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Prophetic Pornography

If God is male, then the male is God.

Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*

What is an essentially simple act of identification when the reader of the story is male becomes a tangle of contradictions when the reader is female.

Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader*

Feminist criticism has made us more aware of the problem of the prevalence of violence against women in the Bible, from mass violence against anonymous women—as in cases of war where we frequently find the command to destroy completely entire cities, including women and children (e.g., Deut. 2.34; 7.1-5; Josh. 6.21; 8.24-25; Judg. 21.10-14; 1 Sam. 15.3) and where the rape or humiliation of captive women is taken for granted (Judg. 5.30; Lam. 5.11; Amos 4.2-3; 7.17)—to individual cases, such as the rape, murder, and dismemberment of the Levite's wife in Judges 19; the rapes of Dinah (Gen. 34), Tamar (2 Sam. 13), and ten of David's wives (2 Sam. 16.21-22); the abduction of the dancers at Shiloh (Judg. 21.19-23); the sexual appropriation and later expulsion of Hagar (Gen. 16; 21); the slaughter of Cozbi the Midianite (Num. 25). And so on.

It is not the intention of this chapter to chronicle instances of biblical violence against women. Rather I want to examine a particularly pernicious form of biblical violence against women where the perpetrator is not a collective, such as an army plundering cities, nor particular 'evil men' but the deity himself: sexual violence where God appears as the subject and the object of his abuse is personified Israel/Judah/Jerusalem.¹ The fact that this is metaphorical violence does not

1. I use the term 'his' for God since God is a character in these texts who is male identified, and I capitalize 'God' as though it were a proper name when referring to this character. Foreign cities or nations personified as women are also sexually abused

make it less criminal. Indeed, it is extremely injurious: because God is the subject, we—that is, female as well as male readers—are expected to sympathize with the divine perspective against the (personified) woman. The examples of biblical sexual violence discussed below are illustrative and representative rather than comprehensive. All of them come from the prophetic books and the book of Lamentations, where this particular kind of imagery has its locus. (What this says about prophecy and the prophets in general is a larger ethical issue.)

In dealing with the ethical problems raised by passages in which a male deity is pictured as sexually abusing a female victim, we cannot confine ourselves to the issue of gender bias in representation, which we can describe and account for as the product of an ancient patriarchal society where the subordinate position of women was taken for granted. We also need to consider gender bias in interpretation. The kinds of questions I raised in Chapter 1 about our responses when faced with the exposure of the female body for our literary and visual consumption need to be raised here in particular. How should we respond to these offensive prophetic texts, and what is our responsibility as readers and consumers of these violent images? As was the case with the textual and visual representations of Bathsheba's body,

by God; e.g., Nineveh in Nahum 3.5-6; Babylon in Isa. 47.1-3 (cf. 23.13-18); Edom in Lam. 4.21-22. Because in these cases the accused woman is not God's wife and there is no covenant to give him rights of ownership over her body, they raise a different set of issues from those discussed here. In some cases, the city/woman's sexuality is deliberately construed as a threat to the (male) god's male-identified people, for whose seduction she is blamed. Others represent a(n insulting) feminization of Israel's enemies, upon whom retaliation can be enjoyed and described in a sexually degrading manner. These passages share the fear of and fascination with female sexuality that motivates the passages discussed in this chapter. On the use of sexual imagery to describe military conquest in the Hebrew Bible, see Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "'You May Enjoy the Spoil of Your Enemies': Rape as a Biblical Metaphor for War", *Semeia* 61 (1993), pp. 59-75; Pamela Gordon and Harold C. Washington, 'Rape as a Military Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible', in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets* (ed. Athalya Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible, 8; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 308-25. Gordon and Washington deal specifically with the image of the conquered city as a raped woman; so also, F. Rachel Magdalene, 'Ancient Near Eastern Treaty-Curses and the Ultimate Texts of Terror: A Study of the Language of Divine Sexual Abuse in the Prophetic Corpus', in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, pp. 326-52, who, while deploring its influence on contemporary readers, sheds helpful light on the ancient Near Eastern background of the rape metaphor.

these prophetic diatribes make claims upon their readers, and their claims will be experienced differently by female and male readers. Male readers (if the commentators are any example; see below) do not find it difficult to identify with the divine perspective portrayed in these texts and thus to defend a righteous and long-suffering God for punishing a wayward and headstrong nation. Female readers, on the other hand, 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.² On the other hand, by definition we are identified with the object that elicits scorn and abuse. As I observed in Bathsheba's case, this involves acceptance if not of guilt, then at least of the indictment of our sex that these texts represent.

Gender Bias in Representation

These texts contain shocking and scandalizing language. Not surprisingly, most translations tone them down. Many terms, because they are rare or because their sexual meaning is obscure or only allusive, are difficult to translate. Pinning down specific meanings for rare words, however, is not crucial for our understanding of these passages, for their misogynistic import is clear enough.³ By way of analogy, we have only to think of the power of our own language to convey sexual innuendo and to give common words vulgar connotations to

2. See Fetterley, 'Palpable Designs', and the discussion of the position of the female reader/spectator in Chapter 1 above.

3. *Contra* Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), pp. 134, 180. Though Carroll recognizes the ideological bias of prophetic polemic and the pornographic (a term he uses) nature of this material, he cautions (p. 180) that 'biblical condemnation of sexual activity, whether real or metaphorical, is a balanced matter of condemning male as well as female behaviour (epitomized in Hos. 4.14)'. He makes similar claims in 'Desire under the Terebinths: On Pornographic Representation in the Prophets—A Response', in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, pp. 275-307. To say, as Carroll does (*Jeremiah*, p. 134) that 'Without knowing the psychological make-up of the biblical writers it is not possible to evaluate the degree to which their writings may be characterized as misogynistic or otherwise' seems to me to be inquiring after the author's intention (conscious or subconscious). I am more interested in the effect on the reader, and I experience this material as defamatory, insulting, and, ultimately, misogynistic. For further discussion of these issues, see below.

recognize that the semantic field of many of these terms is broader than any one particular lexical meaning.

The first to employ the husband-wife metaphor for God's relation to his people, Hosea uses his marriage to Gomer, 'a wife of harlotry', to illustrate God's covenantal dealings with an idolatrous Israel (prominent in chs. 1-3, the harlotry theme runs through the whole book).⁴ In ch. 2, the indictment of the unfaithful woman slips into an indictment of the land personified as a harlot, whom God threatens to strip naked and slay with thirst (v. 3). After a description of her shameful behavior with her lovers and his response, God describes how he will publicly humiliate her.

9[11] Therefore I will take back
my grain in its time,
and my new wine in its season;
and I will snatch away my wool and my flax,
which were to cover her genitals.⁵
10[12] Now I will expose her genitals⁶
in the sight of her lovers
and no one shall rescue her from my hand.

It is important to recognize that the point of view here is male. Hosea describes the nation's unfaithfulness in terms of unrestrained female sexual freedom. The woman's decision to pursue other lovers—in other words, her control of her own body—which is threatening, is visualized as rampant promiscuity, which is not tolerated. Given the carefully circumscribed social position of women in ancient Israel, it is hard to imagine a real woman getting away with such free and open behavior. I find it difficult therefore to see the bizarre exaggerated

4. For a radically new and different way of looking at what is going on in Hosea 1-3 and a trenchant critique of scholarly responses to these chapters, see Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*.

5. The word *'ena* is a euphemism for genitals; cf. Gen. 9.22-23; on the relation of vv. 9 and 10 [Heb. 11 and 12], see the discussion in Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea* (Anchor Bible, 24; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), pp. 246-48.

6. The word I translate 'genitals' here is *nabhiu*, a hapax. For this translation, see Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea* (trans. G. Stansell; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), pp. 31, 37 n. 52. Andersen and Freedman (*Hosea*, p. 248) dispute the meaning of the Akkadian cognate cited by Wolff. They note, however, that something concrete is meant by the image and conclude that it is 'likely that the woman is to have her naked body put on display as obscene'.

sexual appetite described here as anything other than a male fantasy of female desire, a fantasy born out of fear of female sexuality and fascination with it. The punishment for sexual 'transgression' or 'wantonness' is sexual abuse, which is also crudely fantasized in terms that conjure up the atrocities inflicted upon women prisoners of war. It is the male's job to restrain the female's freedom/wantonness and to punish the woman whose behavior brings dishonor upon him.⁷ God is the wronged party here; he is male-identified and portrayed as the abusive husband. Sexual abuse is presented as justified by the woman's guilt.

Isaiah too calls Jerusalem a harlot (1.21; cf. 57.3-13). Language of sexual humiliation similar to Hosea's appears in Isa. 3.16-24, where the object of God's sexual abuse is at first real women, the women of Zion (Jerusalem). The imagery in this passage is fluid,⁸ and by v. 25 the daughters of Zion have become Zion herself.

¹⁶Because the daughters of Zion are haughty
and walk with outstretched necks,
glancing provocatively with their eyes,
tripping along as they go,
rattling their bangles with their feet,
¹⁷the Lord will make bald
the heads of the daughters of Zion,
and the Lord will bare their cunts.⁹

What exactly is these women's guilt? It appears that humiliation is punishment for pride and the possession of luxury items (described and stripped away in vv. 18-23). But where did the women get this finery in the first place? From their own economic endeavors, or

7. See the discussion in Gale A. Yee, 'Hosea', in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 197-98.

8. Cf. Susan Ackerman, 'Isaiah', in Newsom and Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary*, p. 162: 'Indeed, the identification of women, in particular the women of Jerusalem/Zion, with Jerusalem/Zion itself was made so facetiously that a prophet could slip almost without notice from describing one to the other'.

9. The meaning of v. 17 is obscure and my translation conjectural. The word *pet* in 1 Kgs 7.50 refers to the sockets in which the door pivots turned (BDB, p. 834); assuming the word refers to a hollow place in which something turns, I take it as an obscene reference to the woman's vagina (cf. RSV, 'the Lord will lay bare their secret parts'); an alternative reading is 'the Lord will lay bare their foreheads'. On the difficulties, see the commentators.

from their husbands and fathers? 'The flamboyant behaviour of the women attracted the prophet's attention and indignation, when contrasted with the abject poverty that existed in the city', observes R.E. Clements.¹⁰ But surely there must be more to their guilt than this, so Clements does what biblical commentators typically do when no clear cause for divine punishment suggests itself—he surmises that the problem lies with an improper religious attitude: 'Trust in human beauty could signify a lack of regard for God'.¹¹ Can behavior be the cause of poverty? Otto Kaiser apparently thinks so:

The more extravagant they are, the more they lead the men on into illegal profiteering at the expense of those who are socially weaker. In various ways, either by their own attitude to the ordinary man in the street, or by the consequences for the economic behaviour of their husbands, they are undermining the internal unity and health of the people of the covenant. They are judged not because they adorn themselves, but because they break down the order of the people of God through their whole attitude.¹²

Not only are women to blame for the crimes of men, in Kaiser's view the breakdown of the entire social fabric can be attributed to these women's attitude!

Not what androcentric ideology considers wanton behavior but simply what it suspects as glancing provocatively or 'ogling' is sufficient to bring the most vile abuse upon these women. At whom are they glancing provocatively, and why is it threatening? The female gaze is postulated in order to be condemned, while readers are invited to assume the text's male gaze at the women's genitalia. The intrusive textual gaze remains fixed upon the female body and its humiliation in the following verses, where the images are resolved in a picture of Zion as a ravaged woman.

10. R.E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 50.

11. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 51.

12. Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12* (trans. R.A. Wilson; Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 48; similarly, G.G.D. Kilpatrick, 'Exposition to the Book of Isaiah', in *The Interpreter's Bible*, V (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), pp. 191-92: 'It may not be as obvious, but it is equally true, that a degenerate womanhood can corrupt a nation... To a degree seldom realized, the moral quality of womanhood determines the character of society. These are the mothers of men, they set the ideals of men and, by what they are, either inspire or corrupt their sons.'

²⁴ Instead of perfume there will be stench, and instead of a belt, a rope, and instead of well-set hair, baldness, and instead of a rich robe, a girding of sackcloth.

¹³

²⁵ Your men will fall by the sword and your heroes in battle.

²⁶ And her entrances will lament and mourn, ravaged she will sit upon the ground.

Like his prophetic predecessors, Jeremiah also refers to Israel's unfaithfulness in terms of illicit female sexual activity (e.g., 4.30; 22.20-23; and 2.33-3.20, where she is even said to have taught wicked women her ways, 2.33). The irrationally jealous husband imagines that his wife will have sex with anyone.¹⁴ Jer. 2.23-24 masks male fear of and fascination with female desire by crudely caricaturing the woman as a young camel or wild donkey in heat.¹⁵ In Jer. 13.22, when Jerusalem questions her harsh treatment by her lord, she is told:

It is for the greatness of your iniquity that your skirts are lifted up and your genitals¹⁶ are treated violently.

13. The Masoretic text lacks 'shame'; restoring *bšt* with 1QIs^a. The Septuagint and Vulgate lack the stichos.

14. Gracia Fay Ellwood (*Batter My Heart* [Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 282; Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1988], pp. 10-11) observes that this is a trait God shares with the battering husband.

15. I am not convinced that the actual mating behavior of camels need inform the metaphor (William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986], p. 100). For discussion of the pornographic nature of this passage, see Athalya Brenner, 'On "Jeremiah" and the Poetics of (Prophetic?) Pornography', in Athalya Brenner and Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Biblical Interpretation Series, 1; Leiden: Brill, 1993), pp. 177-93.

16. Hebrew *'aqebyik* is literally, 'your heels'; like Hebrew *'aglam*, 'feet', it can be a euphemism for genitals; see Carroll, *Jeremiah*, p. 303; Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, p. 414. Taking *'aqeb* in the sense of 'hinder-part, rear' (cf. BDB, p. 784), Magdalene, 'Ancient Near Eastern Treaty-Curses', pp. 328-29 and n. 4, translates 'buttocks', yielding an equally plausible, and violent, meaning. She observes, '...any violence to the buttocks because of their location may be considered sexual violence even if there is no penetration' (p. 329 n. 4).

It is the woman's fault; abuse is deserved. Jerusalem will be raped by Babylon (13.20-27), and God not only endorses it, he participates in the attack.

And I too will lift up your skirts over your face,¹⁷
and your genitals will be seen (v. 26).

Since God has seen her 'adulteries', 'neighings' (another reference to female lust as insatiable) and 'lewd harlotries', it is presented as fitting that he should repay her in kind by exposing her genitals for all to see (as in the Latin *putenda*, the Hebrew word *qelonek*, 'disgrace, dishonor', expresses the typical view of the female sex organs as shameful).

In Ezekiel we meet the strongest, most abusive language. Ezekiel 16 presents Jerusalem as a founding who grows up to become God's unfaithful wife.¹⁸ Because she has given herself to her lovers, God will assemble all her former lovers and expose her naked body to their view (vv. 35-38), after which they will be given free rein to abuse her.

³⁹I will give you into their hand
and they will throw down your mound
and break down your high places.

They will strip off your clothes
and take the ornaments of your beauty
and leave you stark naked.

⁴⁰They will summon a crowd against you,
and they will stone you with stones
and cut you to pieces¹⁹ with their swords.

17. Literally, 'I will strip off your skirts over your face'. Carroll (*Jeremiah*, p. 303) suggests that the use of euphemisms in the passage 'may conceal an obscene practice of exposing women by drawing their legs over their heads in order to uncover their vulvas completely'.

18. See the discussion of this chapter by Mary E. Shields ('Ezekiel 16: Body Rhetoric and Gender', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, forthcoming), who, in contrast to the usual interpretation, sees no signs of divine tenderness in this text. Shields argues convincingly that the text attributes only desire, not love, to God. Jerusalem is completely dependent on God, who provides everything for her ('but never forgot that it was his property', Ellwood, *Batter My Heart*, p. 12) and who, in his anger, strips everything away.

19. Julie Galambush (*Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife* [Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series, 130; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992], pp. 67, 71) suggests that the hapax *biq* might best be understood in terms of the violent phallic image of splitting the woman open by slicing her up the middle.

The prophet compares the treatment of the woman Jerusalem to the way women who commit adultery are judged (v. 38), and thus provides an implicit warning to women in general, a warning that will be made explicit in ch. 23. The punishment for adultery is death. Here the woman is raped (symbolized by the throwing down of the mound and breaking of high places)²⁰ and stripped naked before she is stoned to death. But this extreme abuse, apparently, is not enough, and so the woman is dismembered in order to satisfy the divine husband's wrath ('so I will satisfy my fury upon you', v. 42). Female sexuality, whose free expression is so offensive, is mutilated and its threat thereby diffused.²¹ Having vented his anger on his victim, the abuser will feel better: 'I will be calm and will not be angry any more' (v. 42). The woman, of course, since she is metaphorical, will not be dead. She will live to be abused again.

And so we come to Ezekiel 23, the most pornographic example of divine violence, where the sisters Samaria and Jerusalem become God's wives (a violation of the law in Lev. 18.18). Before graphically describing the punishment that the jealous husband inflicts on his wives for voraciously chasing after other men, the male author seems to take pleasure in picturing the sexual attentions pressed upon them by 'desirable young men' (vv. 12, 23): the handling of their breasts and their defilement by their lovers' lust. He betrays a fascination with sexual prowess and an envy of other (foreign) men's endowment, fantasizing his rivals with penises the size of asses' penises and ejaculations like those of stallions.

The prophet takes advantage of two occasions to go into the sordid details of sexual abuse, for the same punishment befalls both sisters. One of God's wives, the Northern Kingdom, dies as a result of abuse. God threatens his other wife with the same treatment. Just as he gave Samaria over to men who violated her by exposing her naked body to view and then killed her (vv. 9-10), so he will rouse against Jerusalem the lovers she has spurned (vv. 22-35).

20. In 16.24 and 31 the terms *gab* (mound) and *ramah* (high place) refer to the places the woman/city built for prostitution/illicit worship. I see double-entendre in v. 39, with the destruction of these places represented as rape. Vv. 24, 25, and 31 read singular, 'height' or 'high place', and the Septuagint, Vulgate, and some Hebrew manuscripts read the singular here in v. 39.

21. The classic biblical example of the dictum, 'If the female body scares you, cut it up!', is Judges 19; see Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 170-201.

²⁵I will direct my jealousy against you that they may deal with you in fury.

They will cut off your nose and your ears...

²⁶They will strip off your clothes and take the ornaments of your beauty...

²⁸I am delivering you into the hand of those you hate,

into the hand of those from whom your desire has turned away.

²⁹They shall deal with you in hatred

and take all you have acquired,

and leave you stark naked,

so that your unfaithful genitalia²² may be exposed.

God's anger at the woman will fuel the anger of her former lovers. She will suffer mutilation at their hands and her naked body will be exposed. In her misery and humiliation, she will be mocked and laughed at (v. 32). Finally God calls for a crowd to be summoned against the adulterous sisters to stone them, and hack them to pieces with their swords (vv. 46-47), so that, again, we have both the stoning and the mutilation we witnessed in Ezekiel 16. To bring home the lesson, the fate of the personified cities has a moral for all women, 'that all women may take warning and not commit lewdness as you have done' (v. 48). By detailing the sexual abuse of an 'unfaithful' wife, the text appeals to female fear of male violence in order to keep female sexuality in check.

In this sampling of texts we can discover some disturbing common and repeated features. One is scapegoating women. It is the woman's fault that she is sexually abused because she asked for it by deliberately flaunting her husband's will (control) and thereby antagonizing him. Sexual sin is punished sexually in the most degrading way. Related to this is the portrayal of the woman as solely responsible for the success of the relationship. The husband shares none of the blame and deserves our sympathy as the wronged party. 'God suffers under Israel's deceitful love affair', says Hans Walter Wolff.²³ But what about the woman's suffering? Even if God does suffer (and his suffering is not physical, like the woman's), that two wrongs do not make a right is a simple ethical principle. But this is what we have in these texts.

Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel present us with the abusive husband's version of events. The woman's version, her point of view, is not represented; she is called upon to accept her abuser's accusations

²² Following a suggestion of Galambush (*Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*, p. 76); the Hebrew reads literally, 'the nakedness of your prostitutions'.

²³ Wolff, *Hosea*, p. 44.

as valid and acknowledge her guilt. Lamentations goes a step further by co-opting the woman's voice to have her blame herself. In Lamentations, as elsewhere, the woman is violated because of her sexual 'infidelity':

⁸Jerusalem sinned grievously,²⁴ therefore she became impure.

All who honored her despise her,

for they have seen her nakedness.

Even she herself groans

and turns away.

⁹Her uncleanness was in her skirts;

she took no thought of the consequences for her.

She has come down extraordinarily,

she has no comforter...

¹⁰The enemy has stretched out his hand²⁵

over all her precious things;

for she has seen the nations

enter her sanctuary...(Lam. 1.8-10).

The rape imagery builds upon the correspondence between body and temple and between genitals and inner sanctuary.²⁶ Though the woman's voice breaks through momentarily in the suggestion that God has gone too far in his abuse ('you slaughtered without mercy', 2.21), she shows no anger, only remorse, and thus she remains powerless. She accepts the blame: 'the Lord is in the right, for I rebelled against his word' (1.18; cf. 1.20, 22). Is this not the dilemma

²⁴ The term *niddah* refers to a menstruous woman (for the difference in pointing, see *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* [ed. E. Kautzsch; trans. A.E. Cowley] § 20 n R 1), a reading reflected in Aquila, Symmachus, and the Syriac. Delbert R. Hillars (*Lamentations* [Anchor Bible, 7A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972], pp. 9-10) prefers the translation, 'people shake their heads at her', but recognizes a word play on *niddah*. The association with 'menstruous woman' is hard to miss, especially in view of the reference to ritual uncleanness in v. 9.

²⁵ The word *yad*, 'hand', in v. 10 is also a euphemism for 'penis'.

²⁶ Alan Mintz, 'The Rhetoric of Lamentations and the Representation of Catastrophe', *Proofsheets* 2 (1982), p. 4. Mintz discusses the shift of speaker from female in Lam. 1-2 to male in ch. 3, suggesting that because 'a woman's voice, according to the cultural code of Lamentations, can achieve expressivity but not reflection', the male figure is introduced in order to make meaning out of the disaster. 'This is a figure whose maleness is unambiguously declared by the use of the strong word *gever* for "man" and whose preference for theologizing rather than weeping is demonstrated throughout' (p. 9).

of many women in abusive relationships?²⁷ Where else can she turn except to the abuser in the hope things will improve?

In these examples of biblical violence, physical abuse is God's way of reasserting his control over the woman. The prophets enjoin the sinful woman to seek forgiveness from her abusive husband. The picture they offer suggests that abuse can be instructional and that it leads to reconciliation.²⁸ In Isa. 54.4-10, for example, the divine husband shows compassion on the wife he had forsaken. In Hos. 2.14-15 [Heb. 16-17], God promises to speak tenderly to his wife and restore her to favor so that she will 'respond as in the days of her youth'.²⁹ Her life will clearly be better, but how much better? Because the marriage relationship is one of inequality, she will always be subservient and dependent on his good will. Ezek. 16.59-63 paints a more depressing picture: God will forgive all that his unfaithful wife has done, with the result that she will never open her mouth again because of her shame. In this vision of reconciliation, the woman's lot is to be submissive and silent, which keeps her in the role of victim within the marriage relationship.

The problem we face in interpreting these passages is not just the punishment/rape imagery; the problem is the ideology that informs this imagery.³⁰ The concept of harlotry has meaning only within an

27. Ellwood, *Batter My Heart*, pp. 8-12.

28. Ellwood (*Batter My Heart*, pp. 9-10) likens God's change of disposition in Jer. 30.17; Isa. 42.14-16; 43.1-4, 25; 49.8-26; 51.17-23; and 54.8-11 to the behavior of a battering husband who follows abuse with repentance and sincere promises to reform.

29. Gordon and Washington ('Rape as a Military Metaphor', p. 314 n. 1) translate 'submit as in the days of her youth'; cf. the Septuagint, which reads, 'she will be humbled'. See also the discussion in Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, pp. 276-77. If this is the meaning (and I think obedience, faithfulness, and compliance with the husband's will is fundamentally at issue), then the bleak picture corresponds closely to that of Ezek. 16.59-63.

30. The fear of women's sexuality and the perceived need to control it motivates these and other biblical portrayals of women. By this I mean not just the negative portrayals but also the seemingly positive ones. In ancient Israel, women's sexual activity was severely circumscribed. Before marriage women were under the control of their fathers or brothers, and after marriage, of their husbands. A woman who was found not to be a virgin at marriage was to be stoned (Deut. 22.20-21). The husband had exclusive rights to his wife's sexuality (the converse was not true) and any breach of fidelity or even suspected breach of fidelity on her part was a threat to his honor that called for severe punishment (Num. 5.11-31; whether or not this trial by ordeal

ideology that views women's bodies as the property of men. Only women can be harlots or whores; in Hebrew, as in English, if the terms are applied to men it is only in an extended or figurative sense.³¹ This ideology gives rise to the prophetic marriage metaphor in which the unquestioned superior male position is further privileged by placing God in the husband's position. The divine husband's superiority over his nation-wife, in turn, lends legitimacy to the human husband's superiority over his wife, who, following this model, is subservient to him and totally dependent on him.³² Through messages about gender relations encoded in these texts, men are taught to exert their authority and women are taught to submit.³³ As Drorah Setel points out in her study of Hosean pornography, the prophetic marriage metaphor creates a contrast between God's positive (male) fidelity and Israel's negative (female) harlotry.³⁴ God (the male) by definition cannot be unfaithful; at most he can be, as Lamentations sometimes suggests,

was ever conducted is beside the point, since in principle the law gives the husband the right to demand it; for discussion, see Alice Bach, 'Good to the Last Drop: Viewing the Sotah [Numbers 5.11-31] as the Glass Half Empty and Wondering How to View It Half Full', in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* [Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 143; ed. J. Cheryl Exum and David J.A. Clines; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993], pp. 26-54). Though our modern social context is very different, this ideology remains influential, both in Western culture in general and especially for people who look to the Bible for ethical principles and moral guidance.

31. For discussion of the Hebrew root *znh* and its metaphorical use by Hosea, see Phyllis Bird, "'To Play the Harlot': An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor", in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy Day; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 75-94.

32. A feature of these texts I have not developed here is the picture of the woman's utter dependence upon male support; for development of this point, see T. Drorah Setel, 'Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea', in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster Press), pp. 86-95; especially p. 92; Ellwood, *Batter My Heart*, pp. 11-12. Ezek. 23 treats this dependence theme in a perverse way; see Shields, 'Ezekiel 16: Body Rhetoric and Gender'.

33. While writing this study, I happened to watch a BBC television program called 'The Hamar Trilogy' about the Hamar women of southwest Ethiopia. In this community women are ritually beaten at a young man's coming of age ceremony, and a woman interviewed explains that it shows you love him enough to suffer for him. Wife-beating is also common; a man explains that it makes him feel like a man to beat his wife.

34. Setel, 'Prophets and Pornography', p. 93.

excessive (2.2, 17, 21; 3.43). And 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. 'To involve God in an image of sexual violence', observes Judith Sanderson, 'is, in a profound way, somehow to justify it and thereby to sanction it for human males who are for any reason angry with a woman'.³⁵

In our prophetic examples, sin is identified with female sexuality, and specifically, with uncontrolled or unrestrained female sexuality. 'Bad' women are promiscuous and rapacious, and female desire is consuming and dangerous. And the one who suffers from it most is the woman herself. Male control, then, is seen as necessary and desirable, and sexual abuse becomes justified as a means of correction. To make matters worse, physical assault paves the way for the abused woman's reconciliation with her abusive spouse. Abuse is thus complexly and confusingly linked with love in a pattern that consistently challenges women's sense of worth and self-esteem. A depressing body of evidence demonstrates how such texts oppress women by encouraging scapegoating and reinforcing the idea that physical abuse can be an appropriate measure for men to use against women.³⁶

Gender Bias in Interpretation

In describing God's treatment of his wayward wife, the prophets rely upon a rhetorical strategy that encourages the audience to identify and sympathize with a male-identified deity. This is the privileged point of view, the 'I' that condemns the 'you', the other, whose view is not represented (Lamentations is no exception, since it uses the woman's voice to express the male point of view). When readers privilege the deity, which most readers of the Bible still do, they are forced into accepting this position, for to resist would be tantamount to challenging divine authority. This is the position taken almost without exception by biblical commentators, who, until recently,

35. Judith E. Sanderson, 'Nahum', in Newsom and Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary*, p. 221.

36. For a compelling application of the biblical marriage metaphor to the situation of battered women, see Ellwood, *Batter My Heart*. Ellwood also shows how child battering is part of the picture. See also Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, 'Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation', in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), pp. 96-107.

have been almost without exception male. Typically these commentators either ignore the difficulties posed by this divine sexual abuse or reinscribe the gender ideology of the biblical texts; usually they do both in their ceaseless efforts to justify God. Often they not only pick up on latent gender bias in the text but also read familiar stereotypes back into it. Hans Walter Wolff, for example, sympathizes with the suffering divine husband who 'would rather not' take abusive action against his unfaithful wife but 'finds it necessary', and who strips her naked to indicate his 'freedom from the obligation to clothe her',³⁷ as if freedom from obligation excuses cruelty. In their Anchor Bible commentary on Hosea, Francis Andersen and Noel Freedman accept the husband's 'demand for retribution' as 'legitimate' and describe the public humiliation of the woman as a 'subtle' application of the *lex talionis* (and not, for example, as an unreasonable punitive measure or as vicious and unethical behavior).³⁸

We saw above how Otto Kaiser, in his discussion of Isa. 3.16-24, reinscribes with a vengeance the ideology of the text. John Bright's Anchor Bible commentary on Jeremiah, and, more recently, William Holladay's (Hermeneia) are typical of the commentaries in these series in ignoring the problems posed by the imagery of divine sexual abuse in favor of discussion of philological and historical-critical issues. Bright, for example, in his comment on Jeremiah 13, deals only with the waistcloth incident in vv. 1-11, and has nothing to say about the

37. Wolff, *Hosea*, pp. 34, 38. When Wolff explains that God 'refuses to accept as final the divorce his wife both *desired* and *initiated*' (p. 44; italics mine), he reinscribes the textual strategy of blaming the woman (divorce was not a woman's right in Israelite society). Bernhard W. Anderson (*The Eighth Century Prophets* [Proclamation Commentaries; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978], p. 89) similarly invites us to sympathize with God's suffering and to view the people's suffering as cathartic.

38. Commenting upon Hos. 2.12, they note the 'poignancy' (p. 248) of the display of the woman's naked body, but they never abandon the text's male point of view: 'Why the husband should now deliberately share this privilege [viewing his wife naked] with his rivals is not clear, although in view of the context of the former's outrage and legitimate demand for retribution (cf. v. 5), it is to be seen as a form of punishment appropriate to the crime. Just as in the past the errant wife has sought out her lovers and eagerly disrobed in their presence for the purposes of sexual gratification, so now she will be forcibly exposed in the same situation, and publicly humiliated. The subtlety of the talion here is essentially that what she did secretly and for pleasure will now be done to her openly and for her disgrace' (p. 249).

salacious verses 20-27, except that they are poetry.³⁹ About the same passage Holladay speaks only of the references 'to the shocking harlotry which that city commits, harlotry which merits her public stripping and ravishment'.⁴⁰ Moshe Greenberg's 'holistic' approach to Ezekiel, because it seeks to encounter the prophet on his terms, also has the effect of suppressing the woman's point of view.⁴¹ Walther Eichrodt, in contrast, is not content to let the prophet speak for himself. He is concerned with God's image in ch. 23 (though apparently more with God's image as a husband than as an *abusive* husband): 'In view of the way in which sex-life is elsewhere completely excluded from the divine realm, it is monstrous to find it here stated bluntly how God contracted a marriage with a pair of harlots'.⁴² He assures us, moreover, that the abuse imagery is not to be taken seriously.

One can see from the very beginning that the narrative in which this is clothed has no importance whatsoever; this is no parable story full of charm and poetic beauty, like ch. 16, 17 and 19. It is an allegory, which gives no more than the bare essentials, and applies only a few stereotyped

39. John Bright, *Jeremiah* (Anchor Bible, 21; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 95-96. I refer to the 'Comment' section; in his textual notes to v. 22, Bright observes that 'your skirts' is 'apparently a euphemism' and 'your heels' 'is also a euphemism', but he leaves it to the reader to decide what the terms are euphemisms for. Of v. 27, he writes, "'Your rutting' is literally 'your neighings,' i.e., animal passion, as in v. 8', and he continues, 'The verse refers to practice of the cults of pagan gods, and the immoral rites associated with them' (p. 95).

40. Holladay, *Jeremiah* 1, p. 417. Cf. the evasive treatment of this passage in a commentary designed as a resource for preaching (R.E. Clements, *Jeremiah* [Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1988], p. 87): 'Pictured in the guise of a young woman who has abandoned all moral restraints (v. 27), Jerusalem is now to be faced with the inevitable fate of violence and rape that awaited a young woman captured as a prisoner of war (v. 26). The language is stark and the imagery has become rather conventional in the wake of the earlier prophecies of Hosea. There is therefore a certain lack of originality about it.' In another series designed to keep the 'Old Testament alive in the Church' (p. vii), Walter Brueggemann (*To Pluck Up, to Tear Down: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah* 1-25 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], p. 127) describes the picture of 'a humiliated slave girl' in 13.26 [!] as one of 'a rich variety of suggestive images' that convey a 'simple message'.

41. Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, 1-20 (Anchor Bible, 22; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983).

42. Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel* (trans. C. Quin; Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), p. 320.

pictorial images to bring out the point as clearly and unmistakably as possible. *The images which it employs have no life of their own; their only purpose is to reproduce in quite coarse terms the unspeakable event they convey.*⁴³

From the scandalous imagery in Ezekiel 16, he draws a moral lesson that, like the prophetic marriage metaphor, places full responsibility for the success of the relationship upon the subordinate partner.

The way in which expressions for God's wrath and jealousy are heaped up is to denote the inexorable, yet wholly personal, manner in which he reacts against every attempt to deny or ridicule his giving of himself in fellowship. Unless this is impressed with all possible seriousness upon the conscience of the creature, its value would become doubtful, and the absolute will behind it ambiguous. What is finally at stake is whether or not we realize the existence of that divine majesty, apart from which the dignity of man is empty or non-existent.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, the female figure in the text has no dignity left to her.

I could easily multiply examples of biblical commentators who reinscribe the text's harmful gender ideology. What worries me most about them is the influence they have on those readers who rely on their commentaries for explication of the Bible and who often grant them the kind of authority to say 'what the text means' that they do not deserve.

The contributors to *The Women's Bible Commentary* show the difference reading as a woman makes. The authors of the entries on the prophetic books all wrestle with the implications of biblical violence against women and struggle to find ways of dealing with it. Susan Ackerman looks behind the prophetic polemic for evidence of women's real religious experience.⁴⁵ Gale Yee looks to other prophetic metaphors for the divine-human relationship as alternatives to the harmful marriage metaphor.⁴⁶ Similarly, Kathleen O'Connor finds alternative, positive models for women in certain prophetic

43. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, pp. 320-21, italics mine.

44. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, pp. 209-10. The English translation 'man' does not capture the inclusiveness of German *Mensch*: 'Es geht letztlich um die Anerkennung einer göttlichen Majestät, ohne die auch der Adel des Menschen hohl und nichtig werden müßte'; *Der Prophet Hesekiel. Kapitel 1-18* (Das Alte Testament Deutsch. 22.1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), p. 126.

45. Ackerman, 'Isaiah', p. 162.

46. Yee, 'Hosea', pp. 200, 202.

themes (such as those that express opposition to oppression and hope for a new order of social relations based on mutuality) and in scattered instances of non-patriarchal divine imagery.⁴⁷ Kathryn Darr advocates keeping harmful texts in the canon not as an affirmation of their assertions but because they force readers to confront difficult questions.⁴⁸ Judith Sanderson, perhaps the *Commentary*'s most resistant reader, relentlessly exposes the ideological prejudices that produce such negative female imagery.⁴⁹

I mention *The Women's Bible Commentary* to draw attention to my claim that female and male readers are likely to perceive such texts as these as making different claims upon them as readers. Although the contributors to *The Women's Bible Commentary* read this material differently, like their male counterparts they still seem to have a stake either in defending the 'real god' or defending the text, either because of their own commitment to the biblical text or for the sake of the commentary's stated audience of 'laywomen, clergymen, and students'.⁵⁰ What distinguishes their work from that of their male counterparts is their recognition of divine sexual violence as a problem and their honesty about it.⁵¹ One looks in vain in the standard commentaries for responses like these to the violence against women in the prophetic corpus.⁵²

Regardless of how we decide to respond to it, sexual violence of which God is the perpetrator and the nation personified as a woman

47. Kathleen M. O'Connor, 'Jeremiah', in Newsom and Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary*, pp. 173-77.

48. Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, 'Ezekiel', in Newsom and Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary*, p. 190; similarly in Darr, 'Ezekiel's Justifications of God: Teaching Troubling Texts', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 55 (1992), pp. 97-117.

49. See Judith E. Sanderson, 'Amos', pp. 205-209; 'Micah', pp. 215-16; and 'Nahum', pp. 217-21, in Newsom and Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary*.

50. Newsom and Ringe, 'Introduction', *The Women's Bible Commentary*, p. xvii.

51. This is also true of the work of Renita J. Weems, 'Gomer: Victim of Violence or Victim of Metaphor?', *Semeia* 47 (1989), pp. 87-104; Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992). Their critiques are greatly tempered by the privileged position they grant the deity.

52. While I do not claim to have made an exhaustive study, Carroll's is the only major commentary I know of that faces this problem squarely insofar as he consistently reveals the power of ideology to suppress competing discourses.

is the object, along with its destructive implications for gender relations, is there. It cannot be dismissed by claiming that it is only 'metaphorical', as if metaphor were some kind of container from which meaning can be extracted, or as if gender relations inscribed on a metaphorical level are somehow less problematic than on a literal level. When, for example, Bernhard Anderson assures us the point of Hosea 2 'is not to absolutize a particular understanding of masculine-feminine relations but to lift the whole discussion up to a metaphorical level',⁵³ he ignores what for Yee is the crucial question: 'To whose experience does the metaphor speak, and whose experience does the metaphor exclude?' Raising this question enables Yee to conclude that 'this metaphor makes its theological point at the expense of real women and children who were and still are victims of sexual violence'.⁵⁴

Such a conclusion as Yee's is disputed by Robert Carroll, who, in response to some of the feminist claims about the pornographic character of this material, writes as if the metaphorical violence against women were canceled out by the fact that men as well as women are the objects of the prophets' abusive language:

If the biblical writers only used negative images of women and positive images of men, then I could see the force of the objections made by feminist readers of the Bible. But that is not the case. The metaphorization processes represent negative *and* positive images both of women and men (as metaphors!) and because such representations are inevitably metaphorical their referential force is symbolic.⁵⁵

53. Anderson, *The Eighth Century Prophets*, p. 87. The discussion on Hosea 2 appears on pp. 86-89. Joseph Blenkinsopp (*Ezekiel* [Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990], p. 99) similarly counsels us to 'concentrate on the point of the allegory' in Ezek. 23; he does, however, in contrast to many commentators who simply gloss over the problem, acknowledge that 'We cannot, and should not, ignore the current of antifeminism in the prophetic literature and indeed in much of the literature of antiquity... The ambiguity, suspicion, and fear aroused by female allure, and even more by the biological processes connected with birth and menstruation (one thinks of Baudelaire's *la femme est naturelle, donc abominable*), may help to explain but do nothing to render these attitudes less distasteful to the enlightened modern reader.' With regard to ch. 16, he mentions its pornographic character but chooses the unfortunate title, 'the Nymphomaniac Bride' for the section 16.1-63 (p. 76).

54. Yee, 'Hosea', p. 200; on the problem of this metaphorical divine violence, see also Weems, 'Gomer: Victim of Violence or Victim of Metaphor?'

55. Carroll, 'Desire under the Terebinths', p. 279. As I understand it, Carroll's

Carroll's observation that the 'referential force [of these metaphors] is symbolic' seems to be a special form of the 'it's only a metaphor' argument. Elsewhere he makes statements such as, 'The women in the text [Ezek. 23] are metaphors, not persons',⁵⁶ without examining how the metaphor works, what gives it its sting. The point is not that the Bible uses *positive and negative* images of *women and men*—a point that could hardly be denied—but rather that it uses a particular kind of imagery. The imagery of graphic sexual violation and abuse of a woman by a theologically justified abusive husband-deity is not addressed to women. It is, as Carroll recognizes, addressed to 'essentially a male community'. For him this seems to reduce the offensiveness that the metaphors of sexual abuse hold for women;⁵⁷ in my opinion, it intensifies it. The way to insult a man is to call him a woman. You insult him more if you call him a filthy whore who is going to have her genitals exposed, which is what these prophetic accusations do. Already inscribed in the metaphors themselves is a whole range of negative views about women and about female behavior and female

argument is that (1) these are only metaphors, (2) they are not about real women, and (3) there are negative images of men as well. Whereas I agree with Carroll that the relationship between metaphoric men and women and real men and women is a complex one, I do not accept the idea that metaphor can so neatly be separated from reality; for useful discussions of this complex issue, see Claudia V. Camp, 'Metaphor in Feminist Biblical Interpretation: Theoretical Perspectives', *Semeia* 61 (1993), pp. 3-36; Mieke Bal, 'Metaphors He Lives By', *Semeia* 61 (1993), pp. 185-207. Metaphor is a process of mapping one domain of experience onto another. That metaphoric violence against women is not the same as real violence is true, but, as I argue here, it is nonetheless harmful to real women because it shapes perceptions of reality and of gender relations for men and for women.

56. 'Desire under the Terebinths', p. 285; cf. pp. 277, 279, 283, 292, 303-304.

57. 'Desire under the Terebinths', p. 292. The citation continues: 'Feminists clearly think that the terms of abuse used in that sexual rhetoric betray more than is apparent on the surface of the language'. It is not clear to me what he means. If someone less postmodern than Carroll had made that statement, I would think its meaning is something like 'the text means what it says'. But what would that be? The example Carroll gives of negative male sexual imagery is the comparison in Ezek. 23.20, where men are 'mocked in terms of having animal-sized penises' ('Desire under the Terebinths', p. 288). I cannot imagine a man being insulted by being told he has a large penis. I suggested above that the comparison is an (unconscious) expression (fantasy) of penis envy. In any event, nothing is said about the men's behavior. If the image suggests they are 'good studs', the degree to which a man would find this suggestion objectionable is open to question.

sexuality, as well as about power in gender relations: men dominate and women submit.

Carroll's argument about prophetic rhetoric is much the same in his Jeremiah commentary, where he says, 'If feminine images of sexuality appear to be more numerous, that is because it is masculine behaviour which is being condemned: "whoring after..." is a male activity'.⁵⁸ The statement ignores the question, What have feminine images of sexuality to do with male behavior? *Why* are feminine images used in the first place? They are used because the texts under discussion here rely on a rhetorical strategy of abusing men verbally in the worst possible way—by placing them in the inferior position of a humiliated female—in order to shock them into changing their behavior. This is precisely where the problem with this kind of metaphoric abuse lies. The prophetic condemnations are aimed principally at men but the use of imagery of *female sexual sin* and *female sexual abuse* as a means of representing *male social and political sins and their consequences* reflects what amounts to a devaluation and denigration of women. You insult a woman by assuming that a way to insult or put down a man is to call him a woman.

Carroll appeals to the presence of positive as well as negative images of women in the biblical text as evidence that the text is not misogynistic or pornographic.⁵⁹ As I have indicated, I see the question as not whether the images are positive or negative (a binary opposition I would like to avoid anyway) but how they function. The 'positive' opposite of the adulterous wife metaphor, imaging the people as God's *faithful* wife, does not exalt women, for it relies upon the same patriarchal hierarchy in which the woman remains as the subordinate, inferior member in the relationship.⁶⁰ Likewise the prospect these

58. Carroll, *Jeremiah*, p. 180; cf. 'Desire under the Terebinths', pp. 277, 279, 283.

59. Apparently it is these two terms in particular that raise Carroll's critical ire. They are, as he says, anachronistic if applied to the way ancient men viewed women. I find them nonetheless suitably descriptive of what I perceive, from my twentieth-century vantage point, as going on in the text.

60. Similarly, I do not think that offering positive images to counterbalance the negative images, as, for example, Weems (*Battered Love*) and Helen Schüngel-Straumann ('God as Mother in Hosea 11', in Brenner [ed.], *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, pp. 194-219) do, gets us very far. Reading texts against themselves and against other texts is worth pursuing, but what is needed is something more along the lines of the analysis offered by Mieke Bal (*Death and Dissymmetry*), who finds in Yael, the Woman-with-the-Millstone, and Delilah the (missing)

texts hold out of reconciliation following punishment provides no solution to the problem posed by the imagery of sexual abuse because it is part of the pattern. It reinforces the harmful ideology of abuse as something for the victim's own good and makes acceptance of blame and submission the price of forgiveness. It leaves the woman powerless.

Claiming that there is a suffering and loving god behind this imagery will not make it go away either. For some readers of the Bible creating a canon within the canon, in which texts that are injurious are excluded, is one way of dealing with this offensive material. I prefer doing away with the notions of canon and biblical authority altogether. Because the Bible is an important part of our cultural heritage, it would be presumptuous to suggest that we can casually dispense with it. But I see no reason to privilege it. And, I would add, I think it important to recognize that God is a character in the biblical narrative (as much a male construct as the women in biblical literature) and thus not to be confused with any one's notion of a 'real' god. Increasingly, as investigation into the gender-determined nature of biblical discourse becomes more sophisticated, biblical interpreters will have to come to terms with this fact.

The problematic nature of biblical texts in which the deity violently abuses a nation metaphorically cast as a woman is gaining attention in the scholarly literature.⁶¹ I have no solution to the problem of phetic pornography any more than I have a solution to the problem of pornography in general. But recent work on this topic does suggest that a practical approach can yield important results, and so I would like to conclude this chapter by describing a fourfold interpretive strategy that seems to me especially promising as a response to the prophetic rhetoric of sexual abuse.

1. *Attention to the differing claims these texts make upon their male and female readers.* Readers of these texts are asked to make a dual identification—with God and with Israel—and for both sexes this involves avenging mothers of Bath (Judg. 11), Kallah (Judg. 14), and Beth (Judg. 19); or the deconstructive reading of Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*. Weems advocates a dual hermeneutic: 'one that helps a reader to resist the ways in which texts subjugate aspects of a reader's identity, and another that allows a reader to appreciate those aspects of texts that nurture and authorize them in their struggle for personhood' (*Battered Love*, p. 100). This hermeneutical stance serves a theological agenda; one could hardly imagine such an approach to, say, Shakespeare or Jane Austen.

61. For a variety of perspectives, see the essays in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*.

taking the subject position of the other sex. But pressures to identify with a particular subject position pull male and female readers in different directions. Personified Israel, whose covenant infidelity is described as harlotry, is composed of women and men (indeed, male citizens would have been the primary audience of this material). Male readers are thus placed in the subject position of women and, worse, of harlotrous, defiled, and sexually humiliated women. They are required to see themselves in the wrong and to repent and change their behavior, and because a female identification is not 'natural' for them and identification with a debased woman is shocking and repulsive, they will be anxious to cast it off. The metaphor offers them another role with which they can more readily identify, that of the faithful husband, whose point of view they are already encouraged to identify with by the prophetic rhetoric. Female readers are also called upon to adopt the divine point of view, but in our case the identification is not 'natural' because God is identified metaphorically with the male. Our 'natural' identification lies with the sinful, humiliated woman. This situation, as I said at the beginning of this chapter, forces women readers to read against our own interests and to accept the indictment of our sex encoded in these texts. Male readers, in contrast, are not reading against their interests when they adopt God's point of view toward the sinful woman. On the contrary, it is against their interests to stay in the humiliating female subject position.⁶²

Recognizing how shifting subject positions function rhetorically to manipulate readers' responses along gender lines and how such rhetorical strategies affect what is at stake for female and male readers may help us all to become resisting readers. I wonder, for example,

62. Galambush (*Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*, p. 161) describes an important effect of this rhetorical strategy on the male audience of Ezekiel: 'The depiction of Yahweh expunging his own shame by punishing (including shaming) the unfaithful Jerusalem thus serves to reinterpret the destruction of the city as a positive event, one that reestablishes the honor and potency of Yahweh. This metaphoric refurbishment of Yahweh's honor not only would have allowed Ezekiel's readers to avoid the shame of acknowledging their god's humiliation and defeat, but also would have allowed male Judeans to expunge their own shame by transferring it to the personified woman, Jerusalem. As men in solidarity with a divine, punishing husband, male Judeans could, at least momentarily, have seen Jerusalem (and her shame) as "other." The humiliation of personified Jerusalem would thus paradoxically serve to recapture a sense of power and control for the militarily humiliated male residents of the city.'

how often it is the case that the imagery of female harlotry is used to describe sin but a shift occurs to male imagery (e.g., faithful sons) when reconciliation is envisioned.⁶³

2. *Exposing prophetic pornography for what it is.* The prophetic texts I have cited as examples of God's sexual abuse of a nation personified as a woman contain violent representations that involve, among other atrocities, exposing the woman's genitals to view: to the view of a hostile audience posited in the text and to our, the readers', view. We are asked to adopt, and approve, the pornographic gaze at the naked and physically abused female body—pornographic because it involves objectification, domination, pain, and degradation. Doubtlessly female violation is described in such brutal detail for its shock value, but is there also some righteous satisfaction or perverse pleasure in writing about it? In reading about it, we are complicit. What do we think we are doing when we read prophetic pornography? Can we allow ourselves the moral high ground because the violence is metaphoric and presented with a theological justification; in other words, because we are reading the Bible? Can we afford to ignore the implications this imagery has for readers of the Bible, or to minimize the significance of its presence in the Bible? As Susan Griffin has shown in her subtle and compelling study, *Pornography and Silence*, it would be naive to think that pornography can be contained in such a way that it does not affect all of us. We cannot, she argues, overestimate the effect of images on our lives.

For social science itself tells us that images shape human behavior. And thus, if the social scientist makes the argument that pornography has no effect on human behavior, we are faced with a strange and mysterious phenomenon. For in order to argue that pornography does not reach into the lives of the audience and change their behavior, we would have to say that pornographic images are different from all other images, both actual and cultural, and that the mind, when confronted with the pornographic image, suddenly acts differently than it does when confronted with any other image.⁶⁴

63. As Mary E. Shields ('Circumcision of the Prostitute: Gender, Sexuality and the Call to Repentance in Jer. 3.1-4.4', *Biblical Interpretation* 3 [1995], pp. 61-74) shows, this is the case in Jer. 3.1-4.4. See also Shields, 'Ezekiel 16', on Ezek. 16. Galambush (*Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*) documents a similar shift in imagery in Ezekiel, from the city as God's unfaithful wife to the faithful city no longer personified as a wife; threatening female elements are excluded from the vision of restoration.

64. Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge against Nature* (New

Would not the ethical response to these prophetic texts be to acknowledge what it is we are reading and to take responsibility for doing something about it?⁶⁵

3. *Looking for competing discourse(s).* It is fair to say that female experience is denied or misnamed⁶⁶ in these examples of prophetic pornography. By asking what is the 'other' discourse with which the vituperative prophetic discourse is competing we may be able to uncover evidence of the woman's suppressed point of view in these texts. This involves looking for places where attempts to silence or

York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 105. Further, p. 119: 'It is not in the nature of a being, a thought, or an image to be confined... The pornographic image has a life like the life of a sound wave. Set in motion in one place in a city, it affects a man walking through this part of the city. He begins to resonate with its frequency. He carries the ugliness of pornography outside this neighborhood. Let us say an image of a man beating a woman makes him more ready to strike a woman he knows. Or if this is not the case, let us say simply that he carries this image of a man striking a woman with him in his mind. Unless he repudiates this image, argues with it, decides definitively that it is not part of his nature, and rejects it, it becomes part of him. And inside his soul a man beats a woman. But this is not all. The images we carry in our minds make us into who we are... Thus, in some way, this man comes to be like the image of a man beating a woman. Perhaps he becomes more callous. Perhaps he becomes cruel to his own softness. And now we, who have not walked in the neighborhood where pornography lives, see this man, we sense his brutality, his violence... Finally, pornography has succeeded in reaching us, it has even penetrated our notion of reality.'

65. I am sure there are readers who will resist the designation 'pornographic' for this literature, and it is not my intention here to enter into a discussion of the complicated question, Exactly what constitutes pornography? For a discussion of prophetic pornography and its damaging effects, see Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts*, pp. 167-95; Gordon and Washington, 'Rape as a Military Metaphor'. On Ezek. 16 and 23 as pornographic, see Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*, pp. 124-25, 161-63 and *passim*. In a polemical exercise of his own ('Desire under the Terebinths'), Robert Carroll takes exception to Brenner's and van Dijk-Hemmes's ideological stance and their resultant interpretive claims about prophetic pornography; see the discussion above. For Brenner's latest statement, which appeared after I had completed this study, see Athalya Brenner, 'Pornoprophetics Revisited: Some Additional Reflections', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 70 (1996), pp. 63-86.

66. On this phenomenon, see Setel, 'Prophets and Pornography', and van Dijk-Hemmes, 'The Metaphorization of Woman in Prophetic Speech: An Analysis of Ezekiel 23', in Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts*, pp. 167-76.

suppress the woman's rival discourse, a discourse that threatens to subvert the dominant prophetic patriarchal discourse, are not completely successful.⁶⁷ For example, we can read Jer. 2.31 ('We are free; we will come no more to you') as the woman's claim to autonomy in the face of overweening possessiveness supported by patriarchal constraints; or Jer. 13.22 ('Why have these things come upon me?') as her unwillingness to accept blame. The recent studies of Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes and of Pete Diamond and Kathleen O'Connor profitably employ this reading strategy to challenge the dominant male discourse of Ezekiel 23 and Jeremiah 2-3 respectively. Van Dijk-Hemmes notes that the harlotous activities of the sisters in Ezekiel 23 are described not with active verbs but in the passive: 'There their breasts were squeezed/There the teats of their maidenhood were pressed'. 'It would have been more adequate', she observes,

to describe the events during the sisters' youth in the following manner: 'They were sexually molested in Egypt, in their youth they were sexually abused.' This way, justice would have been done to the fate of these metaphorical women, and the audience would not have been seduced into viewing women or girls as responsible for and even guilty of their own violation.⁶⁸

Diamond and O'Connor conclude their study of Jeremiah 2-3 with similar observations:

What would happen if female Israel told the story? Would she tell of her husband's verbal abuse, his foolish jealousy, his despicable exaggerations, his claims to have 'planted her as a choice vine' (2:21), his continual distrust of her and her sexuality? Would she recount how loving he had been and tell how he had become more and more controlling and demanding? We cannot know, of course, because in this case the husband is God, and not such a nice god, even if broken-hearted. What we do know about this metaphorical woman, though, is that she makes a moral and religious choice. She does not return to him despite the safety and social status a return might provide. She refuses to speak the words he demands of her:

67. For further discussion and demonstration of this approach, applied to Proverbs, see Carol A. Newsom, 'Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9', in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy Day; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 142-60; for applications to prophetic texts, see Shields, 'Circumcision of the Prostitute' and 'Ezekiel 16'.

68. Van Dijk-Hemmes, 'The Metaphorization of Woman', pp. 172-73; the citation is from p. 173.

'Only acknowledge your guilt...' (3:13). She will not accept blame for the failure of the marriage, and she will not reject the gods and goddesses whom she loves. She accepts the price of her autonomy.⁶⁹

4. A systematic deconstructive reading of the texts in question. Such a reading of Hosea 1-3 is offered by Yvonne Sherwood, who shows how the text contradicts its main thesis and subverts the very distinctions it makes between such 'violent hierarchies' as innocence and deviance, Yhwh and Baal, love and hate.⁷⁰ 'The text simultaneously pursues one kind of action (blessing, reconciliation) and its opposite (denunciation, violence, imprisonment and curse)', Sherwood observes.⁷¹ God's argument that Israel loved him and betrayed him is subverted by a metaphor in which the wife is already a harlot at the point of marriage.⁷² In Hos. 2.3 [Heb. v. 5] God threatens to strip the woman naked as in the day of her birth. The nakedness of the woman/land is simultaneously both infant purity, the innocence of beginning, and titillation, cruelty, and pornography.⁷³ It is never purely one or the other. Like the scholars mentioned above who search for the suppressed woman's competing discourse, Sherwood argues that the woman's point of view deconstructs the text's main argument, for the fact that Yhwh's wife has left him suggests some lack or inadequacy in his own character. If he is such a good husband and provider, why would she seek another? Yhwh is, moreover, tainted by and implicated in the very portrait of Baal that he so vehemently opposes.

The text's argument depends on the premise that Yhwh is original, in both senses of the word—he is Israel's 'first husband' and he can be clearly distinguished from his rival—yet far from emphasizing Yhwh's autonomy and individuality, the text remakes him in the image of Baal. Baal is

69. A.R. Pete Diamond and Kathleen M. O'Connor, 'Unfaithful Passions: Coding Women Coding Men in Jeremiah 2-3 (4.2)', *Biblical Interpretation* 4 (1996), forthcoming.

70. *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, esp. pp. 203-53. Carroll observes that Ezek. 23 deconstructs itself but he does not show how ('Desire under the Terebinths', pp. 282-83). For some of the ethical issues raised by deconstruction, see David J.A. Clines, 'Ethics as Deconstruction, and, the Ethics of Deconstruction', in *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium* (ed. John W. Rogerson, Margaret Davies and M. Daniel Carroll R.; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 207, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 77-106.

71. *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, p. 252.

72. *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, p. 210.

73. *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, p. 211.

perceived by the woman as lover and provider, and to reclaim her affections, Yhwh describes himself in precisely the same terms. He depicts himself as giver of grain, wine and oil (precisely the same items attributed to Baal) and pledges to 'seduce' the woman and to become, effectively, no longer stern husband but rival lover...The text rejects Baal's name but not his function: in 2.14 Yhwh pledges to lay waste her lovers' vines and fig trees, and in 2.17 he promises to give her his own. Ironically, before he can give, Yhwh must clear the ground of the previous giving, and the god who claims he is original promises to repeat Baal's act of provision under a different name.⁷⁴

Deconstruction questions the fundamental logic of binary opposition (male/female, culture/nature, rational/emotional, objective/subjective) and staunchly refuses to privilege *either* side of an opposition, or violent hierarchy, over its opposite. As the example from Hosea illustrates, it unsettles the position, held by biblical narrators and critical commentators alike, that the divine husband is in the right and his wife is in the wrong by showing that the text cannot maintain this distinction. Reading deconstructively offers a way of moving beyond an either/or approach that would have us either affirm biblical portrayals of women as positive or reject them as hopelessly negative.⁷⁵ By foregrounding what is repressed, displaced, and undecidable, it draws attention to the inevitable traces of the woman's point of view, in male-authored texts, traces that subvert the texts' patriarchal authority. If the voice of the other is always already inscribed within patriarchal discourse, then women are not simply its objects, and by taking a subject position of their own (no less shifting and unstable than the male subject position), they cease to be powerless.

Though I have listed them separately for the purposes of discussion, these various ways of dealing with gender-biased prophetic rhetoric overlap, and the important work currently being done on this topic draws on all of them.⁷⁶ Taken together they constitute not a solution to the ethical problem of biblical violence against women but an important rhetorical counter-strategy for dealing with it.

74. *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, p. 224.

75. See David Rutledge, 'Faithful Reading: Poststructuralism and the Sacred', *Biblical Interpretation*, forthcoming.

76. Especially the studies mentioned above by Shields, Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes, Gordon and Washington, Diamond and O'Connor, and Sherwood.