

“You Have the Forehead of a Whore”

The Rhetoric of a Metaphor



The prophets of Israel went to extraordinary lengths to convey to their audiences the nature, extent, and consequences of their actions. The prophets repeatedly called upon some of the most explicit, provocative, and lurid images of human sexuality to personify what they saw as the nation's religious distortions and political blunders. Unforgettable scenes of the rape, abuse, and mutilation of women are detailed to symbolize what in the prophets' thinking was the disgraceful fate that awaited the nation. The prophet Hosea, for example, likened the northern capital city Samaria to a sexually depraved wife who, bent on chasing after lovers she sees as her benefactors, is

doomed to be stripped naked, barricaded, and prevented by her husband from any further illicit contact with her lovers (Hos 2:1–13).¹ Two centuries later, after reminding the people that their devotion to God had been once like that of a bride to her new husband (Jer 2:1–3), the prophet Jeremiah compared Jerusalem's impending ruin to the humiliation a woman experiences when her skirt is snatched up over her head and her sexual parts are bared before the public (Jer 13:20–27). To the prophet Ezekiel's thinking, Jerusalem's recent ruin was like the downfall of a loose woman who, despite her husband's love, compassion, and lavish indulgences, had betrayed her husband's kindnesses, pursued lovers as dissolute as herself, and as a result rightly deserved to be left to the vilest impulses of her lovers (Ezekiel 16; 23). If this imagery is extravagant and explicit, it is supposed to be. After all, the prophets were poets. And how else do poets hope to arrest the attention of their audiences except by first seizing their imaginations?

At the basis of their repeated representations of Israel's social and political behavior as promiscuous, lewd, and shameless was the prophets' view that Israel had betrayed the terms of the covenant that her ancestors had entered into with God centuries earlier in the wilderness. There in the wilderness Israel had pledged her faithfulness to the terms of the covenant and her exclusive devotion to the one God Yahweh. It was the prophet Hosea who centuries later would construe that binding event as something like a marriage between a man and a woman. Israel and Yahweh had bound themselves to one another with mutual responsibilities and mutual understandings. Israel's failure to live up to the obligations and expectations of that bond was tantamount to marital infidelity and was legitimate cause for outrage and retaliation by her husband. Casting the divine-human relationship as a marriage relationship would prove—as we will see in this study—daring and provocative. The enduring benefit of convincing audiences to

see the relationship between Israel and God as a marriage was that the prophets could exploit what was sure to be a range of widely held, deeply felt attitudes about marriage to shape their audiences' thinking about God's claim upon Israel. What better way of personifying that claim than by using as an analogy a human relationship where issues of power, propriety, property, and purity were profoundly at stake? What better strategy for rationalizing the just nature of God's punishment of Israel than by drawing parallels with a relationship where trust and fidelity were the basis of the relationship and where the dominant partner had the right and power to discipline and punish the subordinate one when the terms of the relationship have been breached? Furthermore, what better way to persuade their audiences to amend their ways than by drawing on an analogy that had the power to evoke strong feelings of shame and remorse?

Lurid, provocative descriptions of infidelity, depravity, and rape were intended to cast Israel's behavior in the strongest moral terms

possible. Talking about the nation's history in provocative terms made their arguments compelling and unassailable. After all, each prophet's ministry spanned some of the most turbulent times in Israel's history, times of intrigue and disaster, times when, no doubt, conflicting views and interpretations of the events of the day were constantly exchanged in the temple, palace, square, and marketplace. The prophets found themselves faced with having to find an angle on the nation's future that guaranteed them a hearing.²

What we have in the prophets' use of marriage and sexual imagery, however, is not simply a matter of the prophets rendering in highly whimsical ways what could have been conveyed less dramatically. Undoubtedly, the prophets crafted their speeches in ways that were in all likelihood fully in keeping with the dominant conventions of Hebrew rhetoric. By characterizing Israel's relationship with its god as tantamount to the bond between a wife and a husband, and then depicting Israel's demise as like that of an adulterous wife who

rightly—according to the mores of ancient society—must be punished, the prophets chose an image that had enormous sentimental value in Hebrew society. Its sentimental hold upon the population was sure to provide the prophets with audiences who had a moral and social stake in what the prophets had to say. After all, marriage and family norms were central to maintaining and perpetuating Israel's patriarchal culture, and dismantling the marriage relationship, as surely a wife's adultery threatened to do, posed a threat to every patriarchal household.³ For that reason the marriage metaphor is sure to have been a very valuable tool for the prophets' rhetorical aims. Thus, like all prophets who competed for a hearing in public squares, Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel attempted to find an angle of vision that could tap into the most cherished interests and values of their audience—an angle that would have the power to stop an audience in their tracks.

Moreover, it seems evident that the prophets

were also aware of the enormous power that descriptions of marriage and sexual behavior have over the imagination. When marriage, sex, and violence are framed in religious discussions in ways that draw connections between God and marriage, or God and sex, or God and violence, the discussion is tantalizing. Hence, Israel's prophets were not simply demagogues; they were chiefly rhetorists and poets. They understood, first, the power of figurative speech over the human imagination; and they understood, second, the power of that same speech to convey certain things about reality that no amount of paraphrase could impart. The marriage metaphor can be placed within the broader context of biblical metaphorical thinking as one of a number of poetic images on which the prophets drew in their never-ending quest to arrest and influence the thinking of their audiences.

Biblical Metaphors as Representations of Hebrew Reality

Because they were frequently trying to talk about themes that defy easy definition—love, peace, hope, suffering, death, faith, and the rest—Israel's prophets frequently found themselves relying on figurative language to convey what they wanted to say. In fact, the prophets used numerous tropes to help them traverse and talk about the vast and baffling nature of human existence, most especially the human and divine encounter. Since God was understood as both present and yet elusive, known but inscrutable, just and yet ambiguous, the most accessible language for talking about the divine, and in particular the relationship between the divine and humankind, was language borrowed from the realm of human relationships. In fact, human language was all the prophets had with which to talk about the God of Israel.⁴

The prophets Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were not unique in their reliance on metaphors

to talk about God and life. Metaphors have always been central to human expression. The Old Testament well attests to the centrality of metaphors in ancient Hebrew thinking: From God's self-assertion, "You have seen . . . how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Exod 19:4), and the unnamed Philistine's rebuff to David, "Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks?" (1 Sam 17:43), to the Psalmist's outcry, "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God" (Ps 42:1), and Nahum's condemnation of Nineveh, "Your guards are like grasshoppers, your scribes like swarms of locusts settling on the fences on a cold day" (Nah 3:17). The Israelites' thinking about the divine and human existence was expressed by drawing on analogies from everyday life.⁵ 71 highlighters Five human relationships are used as metaphors repeatedly in prophetic speeches to describe the relationship between Israel and Yahweh: (1) judge and litigant, (2) parent and child, (3) master and slave, (4) king and vassal, and (5) husband and wife.⁶ Thus, the prophets were

dependent on their own social institutions to describe their experiences of the divine. Only by using the “this” of their own cultural universe—namely, the everyday institutional life of first-millennium Palestine—were they able to talk about the “That” which they understood as standing above their universe, namely, Yahweh their god. Thus, we discover that God, like human beings, sees and hears, commands and repents, judges and forgives, punishes and rewards, pleads with and castigates, loves and hates, and is jealous and commits rape. The prophets drew on their own mortal experiences of relationships in order to explain what it meant to be devoted to God.

The theologian Sallie McFague has described perhaps most concisely and eloquently what metaphorical thinking involves: “Thinking metaphorically means spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events, or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known.”⁷ The Hebrew prophets, in their

never-ending quest to illumine the character of God's claim on Israel, offered a variety of lenses/ metaphors through which their audiences might view that claim. In each instance the prophets perceived some "thread of similarity" between established patterns of human interchange (e.g., marriage, parenting, slavery, imperial status, and legal standing) and the relationship between Israel and God.

By appealing again and again to these five metaphors, the prophets would enforce and reinforce for their hearers a number of important precepts about the divine-human bond. First, the prophets insisted that the bond between God and Israel was that of a relationship. In fact, all five metaphors taken together insist that God can be known only through an intimate, meaningful relationship, not through abstract contemplation devoid of commitment. Second, the prophets maintained that the relationship between deity and people was not an egalitarian one but was one of hierarchy and authority. In other words, God

and Israel were not equals. Indeed, parallels existed between God's rights over Israel and a superior's rights over a subordinate, and those rights were non-negotiable and firmly established (e.g., parent and child, master and slave). Third, the prophets argued in their use of these five metaphors that the relationship between God and Israel was marked by mutual obligations and mutual responsibilities, that both parties had tasks and responsibilities appropriate to their roles in the relationship, but that the burden of the relationship rested firmly on the shoulders of the subordinate partner. It was the latter's task to conform not only to the stated rules of the relationship but also to live up to the unspoken expectations that framed the relationship. In fact, it was important for the subordinate not to do anything that might be interpreted as an act of insubordination or of disrespect to the superior: the vassal must pay homage to the king; the slave must be subservient to the master; the wife must show honor to her husband. Fourth, and finally, each prophet

insisted that failure by the subordinate to
50 highlighters fulfill her or his responsibility virtually
guaranteed punishment, retribution, or
discipline (depending on the metaphor): judges
punished defendants; kings banished or
executed servants; masters beat slaves; parents
disciplined children; and husbands divorced or
assaulted wives.

Metaphors of Power and Punishment

From these four recurring precepts of Hebrew metaphorical thinking one can sum up the prophets' poetic imagery as "metaphors of power and punishment."⁸ Each metaphor emphasized that the divine-human relationship operated within a frame of fixed rules of behavior and expectations, rules that in various ways perpetuated a system of relating that stressed hierarchy, domination, and retribution, rules that gave the dominant partner the right to penalize or retaliate against the subordinate should rules be broken, expectations be unmet, or warnings go unheeded. In this poetic world of fixed power relations, it is not surprising that God was always masculinized as the husband and Israel was always feminized as the wife. The power issues in the metaphor did not tolerate any diversion from these gender-based roles.

However asymmetrical may have been the power in the relationship between dominant and subordinate partner, at the basis of

metaphors of power and punishment was the claim that with the relationship between God and Israel came mutual duties and mutual understandings. For example, just as a husband entered into a relationship with his wife promising to provide her material and physical security, so did a wife enter that relationship with pledges and promises. In exchange for her husband's provisions and protection, she presumably pledged her sexual loyalty and emotional faithfulness. Hence, the husband figure in the speeches of Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel clearly had the upper hand in the marriage (his wife's sexuality, loyalty, and her very body belonged to him; her fate rested in his hands). Despite the power that the husband had over the wife in the relationship, however, prophetic speeches centered repeatedly not on the husband's obligations but on the wife's obligations. It was her actions (or, rather, her failure to live up to her obligations) that consistently dominates the metaphor's attention in all the speeches of the prophets.

In the prophetic descriptions, the husband repeatedly reminds his wife that he has fulfilled his side of the relationship—he has fed, clothed, and protected her (Hos 2:8; Ezek 16:1–8). It is the wife's failures and indiscretions that are repeatedly elaborated upon: her false claims about her lover (Hos 2:5, 12), her sexually extravagant and wanton behavior (Ezek 16:15–22), her flagrant failure to remain faithful to her husband (Jer 3:3, 10; 4:30; Ezek 16:33–34). The husband threatens to punish and/or divorce his wife. She has repeatedly failed to live up to her side of the relationship (Jer 13:25–27; Hos 2:8–13; Ezek 16:25–52; 23).⁹ The implication is clear: the wife deserves to be punished. The point of the marriage metaphor, like the other four metaphors, is to justify the violence and punishment the subordinate endures and to exonerate the dominant partner from any appearance of being unjust.

God, then, is not a harsh, cruel, vindictive husband who threatens and beats his wife

simply because he has the power to do so. He is himself a victim, because he has been driven to extreme measures by a wife who has again and again dishonored him and has disregarded the norms governing marriage relations. Likewise, God is not a capricious authority figure who deliberates as a cold and distant potentate; according to the king metaphor, God sovereignly administers the affairs of Israel, always with Israel's best interests at heart (Psalms 47, 89, 99, 145). Nor is God the judge who is heartless, merciless, and detached from God's judgments (Psalms 9, 10, 82); instead, God's mercy, say the prophets, has proved to be everlasting. Similarly, God as parent is not a detached authoritarian figure who, like a despot, metes out punishment unsparingly; rather, like every parent, God laments and anguishes over the prospect of disciplining a dearly beloved child (Hos 11:8–9). The point emphasized by all five metaphors of power and punishment, therefore, is that whereas God's power over Israel may be absolute, God's motivations for punishing

Israel are never arbitrary or heartless.

60 highlighters

Although prophetic metaphors stress hierarchy, domination, and retribution in the divine-human bond—concepts that in our modern context warrant considerable scrutiny—it is important to hear these metaphors with the ears of a tiny kingdom. To a vulnerable, powerless, imperiled nation such as ancient Israel, each metaphor would have been reassuring, for each insisted in its own way that, despite a nation's subordinate status, it could still enjoy protection, security, and a modicum of fame.¹⁰ Each metaphor promoted the idea that it was possible for a tiny nation to experience order, peace, stability, and justice amid threatening surroundings. Each insisted that, even though small and subordinate, Israel enjoyed a special, unique claim to its relationship with God. And the only condition for its permanent safety and protection was the nation's obedience. The key was to pattern one's behavior toward the omnipotent, omniscient creator of the earth after the model of human relationships between dominant and

subordinate parties. One partner is loyal, devoted, totally dependent on the other partner for protection and sustenance. Failure to behave according to this hierarchy had its own natural consequences: the weaker partner risked being punished and chastised by the stronger partner.

Thus, the metaphors of the prophets invited listeners to consider parallels between the way God responded and related to Israel and the way humans responded and related to one another. God's authority over Israel, therefore, was seen as not just palpable but natural. Similarly, God's demands upon Israel were not simply comprehensible; they were reasonable. For example, according to the parent-child metaphor,¹¹ like a parent, God could not easily dismiss God's responsibility to care for and protect God's children (Israel), even though, Israel, like children, frequently rebelled against the parent's authority and provoked the parent to chastise and discipline the child. Nevertheless, according to the imagery of the prophets, when God did condemn Israel to punishment,

God was acting well within God's duties as a parent.

Metaphors of power and punishment not only capture the basis of social relations; they naturalize the ideological framework of those relationships. They do this by rendering the power structures and dynamics in those relationships virtually inviolable. Once again we can take the example of the parent-child metaphor. Of the five metaphors, this one might arguably be the most intransigent. It has endured because the power dynamics between parents and children have remained virtually constant and instinctive across the centuries. So widely recognized are parents' power and rights over their children that it is only within the last half century, and only in a handful of countries, that the notion of children's rights has begun to emerge. Indeed, so esteemed were parents in Hebrew culture that honoring them was a divine command (Exod 20:12), presumably on the grounds that they, like God, create and mold life. An unruly child