis of Hosea's metaphor also challenges attempts to accept God's love but not God's power. I have argued that God's courtship language at the end of chapter 2 does not imply weakness or even vulnerability on God's part. As in domestic violence situations, the cessation of violence does not mean that the dynamics of power within the relationship have changed; even in his apparent kindness, the man remains in control of the woman and of the relationship. This critique cautions Christians from claiming as "biblical" any attempt to separate divine love from divine power or from pitting the two natures of God against one another. Feminist critique argues instead that Hosea testifies not to a deity whose love and power remain in a paradoxical, tense relationship but to one whose choice to act in love remains an exercise of full divine sovereignty.

Reading the romantic ending of Hos. 2 in light of its threat-filled beginning also raises the question of how God's power interacts with human will. In Hosea, Gomer is not allowed to say "no" to her husband: if she forsakes him, he punishes her, and even when he speaks tenderly to her she is not free to

decline his attentions. Does the same hold true for God? Is it possible to say “no” to God? Is God’s power, even when couched in terms of love, ultimately inescapable? In light of ideological critique, Hosea says as much (or more) about divine right and control as it does about divine compassion. Why, then, is love all we can see?

In its ancient context, Hosea’s metaphor may have served as a retrospective explanation for the fall of the northern kingdom. Although the dating of the book is much debated, I have suggested elsewhere that the first nine of the twelve Minor Prophets may have been edited in the Persian period in order to provide an introduction to Zechariah.⁶ Zechariah 1:2–6 explains the book’s outlook in Israel’s and Judah’s past:

“The LORD was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, Thus says the LORD of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. Be not like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, Return from your evil ways and your evil deeds.’ But they would not hear or heed me, says the LORD. Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live for ever? But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers? So they repented and said, As the LORD of hosts purposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so has he dealt with us.” (RSV)

According to Zechariah, earlier prophets had called for the ancestors’ repentance, but to no avail. In punishment, Yahweh destroyed Israel and Judah. Zechariah’s own audience in the Persian period is warned not to be like their forefathers. If they return to Yahweh, Yahweh will return to them.

When read from a Persian vantage point, the book of Hosea explains the reason for Israel’s fall. Despite Hosea’s prophecy, the people failed to repent, so that Yahweh declared that “Samaria will bear her guilt” (Hos. 13:16). Yet the close of the book offers promise, using vocabulary that prefigures Zechariah’s message: just as the call of Hos. 14:1 for the people to return to Yahweh is met by the report in Hos. 14:4 that Yahweh’s anger *did* turn from them, so Yahweh promises in Zech. 1:3: “Return to me and I will return to you.”

In such an interpretation, Hosea’s marriage metaphor goes beyond a dry explanation that Yahweh’s punishment of Israel was deserved to offer a compelling depiction of Israel as Yahweh’s bride. Because Yahweh had taken Israel as his own, he had every right to react as any human husband might: to erupt in anger and to exact punishment. The use of the marriage metaphor would make the perception of divine punishment more palatable—and less permanent. If the fall of Israel (and later Judah) had been the reaction of a

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divine shamed husband, then Hosea's promises of future closeness might soon materialize. If indeed such thinking was at work in the production or editing of Hosea, it suggests that ancient writers (and perhaps modern Christians) need ways of believing that our experiences of suffering have some role in the plan of a good God and that they can end. Hosea allows ancient and modern readers to face suffering in full confidence of God's control and care.

While such theological reasoning might be attractive, feminist critique calls Christians to recognize (in Hosea and in other theological formulations) the potential danger in such thinking. As the analogy with domestic battering reveals, such thinking implicitly portrays God as an abuser to be feared, even in moments of care.

Conclusion

I have tried to model a way of engaging Hosea, and the Bible in general, that does not start—or stop—with the question of what it means to accept the text as authoritative. Rather, I have attempted to show that sustained, honest engagement with both the ancient and modern dimensions of this metaphor can encourage reflection on issues that profoundly matter to human lives, including lives of faith. In the chapters that follow, I suggest how other metaphors in the Prophetic Books can do the same.

Challenging Prophetic Metaphor

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