

who failed to obey and show respect to his or her parents could be stoned to death (Deut 21:18–21). Parents' rights to discipline and correct their children were taken for granted; after all, who could know better the purpose and identity of the being created than its creator, who shapes and corrects in whatever way the creator sees fit (e.g., Jer 18:1–4; Isa 45:9–13)?

Another important assumption of the parent–child metaphor was that children were somehow the *property* of their parents. Children were considered to belong to their parent in ways that differed from a husband's claim upon his wife's sexuality. The bond between parent and child was viewed as inherent and indissoluble. Parents could exercise power over their child's life like the power that God the Father-Mother exercised over Israel —not simply because of the rights granted to parents by the legal system but because of the incredible emotional attachment parents have to their children. It is in this

regard that one might speak of a child being the property of its parents—not merely in the material or bodily sense but in the sense of the emotional bond the parent has to the child. Thus, the parent–child metaphor, like the husband–wife metaphor, was capable of stressing the tremendous emotional tug-of-war that lay just beneath the surface of the divine–human drama.<sup>12</sup>

What will become evident throughout this study are the ways in which the marriage metaphor reinforced certain attitudes about power and punishment in divine–human roles and, in collaboration with the other popular biblical metaphors, helped to create an interlocking system of imagery that interpreted and influenced how audiences understood God and their relationship to God. As one of a number of metaphors the prophets appealed to in order to make sense of the world as their audiences knew it, the marriage metaphor only confirmed what were already established dynamics of life (e.g., power, domination, hierarchy, dualism) and images of God (e.g.,

powerful, dominating, punitive). Metaphors became central to prophetic rhetoric because prophets were frequently trying to communicate about the more intangible aspects of divine-human reality (e.g., love, joy, peace, faith) in ways that were familiar, intelligible, and natural to their audiences. But before considering metaphors as rhetorical devices, we will need to consider see how metaphors shape our thinking and our reality.

## How Metaphors Work

Max Black, a literary critic, offers a helpful illustration of how metaphors work. He takes a simple figurative expression, such as “Israel is a luxuriant vine” (Hos 10:1) and refers to the two subjects in this sentence as the principal one (“Israel”) and the subsidiary one (“vine”).<sup>13</sup> In the mind of the audience, says Black, a set of attributes commonly associated with vines (e.g., pretentious, stubborn, wild, excessive) is conjured up, which he calls “associated commonplaces.” Hearing Israel associated with a vine, audiences are inclined to transfer a number of cultural stereotypes (“associated commonplaces”) to the principal subject. Once the connection between Israel and vines is made, Israel begins to be understood by audiences as pretentious, stubborn, wild, and excessive; and all of Israel’s behavior and history begin to take on new meaning. But attributes are not the only things that are associated with Israel when the metaphor vine is evoked. The (set of) *attitudes*

that listeners have toward vines (e.g., annoyance, frustration, impatience) is also transferred to Israel. In that way, attributes and attitudes combine to determine not simply how one is to understand Israel but, most significantly, how one is expected to react to or feel about Israel.

What makes metaphorical speech especially effective as a form of social rhetoric is precisely its ability to reorganize our way of thinking about—and reacting to—the subsidiary subject in new and different ways, drawing connections between the two subjects where connections had not been seen before, calling attention to some attributes and not others, and deliberately rousing certain kinds of emotional responses in an audience. In short, metaphors play upon cultural stereotypes; they stress some attributes while deliberately ignoring others. In the statement “Israel is a vine,” only the characteristics in Israel that are most like a vine are accentuated; those completely unlike a vine are not part of the picture. Israel is stubborn according to the

metaphor of the vine, but this image does not account for the description of Israel's history with God as one also marked by fickleness and shame, which are not attributes associated with vines. To represent these attributes and to present a fuller picture of the diversity of human experience, other metaphors are needed.

Thus, metaphors do not have to give accurate portraits of reality in order to be effective. Audiences do not have to recognize in the vine metaphor an accurate depiction of what vines are actually like; nor do they have to recognize in the marriage metaphor a thorough or complete representation of what Israel was like. The audience only has to perceive a "thread of similarity" between the two subjects in order for the metaphor to be a competent signifier.<sup>14</sup> But those metaphors that wind up finally as memorable and enduring in audiences' minds are the ones that tap into widely held, deeply felt values or attitudes within an audience. In other words, audiences must *care* about the social picture the metaphor is capturing. Hence, a metaphor

about marriage tends to have more lasting value than a metaphor about vines because people tend to be more emotionally and socially invested in their intimate relationships with each other than they are in the quality and care of vines from year to year.<sup>15</sup>

This does not mean that analogies to vines are of no value. A statement such as "Israel is a vine" is able to picture Israel as uncontrollable and pretentious in a way that no other metaphor can. In the same way, the image "Israel is a promiscuous wife" emphasizes attributes of Israel and invites reactions to Israel that other metaphors do not. The image of Israel as vine could make listeners feel the divine disappointment of God with the people who were guilty of unconstrained entanglements with idols and displays of false piety (Hos 10: 1). Despite its unique ability to signify Israel as out of control, the vine metaphor was totally incapable of calling to mind the image of Israel as also lewd and depraved. To convince their audiences that their behavior not only

disappointed God but also dishonored and humiliated God, the prophets found themselves having to rely on the marriage metaphor to traverse the complex world of Mediterranean shame and honor codes.

Returning once more to Black's explanation of how metaphors work, we are pointed to the indeterminant character of metaphors. According to Black, it is impossible to determine how different audiences will perceive the interaction between principal and subsidiary subjects, since a metaphor's meaning and effect can differ with context. That is because the associated commonplaces, or stereotypes, are culturally determined and can differ from one generation to another, from one culture to another, or from one reader to another. Metaphors, therefore, are not timelessly applicable to every context nor timelessly relevant to every generation; the values, assumptions, and worldview inherent in a metaphor can differ according to context. We will see just how true this is when we raise the question in the last chapter about whether



the marriage metaphor, which relies on a contrivance of gender roles for its stability, continues to be a meaningful device for imaging divine–human relations for the modern context.

## Marriage as a Controlling Metaphor

In the end, a metaphor's success depends on its ability to bring two separate objects into cognitive and emotional relation in such a way that "it becomes virtually impossible to view the lesser known one without referring to the better known one."<sup>16</sup> That being the case, it is virtually impossible to think of the God of Israel in the Bible as anything other than male (husband) and the people of Israel as anything other than female (wife). These stereotypes have influenced generations of religious imagining about God and Israel. It is precisely this enduring ability to bring a range of behaviors and attitudes associated with gender to bear upon divine-human relations that makes the marriage metaphor what Terence Fretheim in his study of images of God calls a "controlling metaphor."<sup>17</sup> By that Fretheim means that the marriage metaphor brings together for an audience language and activity from the unconscious level that effectively give coherence to biblical thinking about God. Thus,

when God and Israel were construed metaphorically as husband and wife, a gamut of images associated with the drama of such a relationship emerged out of the controlling metaphor. A whole range of behavior associated with intimacy and mating was brought to mind.

For example, the earliest days of God and Israel's relationship were cast as the period of courtship; the covenant in the wilderness became a marriage; Israel's idolatry was interpreted as betrayal and adultery; Israel's estrangement was divorce; and the reunion of God and Israel was reconciliation. Upon hearing God and Israel cast as husband and wife, then, audiences were able to draw on their experiences of the stages of male and female bonding to bring coherence to and to shed light on their knowledge of God and Israel's erratic history together. Whereas the forensic metaphor invited the audience to trace God and Israel's relationship through the observable stages of the judicial process (violation, summons, verdict, and pardon) and

the parent–child metaphor pictured the normal stages from birth to maturity, the marriage metaphor had the potential to bring coherence to a host of unstated assumptions and imperceptible rules that shaped behavior, attitudes, and reactions, which communities share and by which they governed themselves. Moreover, the subplots of love, sex, and jealousy, which the marriage metaphor invariably propels upon the divine–human drama, introduced an element of unpredictability to the affairs of God and Israel that other metaphors could not paraphrase. God and Israel’s relations were marked by emotional high and low periods; not all expectations were explicit, as much of male and female dealings with one another could be downright irrational. As a controlling metaphor, therefore, the marriage metaphor has the symbolic potential to illuminate a range of behavior the prophets saw as characteristic of, but more specifically as idiosyncratic to, Israel’s history with God.

Finally, the strength of the marriage

metaphor as a controlling metaphor was its ability to leave some elements of the divine-human realm to the realm of the unpredictable. While Israel acted completely like the depraved wife, God as husband was not so easily cast. God as betrayed husband expressed a range of human emotions that could make God seem as erratic as Israel. For example, prophet after prophet drew on a wide spectrum of sexual activities—from marriage (covenant), to infidelity (apostasy), to sexual violence (punishment/judgment), to sexual reunion (covenant renewal)—to describe the vicissitudes of Israel and God's history together.<sup>18</sup> Their history had taken unexpected turns, in part because, like an unfaithful wife, Israel had failed to conduct herself in accordance with the mores and expectations that governed married women. That same history had also taken unexpected turns because God sometimes failed to respond to Israel's infidelities in predictable ways. God was forgiving when one would expect God, like any honorable male, to be unforgiving.

Even though outside liaisons were forbidden, unthinkable, dangerous, and disgraceful, Israel repeatedly dishonored her husband by acting shamefully with other men. And when her debauchery and depravity should have spelled her death (Lev 20:10; cf. Deut 22:25–27), Israel was unexpectedly spared, insisted each propher. Instead of killing or divorcing his wife (as he surely would have been expected to do) God unexplainably welcomed back his incorrigible wife with the invitation to begin anew.<sup>19</sup> Casting Israel's history with Yahweh in a marriage drama allowed the prophets to play upon the unpredictability of love and romance.

## Male Prestige in the Marriage Metaphor

Although Hosea was the first to develop fully in the Hebrew Bible the metaphor of the covenant as a conjugal bond between Israel and God, the marriage metaphor itself probably did not originate with this prophet. It was probably derived from the Ancient Near Eastern custom of personifying the land, the nation, and capital cities as female figures.<sup>20</sup> According to this imagery, as far back as the time of the wilderness, when the nation was like a pubescent virgin, Israel had sworn herself in covenant loyalty to her husband, the one God.

I remember the devotion of your youth,  
your love as a bride, how you followed  
me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.  
Israel was holy to the LORD, the first  
fruits of the LORD's harvest. All who ate  
of it were held guilty; disaster came upon  
them, says the Lord.

(Jer 2:2b–3)

But as time passed, Israel, according to this metaphor, turned out to be the quintessentially depraved wife. Hers was a history of flagrantly violating the founding premise of patriarchy—namely, that a woman's sexuality did not belong to her but was the property of the men in her family.

By brazenly, persistently, and wantonly pursuing other lovers, Israel had defied the social order, violated her relationship with her husband, betrayed his trust, rebelled against his authority, and, above all, had shamed her husband by defiling her body (that is, her husband's property) through sexual involvements with other men. Each prophet would use the metaphor to denounce Israel's social, political, and religious practices and to rationalize Israel's impending destruction. The prophets would portray God not as an impartial judge, or as a disappointed parent, but as a deeply passionate, rightly offended husband who responded as he did because he



had been betrayed. The advantage of the marriage metaphor in casting Israel as a woman was its ability to construe Israel's behavior not simply as rebellion or immaturity but as depravity and shamelessness. Likewise, through the marriage metaphor God's reaction became all the more legitimate because he was acting not merely as a disappointed parent but as an enraged and dishonored man. The metaphor of the promiscuous wife expected its audience to share the values and attitudes of Hebrew society—the belief in a wife's exclusive sexual devotion to her husband, her failure to do so constituting shame on her part that brought dishonor upon her husband and warranted retaliation. The prophets expected their audiences to share these fundamental understandings. Otherwise, the metaphor would have made no sense to them.

Of the five metaphors that reappear in the prophets, only the marriage metaphor was capable of signifying failure to obey and conform to the prevailing norms as a moral

and social disgrace. Neither a child's defiance, nor a defendant's violation, nor the vassal and servant's disobedience inherently connoted shame. Only sexual promiscuity within marriage could capture this fully. That is because the image of the promiscuous wife played upon a range of ideas that tapped into some of the deepest, most subliminal social codes within a culture. Marriage forced audiences to confront their attitudes and assumptions about human sexuality in general, and women's sexuality in particular, in ways that none of the other biblical metaphors was capable of doing. It also called upon audiences to reaffirm their belief in a male honor system where a man's prestige rested in great part on his ability to control the behavior of the subordinates in his household (e.g., wives, slaves, children). Even though all five metaphors insisted that the power relations between God and Israel were not equal, and that ultimately God had the power to retaliate against Israel when Israel failed to meet its obligations, only the marriage metaphor could

uniquely claim that failure to obey brought shame upon the dominant partner and eventually upon the subordinate one.

## Marriage, Sexuality, and the Female Body

Both the female body and female sexuality proved to be ideal vehicles, on the one hand, for connoting the shame and humiliation that resulted from Israel's actions, and, on the other hand, for tapping into the enormous passion and sentimentality tied up with God's claim on Israel. The stereotypical belief that the female body and female sexuality were somehow dangerous, disgusting, threatening, and needing to be controlled played well into the prophets' efforts to push their audiences to perceive both the abnormality of their behavior and the perils that lay ahead should they continue on their course. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that throughout the prophets' writings the marriage metaphor is used almost exclusively to personify Israel negatively and to paint its history with God as volatile. In this way, the woman in the marriage metaphor stands in sharp ideological contrast to the woman in the parent-child metaphor: whereas in the former she was shameless, depraved,