aging the bigamy of Philip of Hesse and in failing to challenge his conscience to cling to the clearer teachings of the Bible rather than its more obscure examples. That's not just a modern perspective; it's also the view of Luther's contemporaries, and possibly the view of Luther and Bucer in hindsight. Unfortunately, Luther himself also allowed — in his theory and through his practice — that faults could be indulged in leaders that were intolerable in ordinary folk. He saw it in his own day, even as he saw it portrayed in the Bible. Modern society, too, is well acquainted with (if not fascinated by) the vices of the rich and famous. But this is not the pattern of biblical ethics to which we are called. In the genealogies of Jesus, the patriarchs fit in nicely next to other men and women of checkered reputation. Special deference to them, or to anyone of power or prestige, is unwarranted — as the best commentators of the past have illustrated in their own successes, as well as through their failings.

Chapter Five

Gomer and Hosea

Does God Approve of Wife Abuse?

Although women are scarcely prominent in the many books that make up the latter prophets, their few cameo appearances and the prophets' regular use of feminine imagery and metaphors have met with protests from many contemporary readers. Their objections are not surprising. At issue is not the *quantity* of women represented, but the *quality* of that representation. In a word, it seems that the prophets never mention women, whether real or metaphorical, except to serve as villains and bad examples.

Of all the women in the prophets, none is better known than Gomer, the wife of the prophet Hosea. Her story is easy to outline, if only because there are so few details. According to the book's opening lines, Hosea's first oracle was directed to himself: "Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry, for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the LORD" (1:2). Gomer was that "wife of harlotry," who bore to Hosea a son, a daughter, and another son — prophetically named Jezreel, Not-pitied, and Not-my-people. All three names signal impending judgment against Israel, even as the oracle in 1:10–2:1 goes on to anticipate a time when a repentant nation will again be prosperous, pitied, and worthy to be called God's people.[1] Gomer, on the other hand, continues to figure through much of the rest of the book as the unnamed woman and mother who is guilty of harlotry and adultery — a figure of Israel's politi-

cal, moral, and religious infidelities. And yet if Gomer/Israel is destined for punishment, she is also the target of God's affectionate and vigorous courtship.

The book of Hosea is a study in contrasts, if not divine mood swings. In Hosea, God is a jealous God. He is a husband who cannot suffer a rival and who berates his wife's foolishness. Yet he is also an affectionate lover: "Behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her" (2:14). At times the prophet's words depict an agonized inner dialogue, a kind of divine bipolarity:

> How can I give you up, Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! . . . My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. (11:8-9)

Echoes of Hosea can also be heard in the New Testament, often in unexpected places, but usually recalling God's love or deliverance. Matthew 2:15 sees Jesus as a fulfillment of Hosea 11:1, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and *out of Egypt I called my son*." Exulting over Christ's resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:55, Paul alludes to Hosea 13:14: "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" It's clear in Hosea that God is loyal to his people, vehemently so, even when they're as unfaithful as Gomer. Why, then, do some find the portrait of Gomer so very troubling?

Gomer and Her Wicked Sisters

One clue might be found in the Revised Common Lectionary — or in what it omits. Naturally, the lectionary has to leave something out of every book, and Hosea is not exactly brief. But in view of the lectionary's dislike of controversy, it's predictable that its selections should skip from the promise of restoration in 1:10 to the "wooing" of Israel in 2:14. Lost are the intervening details of Gomer's dalliances and the punishments to come: "lest I strip her naked and make her as in the day she was born . . . . I will uncover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers."

Although the metaphor of the unfaithful wife was crafted by the biblical author to indict the apostasy of *both* sexes in Israel, many readers today

find such metaphors less than reassuring about the character of God. Hosea is not the only prophet to vilify Israel as an adulteress and to extol God as her nemesis. A few examples from two other prophets will sharpen the problem. In Ezekiel 16, for instance, the prophet rages on and on against the idolatry of Israel:

- You trusted in your beauty, and played the harlot because of your renown, and lavished your harlotries on any passer-by. . . . Yet you were not like a harlot, because you scorned hire. Adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband! Men give gifts to all harlots; but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from every side for your harlotries. (vv. 15, 31-33)
- Wherefore, O harlot, hear the word of the LORD: . . . I will gather all your lovers, with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you loathed . . . and will uncover your nakedness. . . . They shall stone you and cut you to pieces. . . . They shall burn your houses and execute judgments upon you in the sight of many women; I will make you stop playing the harlot, and you shall also give hire no more. So will I satisfy my fury on you, and my jealousy shall depart from you; I will be calm, and will no more be angry. (vv. 35, 37, 40-42)

In Ezekiel 23, the prophet goes on to indict Samaria, Israel's "sister," for equally abominable idolatry, including child sacrifice:

- She increased her harlotry, remembering . . . when she played the harlot in the land of Egypt and doted upon her paramours there, whose members were like those of asses, and whose issue was like that of horses. Thus you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when the Egyptians handled your bosom and pressed your young breasts. (vv. 19-21)
- I will direct my indignation against you, that they may deal with you in fury. They shall cut off your nose and your ears, and your survivors shall fall by the sword. They shall seize your sons and your daughters, and your survivors shall be devoured by fire. They shall also strip you of your clothes and take away your fine jewels. (vv. 25-26)
- Do not men now commit adultery when they practice harlotry with her? For they have gone in to her, as men go in to a harlot . . . But righteous men shall pass judgment on them with the sentence of adulter-

esses, and with the sentence of women that shed blood; because they are adulteresses, and blood is upon their hands. . . . Thus will I put an end to lewdness in the land, that all women may take warning. (vv. 43-45, 48)

In Jeremiah 2:23-24, Israel is likened not to a promiscuous woman, but even worse: to a female camel or wild ass in heat

> How can you say, "I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Baals"? Look at your way in the valley; know what you have done — a restive young camel interlacing her tracks, a wild ass used to the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind! Who can restrain her lust? None who seek her need weary themselves; in her month they will find her.

Once again, all these are lines that users of the lectionary will never read, ponder, or proclaim. The lectionary editors would probably classify them simply as "harsh." But in the last quarter-century, some feminist critics have had another analysis. For them, these passages are not just harsh; they are also *pornographic*.

Reading through the Eyes of Gomer

To label parts of the Bible as pornographic is to use "fighting words" — at least for those who want to resist the feminist reading. Nonetheless, before we look at Gomer in the history of interpretation, we need to note the current controversy over the Bible's representation of women (and, metaphorically, of Israel) as harlots or adulteresses.

Possibly the earliest protest against the Bible's use of such imagery appeared in a 1985 essay, "Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea."[2] The original argument has been amplified by later writers and complicated by quarrels over what exactly constitutes pornography, but the central assertion has remained unchanged. Despite the fact that Hosea and other prophets employ the image of the sexually unfaithful *wife* as a metaphor for *people or cities* who have been politically or religiously unfaithful to God, this metaphor (it is alleged) looks and functions a lot like pornography. Feminists decry pornography for degrading and humiliating women, for presenting women as objects, for assuming women are made

for male subjection and domination, and for expecting women to internalize a perspective that serves only the male and treats a male-constructed fiction as if it were a universal norm or objective reality.[3] When the prophets brand Israel as an unfaithful wife or harlot, destined to be stripped naked, shamed and humiliated, mutilated, exiled or killed, they may intend to bring Israel to repentance. But these graphic woes seem to "luxuriate obscenely in every detail of a woman's humiliation."[4] Even Robert Carroll — who contests the underlying feminist analysis — grants that in such texts, "the fantasy about mothers, wives, sisters and daughters has run riot" and is "out of control."[5]

The accusation that the prophets were deliberately pornographic is, of course, impossible to adjudicate. The term itself is modern, and proving authorial intent is tricky. On the other hand, few would contest the truism that the prophets were men of their time, conditioned by the attitudes of the day: Israel was, after all, a male-dominated society. But if we shift our focus from the author's *intent* to the text's *effect*, the feminist protest becomes more understandable. Explaining the rhetoric of prophetic speech, Renita Weems says that "the first task of a prophet is to arrest the imagination of one's audience."

> The most useful function of this kind of language is its highly emotive impact. For what was the case in ancient Israel remains the case in modern times: talk about sex and sexuality tends to provoke, rouse, humiliate, and captivate people. Such language certainly arrests the imagination.[6]

Nonetheless, she continues, we must also "consider the consequences of such imagery" — especially those that may be *unintended*.

In Weems's analysis, the Bible's image of the unfaithful wife has wonderful potential. It captures God's love for a wayward people, and it often denounces injustice, abuse of power, social and moral decay. Yet it is also "a metaphor gone awry."[7] Metaphors are powerful means by which values are formed or cemented; they are sometimes our "first lessons in prejudice, bigotry, [and] stereotyping."[8] One could add that the imagery of metaphors can live in our subconsciousness, often undetected but still powerful. In the prophets, they invite the audience "to imagine plausible . . . ways of treating women."[9]

The problem, as Cheryl Exum puts it, is "the ideology that informs

this imagery." Women's bodies are viewed as "the property of men." Subliminally, men are taught to exert authority; women, to submit. "Because most readers are likely to read *with* the text's ideology and privilege God, the abusive husband's behavior is not open to question."[10] Some find a troubling ambiguity even in the happy ending that the book forecasts for Israel: "The reader who is caught up in this joyous new betrothal and renewed covenant overlooks the fact that this joyous reconciliation between God and Israel follows the exact pattern that battered wives know so well,"[11] namely, "periods of mistreatment . . followed by intervals of kindness and generosity" — a strategy that "reinforces the wife's dependence on the husband" only so that "the cycle of abuse" can begin again.[12] Other feminist writers are reluctant to see Hosea as an ideal husband. Gomer, after all, "is denied the right to name [her children], is appropriated as a symbol, and is literally stripped, trapped, and pressed into conformity."[13]

Such observations and generalizations are, of course, contested. For Carroll, it seems sufficient to note that metaphors, even metaphorical women, are only metaphors; so in Ezekiel 23, the narrative isn't about two women, it is only about two cities — Jerusalem and Samaria.[14] For Raymond Ortland, these images do not "insinuate a negative judgment upon the moral character of women as opposed to men, or seek to manipulate opinion against women, as opposed to men."[15] At fault for him is not the Bible but feminist readings of it, which "[take] offense where none is given." For him, a hermeneutic of suspicion is "simply unfair," especially when it reads the prophets' figurative language — itself intrinsically ambiguous and risky — in light of implications and entailments the prophet never intended.[16]

Carroll and Ortland nicely sketch the impasse from the other side. While feminists usually recognize that declamations against the unfaithful metaphorical wife do indict the real women *and men* of Israel,[17] the problem of the metaphor's *unintended* effects remains. It is not enough for many readers and hearers to be told, upon hearing such shocking and brutal language, that the rape or torture just portrayed was (no worries!) "just" a metaphor — particularly when the real brutality suffered by some parishioners instantly upstages whatever the biblical point may have been.[18]

Is there a way between these opposing points of view, some sort of middle path? Is there anything to be learned, positive or negative, from the history of the interpretation of Gomer and Hosea?

With Gomer in the School of the Commentators

The history of the interpretation of Hosea 1–3 has been sketched in part by John Farthing, who reports the views of many patristic and Reformation writers as digested in the 1558 lectures of Jerome Zanchi, and partly also by Yvonne Sherwood, who gives more attention to rabbinic exegesis as well as to commentaries of the last century or so.[19] We'll draw on both surveys and occasionally supplement them with other, less accessible material.[20]

The issue that preoccupies most precritical commentators, and later commentators as well, is the scandal of a prophet marrying a harlot. Commentators generally adhere to one of three views.[21]

The Literal-Historical View: Real Marriage, Real Harlotry

We usually think of the church fathers as more allegorically inclined and credit the Reformers as champions of literal and historical exegesis. Not so here. The most "literal" reading of the marriage of Hosea and Gomer is also one of the earliest, and can be discovered in the anti-heretical writings of Irenaeus. His larger point is typological: Hosea's marriage prefigured Christ's union with a fornicating people. Christ sanctifies these sinners, just as Paul declares that "an unbelieving wife is sanctified by the believing husband" (1 Corinthians 7:14). But in making that point, he also characterizes Hosea's marriage as an *action* that stands in contrast to mere visions or words.[22] The same typology is argued by Augustine, who labors to defend a host of Old Testament figures against the slanders of Faustus. Augustine reminds him that Jesus reckoned harlots ahead of the Jews of his day in entering the kingdom of heaven. Significantly, Augustine also assumes Gomer repented of her fornication and became a chaste wife.[23] Jerome, however, falls in this group only with qualification. In the preface of his commentary on Hosea, he insists that the prophet's narrative of his marriage was an allegory, because "God commands nothing but what is honorable." Nonetheless, Jerome's later remarks suggest that though he'd prefer to think Gomer was merely part of a prophetic vision, reading the story as history is also an option.[24]

The literal-historical view was embraced by many commentators. Cornelius à Lapide lists Basil the Great, Cyril of Alexandria, Theodoret, Hugh of St. Victor, Aquinas, Denis, Arias Montanus, and himself.[25] Mat-

thew Poole also joins this group, though not without some waffling.[26] And, as Zanchi and others report, this view has its weaknesses as well as strengths. In its favor is the rather obvious point that recounting a vision would scarcely have had as dramatic an impact on Hosea's contemporaries as an actual marriage with a prostitute. On the other hand, as Jerome said, surely God would not command anyone, especially a prophet, to violate the moral law. After all, Leviticus 21:7 forbids priests from marrying harlots, and 1 Corinthians 6:16 is aghast at the thought of a Christian joined to a harlot. Of course, as Zanchi points out, God is above the law — an argument frequently invoked to excuse the patriarchs' misdeeds. In any case, Irenaeus and Augustine found ways to blunt most of the objections: they protected Hosea's reputation (and God's) simply by presuming Gomer's repentance and insisting on the sanctifying effect of her marriage to the godly prophet.[27]

The Visionary-Metaphorical View: No Marriage, Allegorical Harlotry[28]

A second view has already been glimpsed in Jerome: Hosea didn't marry a prostitute; he merely had a vision (or told a parable or allegory) in which he did so. Though Zanchi doesn't name the adherents of this view, except for *Targum Jonathan*, he claims that "almost all the Hebrews" and "many of the most learned among us" embrace this view.[29] Of the rabbis best known to Christian interpreters of the day, Abraham Ibn Ezra reduces Gomer to an allegory, while Maimonides casts her in a dream sequence. *Targum Jonathan*, an ancient Aramaic paraphrase, also employs allegory, but Gomer is stricken from Hosea 1:2; likewise, the text of 3:1 is changed from "Go again, love a woman who is beloved of a paramour and is an adulteress," to "Go and speak a prophecy concerning the house of Israel, *who are like* a woman loved by her husband, but she betrays him."[30] The neutralization of offense is obvious in the Targum, as it is in Rashi, who alters the text to read not "Go, marry," but "Go, teach." Such ameliorations seem driven by Ibn Ezra's concern: "It is inconceivable that God should command one to take a harlot and conceive children of harlotry."[31]

Visionary readings were common among Christian interpreters, too, just as Zanchi said. Zanchi himself was one, and he tried to paraphrase what Hosea might have said to the people of Israel: "The Lord appeared to

me in a vision and commanded me to take to myself a harlot. . . . You know, of course, that I did not actually do this."[32] Zanchi doesn't name the Christian adherents of this view, but Lapide counts the followers of Origen, Haymo, Isidore of Seville, Paul of Burgos, and François Vatable; Poole puts Oecolampadius on the list; and a glance at seventeenth-century commentaries in English quickly adds three more Protestants.[33] Few of these are household names anymore, but their arguments all converge: a literal marriage with a prostitute would defile the prophet, discredit his ministry, conflict with other biblical laws and morality, unfairly defame his children, and (in a pragmatic turn) delay the urgent indictment of Israel — assuming, that is, that Hosea couldn't begin preaching until Gomer bore and weaned three children! The rebuttals from the advocates of a "real" marriage almost always argue, among other things, that God is above the law. But equally insightful is the observation (noted by Poole) that it is hardly less dishonorable to imagine or envision an immoral action than it would be to enact such a deed.

The Rhetorical View: Real Marriage, Staged or Parabolic Harlotry

A third view derives from Luther and Calvin and looks a lot like the visionary view. Luther sets forth his interpretation in a few words:

> Don't take her whoredom in the active sense, but understand that his wife allowed herself to be so called, along with her children and husband, on account of the people and in the presence of the people: "I am *called* a whore — and my husband, a whore's knave — because you all *are* whores and knaves." See how great a cross they endured in those shameful names for the sake of the word of God![34]

For Luther, the dramatic marriage with a harlot is openly fictitious. So also Calvin, who thinks Hosea received no vision, only a straightforward command to set forth a similitude or a parable. Like Zanchi, he can imagine what Hosea said: "The Lord places me here as on a stage, to make known to you that I have married a wife, a wife habituated to adulteries and whoredoms, and that I have begotten children by her." Of course, Calvin adds, everyone knew Hosea had done "no such thing" but was speaking

only for effect [35] Although Luther's account is unusual for extending some empathy to both the prophet and his wife, as they pretended to merit undeserved scorn, Calvin barely admits that Hosea might have a real wife or children at all.[36] And if it's hard to know why Luther adopted his view (partly because we have only student notes to go on),[37] Calvin's rationale is the common one: to protect the dignity of the prophetic office.[38] At the end of the day, there is little practical difference between these last two views, the visionary and the rhetorical

"Spiritual" Readings of Hosea: Mysteries and Morals

In addition to these three strategies for explaining (or explaining away) the prophet's startling marriage with a prostitute, precritical commentators found other layers in the text. Allegorically, Hosea fulfills a twofold Christological type.[39] First, just as Hosea was joined to an unfaithful and sinful wife, so was Christ united in the incarnation with our adulterous and sinful flesh Second, Hosea's marriage also foreshadowed the marriage between Christ and the church, particularly the gentile church Like our sinful flesh, the church is an image of something unholy that is transformed by this unlikely union with the divine. All the biblical marital imagery, from the Song of Solomon to Ephesians 5, can be summoned to reinforce the point.

Protestants drew the same connections, despite their usual avoidance of allegory, for the book of Hosea is amply represented in the New Testament Romans 9:25-26, for instance, sees the church of the gentiles as fulfilling the prophecy of Hosea 1:10: "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'my beloved.' And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God'" The promises made to and about Israel, as well as to and about Gomer, are fulfilled in the grafting-in of the gentiles — whose ungodliness, idolatry, and infidelity correspond to Gomer's and Israel's harlotries. In other words, the church that aspires to be the bride of Ephesians 5:25-30, "without spot or wrinkle," is by definition also a church in need of being cleansed and sanctified by Christ.

Whether allegorical or moral or typological, these "spiritual" readings are significant because they enable at least traces of Gomer and her story to

survive elsewhere in the canon as well as in the realm of Christian piety and pastoral practice. Indeed, Gomer's wanderings and chastisement reminded many that they, too, have deserved God's enmity. More on this in a moment

Mixed Results and Second Thoughts

In the case of Hagar (Chapter One), there were precritical commentators to be found who were clearly capable of reading the Bible through her eyes. Gomer seems to find no such champion. Should we therefore conclude that Gomer is despised by these traditional readers, or that they would countenance such harsh treatment of a harlot or even an unfaithful wife? To answer that question, we must look at the commitments that precritical commentators bring to the playing field

Although they would never have thought to put it like this, precritical commentators are committed to remain "within" the text — unlike many historical critics and feminist readers, who do not hesitate to challenge the authority and autonomy of texts from outside. One could also say that traditional interpreters read for *coherence* The Bible is a providential communiqué, a saving word from a sovereign God, so it must make sense in its main outlines. These readers often looked to guides such as the rule of faith, the rule of love, and the analogy of faith — three reference points from which the unknown territory of divine revelation could be mapped by triangulating from the basic teachings of the apostles, the great commandments to love God and one's neighbor, and the likelihood that the unclear parts of Scripture will be illumined by a careful reading of the clearer parts [40]

One way or another, most of these readers thought the command for Hosea to marry a prostitute fell among the unclear parts. Consequently, many embarked on a search for a clearer passage from elsewhere in the Bible that would clear things up. Here's where dissent entered the ranks of our precritical commentators, resulting in some truly mixed exegetical results. Which biblical text or teaching best explains the unprecedented affair of Gomer and Hosea? There are two answers, each with its own logic, perspective, and agenda. One finds clarity in analogous doctrines, the other in analogous narratives.

A Doctrinal Analogy: Protecting the Ministry

Although some readers thought Hosea's marriage looked a lot like other startling commands (as when Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac) or like other bizarre prophetic actions (as when Isaiah wandered around naked for three years), many were not inclined to invoke *any* unusual *narrative* as a means of clarifying Hosea. Indeed, some doubted that Isaiah really did walk around naked, even as they worried that some might foolishly imitate Abraham's offering of Isaac. (As we saw in Chapter Two, Jephthah may have been just such an instance of foolish imitation when he offered up his daughter.)

Instead, these readers found Hosea clarified by biblical *precepts,* such as the law that forbade priests to marry a prostitute, or Paul's demand that bishops be the husband of one wife. How much more should prophets set a good example! The conclusion was obvious: the prophet did not really marry such a woman, because such a marriage would have violated a divine command. The account must therefore be understood as a vision or a parable.

If such readers were accused of protecting male interests in this text, they would surely say that the issue is not protecting *men,* but protecting the *ministry,* protecting the dignity of the word of God by defending the integrity of God's ministers. That's a good thing to do, but the year this chapter was written regularly saw headlines decrying clergy sex abuse scandals — scandalous in no small part because these men had often been sheltered from investigation. Yet when ministers are mostly male, protecting ministers or the ministry can easily *look* just like protecting men.

One could imagine there being evidence to the contrary, some sign that Gomer is more than a scapegoat. In our look at Hagar in the history of exegesis, we saw how Reformation commentators described Hagar and Sarah as "womanish" or petty, yet dropped these gendered stereotypes as Hagar's character developed.[41] In Gomer's case, the results are different, perhaps because the evidence is so thin. Although Hosea 2 presents a few words attributed to her, the speech is a rhetorical device, not a quotation. Gomer as a character scarcely appears in the book at all, and when she does, it is strictly in her role as a prostitute and a symbol of a particular kind of vice — idolatry, actually — not as Everywoman. Unfortunately, even Gomer's status as a *symbol* of the unfaithful nation decays in the hands of some commentators. Though most understand that it is the *nation* that is being threatened, not Gomer the symbol, some draw a line from Gomer to women in general. In a long excursus on the moral of Hosea's marriage, Lapide stresses the importance of a wife's character: "The vices of parents, especially mothers, are transferred to their children"[42] Thus Solomon's polygamy may have derived from his adulterous mother — a prejudicial account of Bathsheba, to say the least!

As we assess this preoccupation with the prophet's dignity at Gomer's expense, it does not help that the minds of so many commentators seem to have been long made up. Surely something prodigious is signaled when so many take evasive action against the Bible's literal wording. John Downame, a prominent Puritan of the seventeenth century, illustrates something of the contradiction when he faults Catholic expositors for reading Hosea's marriage as factual. Their mistake, he generalizes, is to interpret things that were actually done as if they were allegories, but to read biblical allegories and parables as if they actually happened, "though innumerable absurdities follow thereupon." Thus, in the case of Hosea's marriage, "the litterall sense . . implieth a grosse absurditie, and contradicteth other places of Scripture, . . therefore it is to be understood typically and as a parable."[43] Ironically, this Protestant commentator echoes here the exact reasoning Origen offered for his own allegorizing — Origen, the epitome of capricious "Catholic" exegesis, who was held in such contempt on this score by Luther and Calvin. But how, one must ask, does Downame *know* such a marriage is absurd? Given Jesus' notorious association with prostitutes and sinners, and given Augustine's well-known emendation (that Gomer repented), one wonders why the prophet needs such protection — unless it is to protect these commentators' and pastors' sense of propriety against a God who is not always polite or predictable.

A Narrative Analogy: God Is No Respecter of Dignity, Including His Own

A commitment to the coherence of the Bible could lead in other directions, too. Sometimes commentators — some of them the same writers just described! — found Hosea's marriage illumined not by particular commands but by the grand narrative of the history of salvation. The "spiritual" readings noted earlier, in which Gomer images our own spiritual infidelity, are noteworthy not because they indicate a modern sensitiv-

ity to gender issues, but because they provide a snapshot of precritical commentators attempting to indwell language that is "gendered" against them, so to speak. Gomer's story was not always applied as a chronicle of someone else's failings — the Jews, say, or the "Papists." Sometimes Gomer's story was read as the story of the infidelities of Christians and their church — *our* story.

Farthing's study of Zanchi, like this chapter, was carried out in dialogue with feminist exegesis. "As a man of the sixteenth century, Zanchi could hardly have engaged in a radical feminist criticism of Hosea's gender-stereotyped metaphor," Farthing admits. But he properly calls attention to the ease with which Zanchi embraces Gomer's role as his own. Indeed, the trials and chastisement that Hosea sets for Gomer in the second chapter are read by Zanchi as an expression of God's "severe mercy" toward the elect. Only those specially loved by God are so tried and so constrained by sufferings, lest they be abandoned to the futility of their own pleasures.[44] Other precritical commentators write in similar fashion: they direct their rebuke not against women as such, but against the women *and men* of Israel, and even more urgently against their own complacent churches and complacent selves. Calvin's account of the painful threats against Gomer in Hosea 2 is yet another case in point: having described in detail God's provision and Israel's ingratitude, he ends with a prayer that puts himself and his hearers in the place of the prostitute and penitent: "Almighty God, . . . *we* have by our ingratitude renounced your great benefits, and you know the defection and unfaithfulness of which *we* are all guilty and for which you have justly rejected *us* . . ."[45]

Nothing that Zanchi or Calvin wrote will alter how Hosea's harsh rhetoric may be heard today, and it may well be true that identifying with Gomer in this way does more to ratify the male prerogative to chastise and control women than to challenge it. Nonetheless, one may still learn something about the complex *intention* of some precritical readers, and their commitment to read Gomer's story more with an eye to rescue and redemption — hers, Israel's, and ours.

Like all readers, precritical commentators were more than just the sum of their exegetical opinions. It's easy to see that they did not read Gomer's story from a feminist perspective, nor could they have. But that doesn't tell us everything we would like to know about the issues Gomer's story raises for us. Sometimes these writers mustered a surprising advocacy for women. In looking at Jephthah's daughter, we saw Reformation exegetes

protest the notion that a daughter's life is at her father's disposal. In the same way, neither does a wife belong absolutely to her husband, and there are times when she may have to invoke a version of Acts 5:29 and "obey God rather than" her husband.[46] If the *rhetoric* of a wife as the husband's possession survived in their day, the *reality* was clearly in flux, for many Protestant readers had rediscovered an "egalitarian" side of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5. As pastors and teachers who often wielded civic influence, they used Paul to argue against the common double standard whereby husbands might divorce an unfaithful partner but wives could not. Calvin lobbied his city council for fifteen years before the double standard was finally taken off the books in Geneva.[47]

There is a similar "back story" to be weighed regarding spousal abuse. Medieval and early modern families are sometimes caricatured as unrestrained in matters of corporal punishment, but sixteenth-century marriages were probably far more companionable.[48] Certainly the forms of penance divinely visited upon Israel in the person of Gomer were not embraced as household advice, particularly by the Reformers. The Protestant church in Lyons followed the lead of Geneva by instituting a "consistory" that looked into the behavior of everyone, including Christian spouses. In response to the new rules, one man reportedly lamented that he wasn't allowed to beat his wife anymore.[49] Calvin himself, though not much interested in the character of Gomer, could still display his awareness of how the world works. When women turn to prostitution, he writes, it's often the case that they blame their husbands for "too much severity" or unkindness. Calvin's point is that this wasn't true of Gomer, who (the text says) was beloved by her husband. But *our* point should be to notice that, wherever Calvin got his information, he knew that a cold or abusive marriage can drive a wife to devastating extremes.[50]

Returning Gomer to the Pulpit

Gomer was a prostitute married to a prophet who alternately shamed her in public and courted her with kindness. Despite the foul deeds of Israel that Gomer is intended to symbolize, and despite an ostensibly happy ending, the graphic details can make Gomer's story a hard one to tell. The same may be said of similar passages in Ezekiel and Jeremiah. What should we do with biblical texts like these?

At the end of her pithy essay, Cheryl Exum discusses how to deal with texts that use sexual abuse as a model of divine action. She urges us to pay attention to the different ways such texts may be heard by male and female readers; to recognize that "prophetic pornography" has an undeniable, detrimental impact on readers; and to read such texts "resistantly," looking for alternative and suppressed perspectives within the text. To be sure, Exum's interest is not in supporting biblical authority; for her, the Bible is "an important part of our cultural heritage" but shouldn't be privileged on that account.[51] Across the divide, Raymond Ortlund offers a different prescription. For him, the feminist critique is part of the postmodern drift toward "nihilistic hermeneutics" and "radical subjectivism." But "a misogynist reading of the biblical text takes offense where none is given," he writes. "The abuse of women is real, . . . [but] it is not true that the metaphor of the harlot is 'verbal violence' toward women." The prophet's message is true just as it stands, though one can recognize this only if one is born again and illumined by the Holy Spirit.[52]

Once again, these are the two polarized readerships of our own day. Earlier in this chapter I asked if there were any middle ground between these two positions that might be indicated or illuminated by the history of this text's interpretation. Here are some concluding theses that point in that direction.

1. ALL READERS LONG TO FIX THE STORY OF GOMER AND HOSEA. *The precritical commentators we have looked at most often want to fix the story by protecting the prophet. Were we to look at later accounts, we would see that other readers fixed Gomer instead. Our own use of this text must be aware of the ways other readers have been offended by it.*

We wouldn't know this from exegesis alone. Rather, it's in the melodrama of how precritical commentators maneuver to avoid or change Gomer and protect the dignity and credibility of the prophet that we see how easily readers can impose their will upon the text. Any amelioration simply confirms Sherwood's assertion that even traditional interpreters read resistantly when they "resist elements of the text that displease them."[53] Her next question (and it's not impertinent) is, *whose ideology will be favored* by such resistance or amelioration? If the story of Gomer makes us uncomfortable, if we have a hard time imagining the vivid de-

tails of her life told from the pulpit, we are obliged to ask ourselves why. Why do we want to protect the prophet from the taint of a harlot, when God commanded this union? Why might we wish the story could be toned down? Who or what interest might we be protecting? And how will others hear this tale?

2. A HERMENEUTIC OF SUSPICION IS NOT ALWAYS A BAD THING. *As a tool for understanding the implications of a text, suspicion can and should cut two ways. The Bible was written by human beings who were also sinners, so we shouldn't be surprised if it displays some of the limitations and ambiguities of human language — even as the Holy Spirit can work through the medium of that language. By the same token, every reader of the Bible is also a sinner and ought to fall under suspicion as prone to misuse, distort, and twist Scripture.*

Does it damage our understanding of the authority and inspiration of the Bible if we acknowledge that the human authors of Scripture were finite and sinful? I think not. Instead, such a recognition can prevent us from thinking of the Bible as a magic book, filled with formulas that brook no ambiguity and no exceptions. (Indeed, this book examines the very texts that seem most ambiguous and exceptional!) Suspicion is also important, however, insofar as it leads to a recognition that, as sinners, we too are inclined to misread and misapply the Bible. Why should we be surprised if feminist critics accuse Christian interpreters of reading the Bible in a way that perpetuates their own privileged status — whether as European, educated, emancipated, or male? How could sinners easily do otherwise? There is a great opportunity to be had, delivered by the harshest feminist critics, to turn suspicion upon ourselves and ask how we may have filtered out aspects of Scripture, or aspects of our society's or congregation's realities, that displease us. Naturally, suspicion will run the other way, too, as it ought; but humility, like charity, should begin at home.

3. WE MUST DISTINGUISH THE BIBLE'S INTENTION FROM ITS EFFECT. *Traditional Christian theology has always known that God accommodates revelation to human capacity. In like manner, our proclamation of Scripture will be effective only if accommodated to the aptitude and receptivity of our hearers.*

However true it may be, as Ortlund writes, that the truth of Scripture can be recognized only through the inward working of the Holy Spirit, the "scandal" of the gospel ought to be enough on its own, without needlessly adding other offenses by the way we read or proclaim Scripture. In other words, inspired and authoritative words from the Bible can still have unintended consequences for various readers or hearers. Preachers are obligated to know their audiences and to try to remove every obstacle. It's not enough simply to blame the hearer for misperceiving the text's intention or to tell her to "get over it," particularly when the Bible's forms of speech are or have become inflammatory. The graphic descriptions in Hosea and other prophets were surely intended to shock the men and women of Israel, but they can also inflict collateral damage, so to speak, on some hearers today.

A similar case could be made with respect to descriptions of "the Jews," say, in the Gospel of John. Writing at the end of the first century, John the evangelist could scarcely have intended or foreseen the eventual persecution of Jews by Christians throughout European history. But John's innocent intention is not enough to cancel out the way such sharp rhetoric is heard by Jews today, even when nothing is added to the words of John's Gospel. Some recent versions of the Bible have attempted to counteract the anti-Semitic potential of such texts by translating "the Jews" as "the Jewish leaders."[54] That's a strategy that ought to instruct us here as well. It takes nothing away from the intention of an authoritative scripture when we recognize, in the course of preparing and delivering a sermon or lesson on this text, that the vehement language of the prophet will raise painful issues for some of our hearers.

4. WE MUST READ HOSEA AND GOMER DIALECTICALLY. *We musn't lose sight of the prophet's intended meaning, with its promises and threats. Neither should we lose sight of the text's unintended effects, especially its potential misuse as a precedent or model for the denigration or abuse of women.*

This is a lesson gleaned also from our consideration of the misdeeds of the patriarchs. We might grant, as did some precritical commentators, that the patriarchs' dubious actions — their lying or polygamy — might have expressed great faith or good intentions. But we would probably hasten to add, also with many precritical commentators, that these same actions offer no precedent for contemporary readers or hearers. The promises held forth by Hosea's oracles as a testimony to God's inextinguishable love are further canonized by the New Testament and should be cherished by all. Conversely, the threats uttered against Gomer and Israel and us are also deserving of a sober appreciation: God is God, the one who gives life and takes it away. That can be both good news and bad. We ought to cultivate the tendency of precritical commentators to read themselves into the story of Gomer, directing an appropriate suspicion against themselves as having any fidelity or righteousness worthy of their Christian calling.

However, we are also justified — indeed, mandated — to wonder and worry about the effects of the prophet's charged and gendered rhetoric. One justification comes from the blind spots of many precritical commentators, who fretted about how their congregations or readers would be affected if they thought one of God's prophets got away with fornication (their description, not mine). Yet they did not think to ask what other prejudicial models might be hidden in the book of Hosea, despite the fact that they would have been opposed to domestic violence and even took steps, during the Reformation, to address this social ill. If patristic, medieval, and Reformation writers strike us as a bit naive with respect to the pervasiveness of domestic violence, we today have no excuse for remaining so. We must see this other dimension of the prophet's words, granting the distinction between intention and effect, then name abuse as the sin it is.

Reading the Bible with the Dead

What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis
That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone

John L. Thompson

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