Bonds of Love: Methodic Studies of Prophetic Texts with Marriage Imagery (Isaiah 50:1-3 and 54:1-10, Hosea 1-3, Jeremiah 2-3)
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Citation for published version (APA):

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CHAPTER 2

Background Issues in relation to Marriage Imagery

'An important aspect of this metaphor is its singularity in the ancient Near East'.

1

1 Introduction

The last decades of the twentieth century have shown a surge of interest in the marriage imagery in the Hebrew Bible and may be called heydays with respect to studies concerning this topic. Adler (1990), Galambush (1992), Stienstra (1993) and Weider (1993) have published monographs on the topic and Van Dijk-Hemmes and Brenner have devoted several essays to it (see Brenner 1995). In this section a survey will be given of different aspects of research in this area. This survey will simultaneously serve as an introduction to the major aspects of this imagery in the present discussion. It will not be limited to literary and hermeneutical issues, but reference will also be made to developments in the history of Israelite religion stimulated by the findings in Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom, and to patterns in the cultural environment of Israel that may help to clarify the marriage imagery and situate it in a broader context.

2 On metaphor

2.1 General theories on metaphor

Metaphor is a literary device in which terms from two different areas of life are brought together in order to achieve a special meaning which goes beyond the ordinary meaning of words or concepts. Metaphor has the effect of twisting the usual perception of things. It does not aim at a strict definition but is a form of figurative, poetic language which appeals to the imagination. It is not a figure of identity but of correspondence. It may function as a surprising evocation of meaning by association, or as a well-known shortcut to express the correspondence between two things without having to spell out all of the details. Biblical poetry and biblical language are extremely rich in metaphor.

Since metaphor is a complex and challenging phenomenon – metaphors ever retain a dimension of open and indeterminable meaning – scholars studying

biblical metaphors have displayed a growing interest in the theory of metaphor. The definition and function of metaphor, however, are still widely contested in linguistic, philosophical and literary studies.

For our purposes a summary of the main points of discussion concerning metaphor is sufficient. The term ‘metaphor’ is derived from the Greek words μετά and φέρειν and literally points to the transference of a word or expression from one element, to which it naturally belongs, to another element. Aristotle in his *Poetics* gave the following definition:

Metaphor is the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species, or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else, by analogy.

This definition has become the basis of the so-called substitution view of metaphor. In this view, which according to some does not do full justice to Aristotle, metaphor is explained as the substitution of a literal term by a figurative or ‘strange’ term. In order to understand the metaphor, one needs only to reverse this process and replace the metaphorical term by a literal term. The implication is that metaphors do not represent additional meaning, but are simply another, nicer way of expressing the same meaning. In the same spirit, metaphor came to be looked upon as a decorative device or literary ornament, belonging to the sphere of rhetorics rather than to the sphere of semantics.

This substitution view of metaphor has been dominant for a long time. It was eventually replaced by the so-called interaction view introduced by Richards and developed by Black. Richards’ starting point is that metaphors consist of two constituent elements. He calls these the ‘tenor’ and the ‘vehicle’. The tenor is the underlying subject, and the vehicle is the figurative term – sometimes itself called the ‘metaphor’ – that is used to describe the tenor. In the metaphor ‘my heart is a wilderness’, the tenor would be ‘my heart’ and the vehicle ‘wilderness’. Not in every case, however, are both elements of the metaphor explicitly mentioned. Sometimes only the vehicle is indicated while the tenor is understood, as in the example ‘how sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank’.

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5. Korpel, *Rift*, pp. 37-38, argues that Aristotle was wrongly credited with the substitution view of metaphor, since the idea of substitution in the work of Aristotle accounts only for some metaphors. Aristotle continues to mention other examples of metaphors in which the metaphor is not replaceable. The substitution theory would thus only be a partial reflection of Aristotle’s view of metaphor.


If there is agreement that a metaphor consists of two relevant elements, a vehicle and a tenor, how do these elements together constitute the meaning of a metaphor? Black conceives of this process in terms of ‘interaction’. According to him, the meaning of a metaphor is constituted in a dynamic relation between tenor and vehicle. Metaphors occasion an interaction between the tenor and the vehicle, with the result that the vehicle ‘reorganizes’ our perception of the tenor. This ‘reorganization’ is achieved by the vehicle highlighting those qualities in the tenor that are usually associated with the vehicle, while it suppresses those not associated with the vehicle. In the example ‘man is a wolf’, the vehicle ‘wolf’ modifies our understanding of ‘man’, in the sense that those qualities usually associated with wolves, such as ferocity, aggression and power to assault humans, are highlighted, while qualities not commonly associated with wolves, such as living in houses or having jobs, are repressed. In this sense the vehicle reorganizes our perception of the tenor.

Black argues that a metaphor works like a filter in two directions. The vehicle highlights particular aspects of the tenor and at the same time the tenor filters and modifies our understanding of the vehicle, though to a lesser extent. If man is called a wolf, this not only highlights the wolf-like qualities in man, but also the man-like qualities in wolves. There is a reciprocal effect in the interaction between vehicle and tenor.

In Black’s line of reasoning, vehicle and tenor are not conceived of as isolated words: both vehicle and tenor involve a system of ‘associated commonplaces’. These consist of the qualities and characteristics that an average speaker associates with these terms. Thus, metaphor does not merely bring into contact two words or ideas, but two systems of associated commonplaces. This makes metaphor a complex phenomenon, for the large number of possible connections between the two systems of associated commonplaces makes the interaction between these systems to some extent indeterminate and open to the articulation of new meaning aspects. For Black this means that metaphors cannot be replaced or paraphrased by literal language: they articulate new meaning.

Black’s theory draws particular attention to the indeterminacy of metaphors, the impossibility of defining with precision what a metaphor “means”. Because it is not merely two words or two ideas, but two indeterminate systems of culturally associated commonplaces, that metaphor brings into contact, the precise interaction between tenor and vehicle is to some extent unpredictable [...] a metaphor does not make a single statement [...], but provokes the reader to see connections where none had been seen before. Metaphor in Black’s view is thus not a matter of transference of an isolated word from A to B, as Aristotle conceived of it, but of interaction between A and B which results in C, a new and to some extent flexible metaphorical meaning.

A significant contribution was further made by Lakoff and Johnson who maintain that metaphors govern human thought and experience on a more fundamental level than that of language. Metaphors belong to the level of how people

8. For summaries of the views of M. Black, published in 1962, see Abrams, Glossary, p. 68; Galambush, Jerusalem, pp. 5-6.
conceptualize reality. These scholars introduce the term ‘metaphorical concept’ for metaphors on this fundamental level. Such metaphorical concepts come to the fore in various forms of metaphorical speech. A famous example is ‘argument is war’ which motivates expressions such as ‘she won the argument’ or ‘she shot down all of my arguments’. In connection with marriage imagery, this idea of a metaphorical concept that lies at the root of several related forms of metaphorical speech is relevant as well, as this imagery also shows the tendency to fan out in different directions.

A final characteristic of metaphor that concerns us here is that Black and Lakoff and Johnson all emphasize that metaphors are culture dependent. In order for a metaphor to be understood, the speaker and hearer must have the same frame of reference. The expression ‘a Dutch treat’ is not understandable for those unaware of the frugality usually attributed to the Dutch people. For Lakoff and Johnson, the fundamental metaphorical concepts that ‘we live by’ are also culture bound. Not every culture is based on the implicit idea that time is money. In their view, such fundamental metaphors guide our understanding of reality and thereby have the effect of reproducing certain ‘hidden’ values. Metaphors are thus neither value-neutral nor culture independent.

2.2 Biblical metaphor

Biblical metaphors and metaphorical forms of speech about God form a special category within the field of metaphor and raise specific questions. It is, for instance, a much debated issue whether biblical speech about God is necessarily metaphorical. The possibility to speak literally about God has often been denied on account of the fact that his being is mysterious and unseen. A ensuing question is: if all biblical speech about God is metaphorical, what is its truth value? Can metaphors circumscribe reality in any accurate way? Or can metaphors only be approximately true so that the divine reality remains hidden after all?

A first point to be noted is that metaphorical language is not by definition untrue or less true than literal language. That would be the case if one only allows for the knowledge of observable and external things. But if one allows for genuine knowledge of things that are beyond observation — such as mental processes and feelings — then another form of knowledge is acknowledged, namely, knowledge by experience and participation. In this case the reality of a certain matter may not be empirically verifiable but it may be verifiable by experience and by immersion in it. Here lies the potential truth value of metaphors that relate to hidden and unobservable realities: they may cast a significant light on subjects, whose existence is known from experience, and enable us to know these subjects to some extent by force of the analogies between vehicle and tenor. Macky, Stienstra and Seifert leave thus no doubt that metaphors have a cognitive content.

11. Macky, Centrality, pp. 8-10.
and open up accurate knowledge of realities beyond observation.\textsuperscript{12} With respect to God, according to Stienstra and Seifert no other form of informative language is available than metaphorical language, for only the latter can cross the gap between human concepts and divine realities.\textsuperscript{13}

At the same time, there is a broad recognition that metaphors not only have a cognitive function. Especially Macky emphasizes that the purposes of the biblical writers in using metaphors were to transform and to stimulate exploration.\textsuperscript{14} Metaphors have the capacity to evoke wonder, to appeal to the imagination and to involve the reader. For Macky this relates to a key concept in his definition of metaphor: analogy. Metaphors provide information about a subject in terms of a vehicle and this information is based on the fact that subject and vehicle are related by analogy. The term analogy is to be understood in a threefold sense: it implies that there will be similarities (positive analogy) and differences (negative analogy) between vehicle and tenor and there will be a ‘neutral analogy’, that is, space for a creative further exploration of the combination of vehicle and tenor.\textsuperscript{15} It is clear that the latter aspect provokes the reader to creative and imaginative reflection.

A final word may be said here about the position of Macky, who maintains contrary to mainstream scholarship that some speech about God is literal. Macky employs an unconventional definition of metaphorical and literal speech. In his view, literal speech is not the same as speech with a concrete, verifiable referent but it is defined as independent language-use. That is, such speech is not dependent on other uses of the same word, but is directly understandable. Metaphorical speech, on the other hand, is a form of language that is dependent and analogically related to other senses of the same word. The effect of these definitions is that Macky can include speech about unobservable realities under certain conditions in the category of literal speech. If the speaker knows the reality she is speaking about directly from experience and can indicate certain concomitants of the described reality, it is likely that her speech – even when it is about God – is literal.\textsuperscript{16}

Examples are the expressions ‘God saves’ and ‘God is active’. Both are standard biblical expressions and, although there may originally have been an analogical relation to human saving actions and activity, it is likely that these expressions in course of time came to function as independent analogical usage. That is, the biblical writers both had direct experience of God’s saving actions and activity and must have recognized that the terms describing these actions had a special (independent) meaning when applied to God. They were able to indicate the effects of these actions in their personal life (concomitants). All of these elements suggest that the biblical speakers meant these expressions literally and


\textsuperscript{13} Stienstra, \textit{Husband}, pp. 10, 17, 32.; Seifert, Hoseabuch, p. 60. For another view see Macky, \textit{Centrality}, pp. 229-241 (this relates to Macky’s broadened definition of literal speech, pp. 205-209).

\textsuperscript{14} Macky, \textit{Centrality}, 243-263 (chapter 10).

\textsuperscript{15} See Macky, \textit{Centrality}, pp. 49-50.

\textsuperscript{16} Macky, \textit{Centrality}, pp. 205-209.
not metaphorically. Fair enough, Macky admits that by far the most anthropomorphic and concrete forms of speech about God are metaphorical. References to emotional activities or specific interpersonal activities of God – his love for Israel – are surely metaphorical, for we cannot experience such actions directly but need to establish their meaning in analogy with the human situation. Macky is thus sensitive to the fact that metaphorical expressions can become literal and that there is a broad variety of nuances between strictly metaphorical and strictly literal expressions.

2.3 Marriage in ancient Israel

The interaction of vehicle and tenor within metaphors means that the organization of marriage in Hebrew society substantially influences the meaning of the biblical metaphor of marriage. In order to understand this metaphor one must possess some knowledge of this institution. The biblical texts may not give us a full picture of marriage in real life, but do provide some information.

- It may be assumed that marriage was in principle a relationship between two partners. Although it may not have been an exclusive relationship on the part of men, women were obligated to exclusive loyalty to their husbands. Polygamy seems to have been a privilege of high-ranking men or may have taken place as a solution to problems such as childlessness; men could also have additional relations with concubines. This, however, need not affect the essential idea that marriage was understood as a one-to-one relationship.
- Marriage was an unequal relationship in which the man was the dominant and privileged partner. This may be gathered from the unequal treatment of male and female sexual transgressions and from the divorce legislation.
- Divorce was an acknowledged possibility.
- Despite all variation in real life, there is an ideal of marriage as a form of lasting companionship and partnership.

At the same time, one must be cautious not to overstress the connections between human marriage and the metaphorical marriage between Yhwh and Israel. In the interaction view of metaphor, the tenor, in this case the relation of Yhwh and Israel as depicted elsewhere, has its own characteristics. These may influence the notion of marriage and deflect it in a particular direction, highlighting some elements and disregarding others. A metaphor always involves some freedom to depart from the rules that apply to the domain of the vehicle. As we shall see, in the sphere of metaphor it is not a problem that the husband takes his former wife

19. There is actually much uncertainty about the issues of monogamy and polygamy. Stienstra, Husband, pp. 79-83, argues that monogamy was the rule rather than the exception in biblical times; Adler, Background, pp. 57-59, is more hesitant but also assumes that marriage as such was predominantly monogamous.
back (Jer. 3:1) or that reunion results in a new bridal time rather than in a continuation of the marriage (Hos. 2:20-21). Here the metaphor defies the laws that apply to the human level of marriage and divorce.

It seems that Stienstra, who calls Israelite marriage the donor field and the relationship between Yhwh and Israel the recipient field of the metaphor, takes the two-way interaction between tenor and vehicle insufficiently into account. In her view the metaphor of marriage works in complete analogy to the Israelite arrangement of human marriage. This suggests that Stienstra in practice works with a transference rather than an interaction concept of metaphor. She does not allow for the creative aspects in the metaphor which expresses new meaning, but assumes tacitly that vehicle and tenor may be virtually identified. This point of departure leads her to an interpretation of the marriage metaphor in which Yhwh comes out as a rather conventional and conservative husband.

To conclude, metaphor may thus be understood in terms of the interaction between vehicle and tenor. These elements together give metaphor its meaning. It may be emphasized, however, that not all qualities of the vehicle are involved in restructuring our understanding of the tenor, nor are all characteristics of the tenor highlighted by the vehicle in use. The metaphor that Yhwh is the marriage partner of Israel does not imply that all qualities of husbands are applicable to Yhwh, nor that all qualities of Yhwh are expressed by this metaphor. Metaphors always suggest a partial correspondence between vehicle and tenor, in the sense both that the correspondence is partial and that the metaphor highlights only a part of the tenor and of the vehicle.

3 The cultural-historical background of the marriage metaphor

As Israel did not live in isolation, the question must be addressed whether the biblical marriage imagery can be explained in relation to general features within the cultures of the Ancient Near East. In this respect three sorts of connections have been postulated. The biblical portrayal of the marriage between Yhwh and Israel has been related to the following phenomena:

- in the mythology of the Ancient Near East, gods paired themselves in sexual union to the earth, as part of a recurrent ritual in order to ensure the fertility of the earth (the theory of sacred marriage);
- in the mythology of the Ancient Near East, gods were usually accompanied by a female partner and (or) married to a goddess within the same pantheon;
- in the Ancient Near East, capital cities, or the goddesses of these cities, could be regarded as consorts of the patron deity of the city.

23. In calling Israelite marriage the donor field of the metaphor, Stienstra (Husband, p. 31) follows Kittay’s and Lehrer’s theory of donor field and recipient field. This terminology of ‘donor’ and ‘recipient’, however, seems to imply a one-way influence between vehicle and tenor rather than the two-way interaction that Black advocated.

24. Cf. Stienstra, Husband, p. 150: ‘Whereas He [Yhwh] might reasonably have expected love, loyalty and obedience (as any Hebrew husband), He has to put up with His wife failing to recognize His position [...] Ezekiel provides us mainly with a colourful description of the appropriate punishment’. In fact, even the title of Stienstra’s book is problematic (‘Yhwh is the husband of his people’) (italics mine).
These explanatory models are not all of the same weight. The second explanation moves on the level of the phenomenology of religion and seeks to explain structural elements within Israelite religion by a comparison with the surrounding religions. The other two models of explanation, as a matter of fact, draw attention to the distinctions within the marriage imagery in Hosea, Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah. The idea of the city as consort – the third model – may contribute to the understanding of the Zion texts in Isaiah where Zion functions as the partner of Yhwh, while the first model of the sacred marriage between heaven and earth may illumine Hosea 1-2 where the earth seems to fulfill the role of Yhwh’s partner. The diversity in the biblical marriage imagery should thus not be overlooked. It may not be possible to find a single comprehensive model in the cultural background that explains all of the biblical imagery. Nonetheless it is important to discuss the possible points of connection between the prophetic marriage imagery and the broader cultural environment, since the alleged influences of this environment have considerably affected the interpretation of the texts central to this study.

3.1 Sacred marriage in mythology and cult

The theory of a sacred marriage refers to the idea that a male divinity is engaged in a sexual relationship with the earth, conceived of as a mother goddess, in order to ensure the fertility of nature. On the level of the cult, it refers to the re-enactment of this sexual union by representatives of heaven and earth, namely, the king and the priestess. The thought is that in the backwash of this practice other forms of sacred sex and especially sacred prostitution – between worshippers and temple women – flourished.

The theory of sacred marriage has been particularly influential with respect to Hosea 1-2. A great number of scholars assert that Hosea’s presentation of Yhwh and Israel as husband and wife was modelled after the sexual relations of a divinity with the earth. Wolff in his commentary on Hosea emphasizes that such a concept of hieros gamos was characteristic for Canaanite religion. The marriage partners are Baal and the earth goddess. Hosea, however, replaces Baal and the earth with Yhwh and his people, and substitutes the mythological categories with the ‘legal categories of covenantal thought’.25 Wolff discerns here a ‘striking process of reception and polemic with contemporary mythology’.26 That Baal was married to the land and that this phenomenon to some extent explains Hosea’s marriage imagery is also assumed by Von Rad, Ringgren and others.27

According to Wolff, however, the idea of sacred marriage influences Hosea’s marriage metaphor in yet another way. Moving beyond the general theory that Hosea’s marriage imagery forms a contrast to the mythological marriage of Baal to the earth, Wolff makes a more specific assumption with respect to the conduct

that the prophet is attacking. Wolff’s thesis is that Hosea develops his marriage imagery in response to the involvement of Israel in real sexual cultic acts. That is, young women prostitute themselves as part of the cult in order to devote their sexuality to the deity and secure their own fertility. Strictly speaking, this fertility rite is not related to the mythology or cult of the hieros gamos, but Wolff regards both phenomena as unmistakable ingredients within Israelite religion due to Canaanite influences. The real ‘prostitution’ of the Israelite women explains Hosea’s usage of the expression ‘to commit harlotry away from Yhwh’ (Hos. 1:2). This expression would in turn have given rise to the surprising and polemic idea of a marriage between Yhwh and Israel.  

There are three moot points in Wolff’s argumentation. The first is his assumption that the marriage between Baal and the earth was a core issue in Canaanite mythology. Adler has minutely explored the mythic texts from Ugarit and has concluded that there is no firm basis in Ugaritic mythology either for the existence of a goddess specifically related to the earth or for the idea that Baal formed a couple with such a goddess. Evidence for a pattern of hieros gamos with respect to Baal and an earth goddess is simply not extant. A second point is Wolff’s assumption that the expression ‘woman of harlotry’ in Hosea 1:2 can be explained in light of a sexual initiation rite within the Canaanite cult. Contemporary scholars dispute the existence of such an initiation ritual and question the commonly assumed link between Canaanite religion and sexual cult practices. The idea that Canaanite religion is merely focussed on fertility and full of sexual aberrations is prejudiced and should not be mistaken for factual knowledge. In the third place, one may wonder whether the term נער in Hosea 1 demands such an elaborate explanation and does not simply presuppose the idea of an existing relationship between Yhwh and Israel. Is the notion of a covenant that demands faithfulness and exclusive loyalty of Israel and that motivates the equation of apostasy and harlotry (cf. Ex. 34:14-16) not the most likely point of departure for Hosea? This will be further discussed in relation to the Hosea chapters below, but it may already be indicated that the link between the harlotry of the nation and any form of real prostitution is increasingly disputed.

29. See E.J. Adler, Background, pp. 131-144. Her conclusion is: ‘The existence in the Canaanite pantheon of an earth goddess may be regarded with doubt, along with Baal’s marriage to her or any other’. Other goddesses such as Anat and Asherah, according to Adler, are not particularly associated with agricultural fertility nor can one of them unambiguously be regarded as the spouse of Baal.
30. Adler (Background, pp. 178-185) refutes the claims made by Wolff in this respect and maintains that ‘the claim made by biblical scholars such as Wolff and Rost, that the ritual deflowering of virgins was a commonplace of Canaanite culture [...] and the basing of such claims on the reports of Lucian and Herodotus is unreasonable’. Her argument is that the report of Herodotus concerning Babylon is the only evidence from ancient times and its credibility is not beyond dispute. Similarly W. Rudolph, Hosea (KAT), Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1966, pp. 42-43.
3.2 Evidence for a goddess as partner of Yhwh?

The theory that Yhwh may have had a consort deity was originally nothing but an inference from the study of other Ancient Near Eastern religions. In the cultures surrounding Israel couples of male and female deities were an omnipresent phenomenon and so the surmise was made that Yhwh once must have had a consort deity as well. El and Asherah, Baal and Anat, Tammuz and Ishtar, to mention a few neighbouring deities, were all encountered in pairs.

In the beginning of this century this hypothesis gained support from a document found in Elephantine. A text fragment from this Jewish colony in Egypt contains a reference to Anat-Yahu. It is an oath text concerning a female donkey that starts as follows:

Menahem ben Shallum ben X swore to Meshullam ben Natan [...] by the sanctuary and by Anatyahu [...] saying: The female donkey [...] I am entitled to transfer it to Pamisi.\(^{32}\)

The term Anat-Yahu presumably refers to a deity or divine force that is invoked in order to guarantee the effectivity of the oath. A majority of scholars interprets Anat-Yahu as the name of a female deity in analogy to another goddess mentioned in Elephantine with the name Anat-Bethel. This goddess Anat-Yahu is clearly connected to Yahu and is quite generally regarded as a consort of Yhwh.\(^{33}\)

It should be noted that the name Anat-Yahu occurs only once in the available documents and in a peculiarly syncretistic setting so that it is hardly possible to draw any conclusions from this with respect to the religion of Israel in Palestine. Nonetheless, it has been argued that the religion of the Jews in Elephantine has much in common with pre-exilic religion in northern Israel. Accordingly, Van der Toorn has suggested that the goddess Anat-Yahu – a goddess created after the model of Anat-Bethel due to the influence of Aramaean immigrants in Israel at the end of the eighth century – was honoured as Yhwh’s consort in Israel itself.\(^{34}\)

The discussion concerning the consort of Yhwh received a new impulse from the discoveries in Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet ‘Ajrud in 1970 and 1975-1976. These sites produced inscriptions which throw a new light on the religious situation in eighth century Palestine. In Khirbet el-Qom, a village situated in Judah to the west of Hebron, an inscription was found on a pillar from a burial cave. It is difficult to decipher and only in a second reconstruction presented by Lemaire is there a reference to Yhwh’s asherah. In a now commonly accepted reconstruction the text reads:


\(^{34}\) See van der Toorn, ‘Anat-Yahu’, pp. 92-95. In his reconstruction northern Israel became a religious melting-pot after 722 BCE which included the introduction of Aramaean deities (Bethel, Anat-Bethel) into Israelite religion. Descendants of this pluralist religion may have migrated to Elephantine two centuries later.
Uriyahu the rich wrote it:
Blessed be Uriyahu by Yahweh
from his enemies by his asherah he has saved him!\(^{35}\)

The phrase ‘his asherah’ presumably occurs twice more in scratchings at the end of the inscription.\(^{36}\) In Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, a site in the Sinai to the south of Kadesh Barnea, a large building was excavated, presumably a caravanserai for travellers and traders. In this building two storage jars were found with drawings and blessing formulations on top of them. The blessing text on the first jar reads:

x says: Say to Y and Z [...]:
I bless you
by Yahweh of Samaria and by his asherah.

The text on the second jar reads:

Amaryahu says: Say to my lord: Is it well with you?
I bless you
by Yahweh of Teman and by his asherah’.\(^{37}\)

The interpretation of the term ‘asherah’ in these inscriptions is not unanimous. Opinions diverge on whether the word functions as a proper name and refers to the goddess Asherah or functions as a noun and refers to an object. A strong argument in favour of the latter opinion is that the combination of a proper name with a possessive suffix is rare if not impossible in Hebrew.\(^{38}\) This seems to rule out the possibility that the text refers to Yhwh and a female deity named Asherah. Thus scholars have advocated other interpretations of the term asherah, such as that it would refer to (a) a cult object in the shape of a wooden pole, with or without a relation to the goddess Asherah, (b) a subordinate agent of blessing personifying the blessing powers of Yhwh or (c) a shrine or sanctuary.\(^{39}\)


On closer consideration, however, the grammatical argument is not conclusive. There are parallels of divine names with a third person suffix in Ugaritic literature and also the suggestion has been made that the final consonant in *asrth* can be explained as an archaic name ending rather than as suffix.\(^40\) So the goddess interpretation could not altogether be dismissed. One of the major arguments in favour of the goddess interpretation according to Dever is that it would be illogical 'to suppose that an inanimate object, or even a sanctuary, could be mentioned on equal footing with the principal deity as an *agent of blessing*'.\(^41\) In his view the inevitable conclusion must be that the three texts refer to the goddess Asherah. This point is not decisive, however, in view of the Elephantine text quoted above, according to which it is possible to swear by the sanctuary so that one may presuppose that it is equally possible to invoke an object with a certain religious value as an agent of blessing.

At present some scholars have concluded from the Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet ‘Ajrud texts that reference is made to the goddess Asherah and that Yhwh formed a couple with this goddess in the religion of the eighth century.\(^42\) Others have explained the term ‘asherah’ as reference to an object that is somehow related to the cult of Yhwh and attributed with the power of blessing.\(^43\) The latter view seems more convincing to me, on account of the subordinate nature of the term ‘asherah’ in the formulas (‘his asherah’) and on account of the fact that the blessing formulas continue in the singular and identify Yhwh as the main source of blessing. Even if one were to take the opposite view, the inscriptions do not necessarily testify to the idea that the goddess Asherah was regarded as the partner goddess of Yhwh. The appearance of two deities in close association is not conclusive evidence for that surmise. At the same time, there is reason to assume that in the pre-exilic era goddesses were worshipped in Israel in combination with the cult of Yhwh. Evidence thereof is found both in the biblical texts (cf. 2 Kgs. 21:7; 23:7) and in the numerous female figurines excavated in the region.\(^44\) However, there is again no sign of Yhwh and one of these goddesses being regarded as spouses.

Some interpreters have related the discoveries in Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet ‘Ajrud to the biblical marriage imagery. Margalit is one of those who assume a direct connection between Hosea’s nuptial metaphors and the Yhwh-Asherah connection in the inscriptions. In his view:

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\(^{44}\) On these figurines see Albertz, *Religionsgeschichte*, pp. 133-134: ‘Auch wenn noch nicht sicher ist, daß alle Typen dieser nackten Frauendarstellungen als Göttin gedeutet werden müssen, so ist doch zumindest für einen Teil von ihnen ein religiöser bzw. kultischer Kontext wahrscheinlich’.
The idea of Israel as Yhwh's wife, first encountered in the writings of Hosea in the eighth century, may have originated as a polemical response to the pervasive catchphrase *yhw h w'srth* of contemporary Hebrew inscriptions [...]. Prophets of subsequent generations will develop the polemically-born idea of Israel as Yhwh's betrothed into a major tenet of Israelite religion.  

Margalit thus explains the biblical marriage imagery as a transformation of the views concerning Yhwh and his spouse visible in the inscriptions. In the biblical account the goddess beside Yhwh is eliminated and the marriage ties between Yhwh and his consort are transformed into the metaphorical marriage ties between Yhwh and Israel.

It is interesting that a similar transformation theory has been put forward without reference to the Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet 'Ajrud texts and apart from the idea that Asherah functioned once as consort of Yhwh. Korpel has concluded from a close comparison of Ugaritic and Hebrew descriptions of the divine:

> It appears that in Israel the imagery used to describe the love life and marriages of the Canaanite gods was deliberately and consistently transferred to the relation between Yhwh and his chosen people. [...] Whereas in Ugarit it was apparently the intention of the poets to ascribe a splendid and even superior love-life to the deities, the [...] turn to monotheism forced the Israelite tradition to restrict this anthropomorphic imagery to the relation between God and his people.

Korpel sees the biblical marriage imagery as a compensation for the disappearance of the female partner of Yhwh. Her argument is that the erasure of female deities in the biblical texts and the introduction of the people as marriage partner of Yhwh are corresponding developments.

In response to this transformation theory, it may be remarked that the correspondence between the marriage patterns of gods in the cultures surrounding Israel and biblical marriage imagery is only of a general and superficial kind. While it is phenomenologically true that the people as marriage partner of Yhwh take over the role of a goddess, the whole idea of marriage is considerably different and far more developed in the relation between Yhwh and Israel than with respect to the deities in the surrounding cultures. In the biblical metaphor there is an emphasis on the analogy with human marriage, on the long-lasting character of the relationship and on the exclusive nature of the relationship. The love affair between Yhwh and Israel is not just one among many but a special and enduring relationship. This picture differs from the love life of the deities in the Ugaritic texts, which is more colourful, capricious and fluid and usually involves various partners. In this light the theory of Margalit that the biblical texts deliberately and directly substitute Israel for Asherah as partner of Yhwh is...

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46. Korpel, *Rift*, p. 231. On p. 222 she writes: 'In Israel the people took over the position of a beloved goddess'.
47. For more details see Korpel, *Rift*, pp. 213-17, 225-28, and Adler, *Background*, pp. 134-44.
strained, even apart from the fact that it is not certain whether Asherah ever was regarded as Yhwh's marriage partner.

While it may thus be helpful to realize that on a structural level, in the biblical marriage imagery Israel takes over a role elsewhere reserved for a goddess, this insight has only partial explanatory value. The connections between the biblical marriage imagery and the patterns of intimate relations between deities in the surrounding cultures are indirect and superficial while the distinctions between both phenomena seem to preponderate.

3.3 The city as spouse of Yhwh?

According to a third group of scholars the biblical image of Yhwh as husband of the nation has its origins in the West-Semitic idea that capital cities could be married to the patron deity of the city. Seminal work in this respect was done by Fitzgerald (1972), and Galambush and Schmitt among others have supported and further developed the thesis of Fitzgerald.48

Fitzgerald has sought to explain the widespread female personification of cities in the Hebrew Bible with special attention for the accusation of harlotry voiced against Israelite cities. His thesis is that the female personification of cities – as queens, ladies, daughters – relates to the general cultural idea that capital cities were regarded as goddesses who were married to the patron god of the city. According to Fitzgerald Israel adopted this idea but adapted it so that the marriage between Yhwh and the capital city was understood as an exclusive relationship. In this light the worship of other gods than the patron god Yhwh came to be seen as the equivalent of adultery or harlotry.49

The marriage imagery can also be explained in light of this pattern. Given his focus on the role of the city, Fitzgerald maintains that texts which present Yhwh as husband of a city – Jerusalem or Samaria – reflect the most original form of the marriage imagery, while texts which depict Israel as nation as spouse of Yhwh must be regarded as a secondary development. In other words, the depiction of the people (or: the land) as partner of Yhwh in Hosea 1-2 must be explained as a deviation from the primary form of the marriage imagery that is found in, e.g., Ezekiel 16 and 23. The presentation of Fitzgerald is, however, problematic for various reasons.

- The main problem lies in the fact that his thesis in fact consists of three hypotheses at once. His point is that in the West-Semitic area capital cities were regarded not only as females (1) but also as goddesses (2) who were married to the patron god of the city (3). In the course of his article he does not prove that in the extra-biblical material gods were married to capital cities, which is in fact the major tenet of his theory. He concentrates on the

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49. See Fitzgerald, 'Background', p. 405.
female character of cities, and the links between the female city and the male city deity and the notion of marriage disappear from view.

- The attempt to explain the use of the verb נָשַׁל exclusively in relation to the female personification of cities is illogical and leads to the distorted view that every occurrence of this verb originates in the marriage of Yhwh to the capital cities of Jerusalem and Samaria. On the one hand, this cannot explain the fact that foreign cities such as Nineveh and Tyre are also depicted as involved in harlotry, although these cannot be considered to be ‘married’ to Yhwh (cf. Isa. 23:17; Nah. 3:4). On the other hand, the treatment of the verb נָשַׁל in complete isolation of the same root in extra-prophetical texts is questionable. The notion of ‘covenant’ that accompanies the occurrence of the verb נָשַׁל in Lev. 20:5-6; Ex. 34:15-16; Deut. 31:16 is entirely ignored in Fitzgerald’s article, although the influence of this concept seems to be significant.

- The way in which Fitzgerald explains all biblical marriage imagery as a modification of the general pattern that gods could be married to a city takes the variation within the biblical marriage imagery insufficiently into account. Galambush has used Fitzgerald’s theory as the cornerstone in her treatment of the prophetic marriage metaphor. The depiction of Jerusalem as Yhwh’s wife in Ezekiel 16 and 23 in her view stands in the tradition of marriages between a city and its patron deity.

Galambush improves on the work of Fitzgerald by explaining the harlotry motif not only as a consequence of the general pattern of personified and married cities, but also as a result of the biblical covenant concept. In her view ‘the biblical metaphor of apostasy as sexual infidelity’ cannot be understood apart from the covenant relationship between Yhwh and Israel. The claim of exclusive fidelity within the covenant renders it possible to assume an analogy between covenant and marriage and in this light it becomes feasible to identify the worship of gods other than Yhwh as harlotry or adultery. Galambush thus assumes two formative influences on the prophetic description of apostasy as harlotry: the concept of the covenant with its demand of exclusive loyalty and the tradition of marriage between personified capital cities and their patron deity.

In addition Galambush notes that the female personification of cities occurs within the prophetic texts predominantly in the context of condemnation and accusation. The motifs of infidelity and misbehaviour become favourite themes in the portrayal of cities. This approach enables Galambush to include such texts as Nah. 3:4 and Isa. 23:17 in her survey of the prophetic harlotry motif. In these texts the notion of covenant does not play a role; the personification of foreign

50. For similar and other points of critique, see W.D. Whitt, ‘The Divorce of Yahweh and Asherah in Hos 2.4-7.12 ff’, SJOT 6 (1992), pp. 31-67 (esp. pp. 54-56). According to Whitt (p. 55) precisely the idea that cities were married to a god is unlikely in a polytheistic society, since in this frame of thought ‘the gods marry one another’.
52. Galambush, Jerusalem, pp. 32-34.
capital cities rather serves, 'as a rhetorical tool by which the prophets could belittle enemy strongholds'.

Two summarizing comments may be made. Both Galambush and Fitzgerald make the assumption that the cultural paradigm of cities married to divine consorts can explain (a) the female personification of cities in the biblical texts, (b) the metaphor of idolatry as harlotry and (c) the biblical marriage metaphor. It seems, however, that the application of marriage terminology to Yhwh and Israel, the depiction of female cities as involved in harlotry and the female personification of cities are basically three distinct phenomena which cannot all be dealt with under the general heading of marriage imagery. In the first place the verb נָקַת is not always related to the notion of marriage (Isa. 23:17; Nah. 3:4); in the second place the female personification of cities is not always related to the notion of marriage (Isa. 1:21-26; 51:17-22; Lam. 1); and in the third place, the biblical marriage imagery is not always related to cities (Hos. 1-2; Jer. 3:6-10). Therefore these three phenomena require separate treatments, even though they occasionally happen to occur in combination with one another.

In general, the theory that the biblical marriage imagery relates primarily to cities does not correspond to the biblical evidence. In the prophetic texts two forms of marriage imagery are found: one in combination with the female personification of cities (Isa. 54; Ezek. 16 and 23) and one with the female personification of the nation (Hos. 1-3; Jer. 3:6-10). It seems advisable not to attempt to explain the one from the other. The proposals of Galambush that the female character in Hosea 2 may be identified as the capital city Samaria and the female addressee in Jer. 2:1-3:5 as Jerusalem strike one as an attempt to force the texts into a system into which they poorly fit.

These reflections on the female personification of the city may be concluded with the contributions of Steck and Biddle. These scholars adjust the approaches of Fitzgerald and Galambush by linking the phenomenon of female personification of cities not exclusively to the idea of marriage between a city and its patron deity but to the more general cultural notion that capital cities could be conceived of as female and as goddesses, queens, ladies, widows and mothers of their inhabitants. The biblical texts take over the rich variety of female imagery with respect to the city and in this regard the depiction of the city as the bride of Yhwh is only a subordinate form of this imagery.

Steck and Biddle both focus on the personification of Jerusalem and unanimously suggest that the first forms of an extended female picture of Jerusalem may be found in the book of Lamentations, where the destruction of the city is lamented in terms personifying the city as a widow and a bereft mother in analogy to Sumerian city laments. When such extensive female personification of Jerusalem reappears in Isaiah 40-55, 60-62 and Ezekiel 16 and 23, it seems that these texts somehow relate to the theme of Jerusalem's destruction.

54. Galambush, Jerusalem, p. 44.
57. Steck, 'Zion', p. 279; Biddle, 'Jerusalem', p. 182.
With respect to the marriage imagery Steck seems to assume two traditions: one that focuses on the nation as partner of Yhwh, which is found in Hosea and Jeremiah, and one that focuses on the city as partner of Yhwh, which is found in Ezekiel and in Deutero-Isaiah.58

3.4 The covenant background

In distinction from these proposals, Adler advocates the view that intra-Israelite factors rather than extra-Israelite influences are the essential force behind the biblical marriage imagery. She emphasizes the strong analogy between the institution of marriage and the Hebrew concept of covenant and argues that the correspondence between these two concepts motivates the presentation of Yhwh and Israel as husband and wife.

For Adler, an important aspect is the uniqueness of the prophetic marriage metaphor. An amorous and conjugal relationship between a nation as a collective and its deity is without parallel in the Ancient Near East.59 The singularity of the marriage metaphor is best explained as a reflection of the equally unique covenant concept that regulates the relationship between Yhwh and Israel. A substantial element in this covenant is the obligation of exclusive fidelity to the covenant deity Yhwh. According to Adler, it is this notion of an exclusive relationship that motivates the equation of the covenant relationship and marriage.60

Marriage is a metaphor most suitable to the relationship between Yhwh and Israel on account of a number of correspondences. Adler lists four major common features. She mentions (a) the obligation of exclusive fidelity by one party (the female, the nation) in particular; (b) the moment of election and of Yhwh’s special love for Israel; (c) the element of a commitment beyond the natural ties of the family and (d) the emotional intensity of the relationship, which is characterized by notions such as ‘love’, ‘passion’ and ‘jealousy’.61 Further, the notion of marriage offers the possibility of conceiving of different stages in the relationship between Yhwh and Israel and retelling Israel’s history as the history of a marriage with such diverse stages as a happy honeymoon and periods of alienation and reconciliation.

Adler’s focus on the intra-biblical parallel between the concept of covenant and the institution of marriage goes together with a fair amount of deconstruction of the theories advanced above. From a minute examination of the available evidence, Adler concludes that there is no real proof for the existence of sex rituals in Israelite or Canaanite cult, nor for the marriage between Baal and an earth goddess nor for the presence of a consort deity within Israelite religion, in

59. Adler, Background, pp. 2-7.
60. For Adler the covenant between Yhwh and Israel is unique in three respects: a) it is a covenant between a deity and a people, rather than between a king and a vassal nation; b) as overlord, Yhwh enters into a covenant with only one other party – Israel – and not with as many parties as possible as is usual in the realm of politics; c) this covenant with the obligation of exclusive fidelity to Yhwh as the only god is unique for Israel’s religion and distinguishes it from polytheism (Background, pp. 3-6, 419).
61. Adler, Background, pp. 42-84.
spite of the excavations in Kuntillet Ajrud. She points out that in the explanation of Fitzgerald precisely the element of marriage is the most contestable, as an exclusive relationship between the city and the patron deity is hardly conceivable in polytheistic religion. In her view a direct contribution of any of these elements from the cultural environment to the biblical marriage imagery is implausible, for the specific reason that the notion of gods having an exclusive relation with a female partner is absent in the cultures surrounding Israel. On the whole, therefore, the unique outlook of the biblical marriage metaphor suggests a primary link with the intra-biblical idea of covenant rather than with extra-biblical influences.

It is interesting that with the viewpoint of Adler a sort of post-critical naivety is reached. A good deal of the alleged cultural influences upon the biblical marriage imagery have appeared to be absent in the available sources and that brings us back to a position which had intuitively been taken before the publication of material from Ugarit and Kuntillet ‘Ajrud. All things considered, the view that the marriage metaphor is strongly related to the biblical notion of covenant and that this concept of covenant explains the marriage imagery to a larger extent than the parallels with the extra-biblical material, has gained new support.

3.5 Summary

1. The biblical presentation of Yhwh and Israel as marriage partners is unique to the biblical texts.

2. No single theory can fully explain the occurrence of marriage imagery in the biblical texts. This holds for the theory that in this imagery the goddess is replaced by Israel, for the theory that the imagery is motivated by a polemic with the idea of sacred marriage and for the idea that conjugal ties exist between a city and a patron deity. Only the intra-biblical concept of covenant may be seen as a central force behind the different forms of marriage imagery.

3. The theory of Fitzgerald raises the issue that there are two forms of marriage imagery present within prophetic texts, one with the personified city as partner of Yhwh (Isaiah 50 and 54; Ezekiel 16 and 23) and one with the personified nation as partner of Yhwh (Hosea 1-3, Jeremiah 2-3). One could say that this corresponds to two strands of tradition: the latter is strongly

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62. See Adler, Background, pp. 130-295. Her conclusion is (pp. 410-11): ‘Admittedly, our knowledge of Canaanite mythology is imperfect, yet little of the data known aids us in reconstructing the origins of the marriage metaphor. In extant texts, gods and goddesses do indeed engage in sexual relationships, yet of marriage we hear little. The earth goddess who, according to some, was superseded by Israel in the metaphor, cannot be identified. Regarding the cult, scholars have long assumed that pagan religion, especially Canaanite, demanded and gave religious meaning to sexual acts of various kinds [...] this is dubious [...] Thus, the origins of the metaphor of covenant as marriage should be sought primarily, or even only, in basic ideas peculiar to Israelite religion.’

63. Adler, Background, pp. 147-148.
rooted in the covenant tradition, while the former is influenced by the sustained female personification of capital cities.

4. It may be helpful to approach the distinctions between these texts not so much in terms of distinct marriage imagery but in terms of diverse text genres. Ezekiel 16 and 23 and Isaiah 50 and 54 are texts with a different sort of poetry than Hosea 1-3 and Jeremiah 2-3. The personification of Zion, Jerusalem and Samaria in Isaiah and Ezekiel occurs in text sections with refined and sophisticated poetry. In Hosea and Jeremiah, however, switches are found between narrative and discursive genres, between different addressees and different forms of personification and this results in more variation within the metaphor and within the texts. These texts are simply different from a formal point of view. The variegated literary contexts in which marriage imagery appears is thus a factor that contributes to the specific shape of the imagery.

5. It is impossible at this point to determine more precisely the relation between the texts with the female personification of the city and those with female personification of the nation. Suffice it to state that the notion of marriage and the notion of the covenant as a binding relationship is the common point of departure for the texts with marriage imagery. These aspects come to the fore without the city motif in Hosea and Jeremiah, and with the city motif in Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah. On the whole, it seems possible to distinguish three traditions in which the motif of marriage occurs. First, there is the tradition of Hosea and Jeremiah with a special focus on the disloyalty and adultery of Israel. Second, there is the tradition of Deutero-Isaiah which shows a focus on Yhwh's special love for Zion including a strong accent on the female personification of the city, following Lamentations. Third, there is the tradition of Ezekiel 16 and 23 which resembles Hosea and Jeremiah with respect to the harlotry motif and with respect to the marriage to two wives (Ezek. 23, cf. Jer. 3: 6-10) and, on the other hand, unlike Hosea and Jeremiah, shows a strong accent on the female personification of Jerusalem and Samaria. The latter accent fits within the profile of the book of Ezekiel which includes more chapters with long and eloquent forms of personification (cf. chaps. 19, 27, 28) and relates to the broader phenomenon of the female personification of capital cities.

4 Feminist approaches and hermeneutical reflections

4.1 Introduction

Since the contemporary meaning of the biblical marriage imagery is within the scope of this study, it is appropriate to pay attention to feminist receptions of this imagery. The marriage metaphor has been taken as a serious problem by feminist scholars. The point has been stressed that the gender pattern that is inherent in the metaphor is not value-free but 'reflects and reproduces' stereotypical conceptions about males and females. Within this gender pattern Yhwh is depicted as the
male and as the superior party and Israel as the female and as the inferior party. Israel is predominantly portrayed as the ‘weak and the wrong’ while Yhwh is portrayed as the ‘right and the strong’. This gives the marriage metaphor a fundamentally asymmetrical character in terms of gender.64

An important assumption in feminist criticism, according to Van Dijk-Hemmes, is that ‘with respect to the construction of gender-relations there exists a certain continuity between social reality and the world which is described in literature’.65 That means that biblical texts which reflect asymmetrical gender patterns have the effect of authorizing and legitimizing these patterns. The same holds for interpretations of these texts which do not expose the gender bias of such role patterns. A primary task of feminist criticism, therefore, is to investigate critically the way female characters function in the biblical texts. This is necessary in order to assess the way biblical writings reflect and support systems in which women are defined in relation to and from the perspective of men, as objects and victims rather than as independent and free creatures. From this perspective Setel wrote with respect to Hosea 1-3:

The specific representation of Israel and Yhwh as a woman and a man in a marital relationship has several implications. As discussed earlier, marriage in ancient Israel was in no sense a partnership of equals. The sexes of Gomer and Hosea and their respective behaviour are not a random representation but a reflection and reinforcement of cultural perceptions. Hence, Hosea’s metaphor has both theological and social meaning. With regard to theological understanding, it indicates that God has the authority of possession and control over Israel that a husband has over a wife. The reverse [...] is a view of human males as being analogous to Yhwh while women are comparable to the people, who, by definition, are subservient to Yhwh’s will.66

4.2 Prophets and pornography?

Setel was the first to describe the marriage imagery in Hosea 1-3 in terms of pornography. Setel claims that the use of the term ‘to commit harlotry’ as a metaphor for idolatry leads to an extremely negative exploitation of female sexuality in Hosea 1-3. Since harlotry as a metaphor for idolatry is to be condemned, by extension female sexuality as such is condemned. It is depicted as a source of misplaced pleasure (2:7) and as the summit of despicable behaviour

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(2:6-7). The subsequent punishment by Yhwh is in the form of a public humiliation of the female including her sexuality and reflects an aggressive male-centred perspective:

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 nakedness
Now I will expose her genitals
in the sight of her lovers
and no one shall rescue her from my hand
(Hos. 2:11-12)

Female sexuality is employed here as a symbol of evil. It is viewed from an objectifying and chauvinist point of view. According to Setel, therefore, the text of Hosea meets the definition of pornography. In her definition pornography has three characteristic features. These are: a) female sexuality is depicted as negative in relation to a positive or neutral male standard; b) women are degraded and publicly humiliated; c) female sexuality is portrayed as an object of male possession and control. A concomitant effect of pornography is the denial or miscalling of female experience and the maintenance of male domination over female sexuality. So Brenner summarizes that 'pornographic fantasy incorporates elements of power, domination, gender relations and quite often violence'.

A broad range of scholars has followed Setel in her characterization of Hosea 1-3 as pornography. Van Dijk-Hemmes, Brenner and Exum have pursued this line of research by investigating Jeremiah 2-3 and Ezekiel 16 and 23 in terms of pornography. Scholars such as Sherwood, Galambush, Wacker and Yee have offered a critical perspective on the husband-and-wife imagery in their own way.

The acknowledgement that the gender imagery in these texts is not harmless but in some sense pornographic implies that texts such as Ezekiel 16 and 23 and Hosea 1-3 are considered as offensive and detrimental to women and problematic from a feminist point of view. Exum, for instance, has qualified the detailed exposure of the female body and the sexual details in Hosea 2:5; 2:11-12 and Ezekiel 16:35-40; 23:22-35 as forms of sexual violence by the divine husband. In her view:

In our prophetic examples [...] 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 complexingly and confusingly linked with love in a pattern that consistently challenges women’s sense of worth and self-esteem.\(^{71}\)

The most painful and disturbing element in these texts is the role of Yhwh. As Brenner puts it:

The [marriage] metaphor disturbs not only because of the female imagery it contains, but also because of the figure of the husband/Yhwh implied by readings which focus on the female figure. What kind of god will allegedly allow such brutal handling of a female figuration?\(^{72}\)

The violence to the female character arouses thus anger and protest. The fact that the female character represents the nation or the city so that the ‘tenor’ of the personification consists of both males and females does not diminish this. As a result the notion of love in these texts is also questioned, interconnected as it is with the other elements in the texts. There is a preference for the terms ‘husband-and-wife’ imagery or ‘sexual’ imagery rather than for the term ‘love imagery’. Graetz, for instance, states: ‘In my view, love, punishment and subservience are not compatible concepts’.\(^{73}\) Since according to Graetz precisely this suggestion is made by Hosea 2, she seeks a contrasting image of love in the Song of Songs. In its emphasis on reciprocity she sees a more promising model for the relationship of God and Israel than in the patriarchal type of love reflected in Hosea.\(^{74}\)

4.3 Some reflections

It is important to note that feminist scholars have not avoided these texts since their awareness of the dominant and harmful perspectives in these texts. Perhaps rather to the contrary: much work has been done in analysing the way in which one perspective dominates the texts and in investigating the extent to which stereotypical gender roles are perpetuated. This is not merely a negative enterprise. The disclosure of the patriarchal dimensions in the text simultaneously creates room for the expression of feminist role conceptions. The denial of some of the values expressed by the text is a way of affirming an alternative perspective. In that sense, one could say that the texts function as a question. Particular elements in it are disclosed and presented to the reader along with the choice to agree or disagree.

Besides the exposure of stereotypical role patterns, feminist interpreters frequently seek to find a voice going against the dominant perspective. Sometimes such a dissenting voice is found in the same text, other times it is found

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within other biblical texts or within experience. Thus a variety of methods is employed to develop alternative interpretations of these texts.

I wish to address the feminist critique of pornography in the prophets more specifically. The definition of Hosea 1-3, Jeremiah 2:23-25 and Ezekiel 16 and 23 in terms of pornography is sufficiently extreme to elicit a response.

I feel that it is not fair to comment upon the usage of this term without clarifying my own point of view in dealing with these texts. To take Hosea 2 as an example, it is undeniable that there are elements of violence in this text. No matter how and within which framework one attempts to explain this, the violence to the woman in the text should not be denied or silenced. It rather should be brought into the open by any interpreter. To be explicit about it is an important step in providing room for some distance from the text. One could point out that the text does not conform to modern standards with respect to gender. Is that a way of excusing the text? No, it is a way of pointing out to the reader an element in the text that cannot be overlooked and a way of affirming that biblical texts have their origin in a specific historical context.

At the same time I find it questionable that this assessment functions as the main hallmark of the interpretation of this text. A text may be offensive in some respect but on another level it may still be interesting, illuminating, confronting and worth interpreting. My point of departure is that a comment about the violence in the text as outlined above can never be the only interpretative comment in relation to this text.

Why not? A literary text cannot be restricted to a single meaning. This statement applies in two directions. First, a text consists of countless elements which can be ordered and accentuated by the reader in many ways. That implies that one should allow for a plurality of meanings, constituted by the particular blend of elements that are fore- and backgrounded in a specific interpretation. Second, the interpretation of a text involves several levels of observation, combination and finally of communication. To some extent these stages can and must be distinguished. It is a misunderstanding of the task of interpretation to focus only on the stage of communication and on the issue whether or not the reader shares the values of the text. The assumption of different stages in the process of interpretation implies that one and the same reader can read a text on different levels and with distinct results. The results are not comparable in the sense that they can or must cancel each other out. The fact that some values of the text are not shared cannot overrule all other meanings. One must allow some room for contradiction and distinction within the different stages of interpretation. In short, readers can read a text on various levels with different results.

The qualification 'pornographic' arises from interpretations that are concentrated on one particular aspect of the text, namely, on the way gender relations are represented. The focus on a particular issue is not exceptional for all interpreters have their preoccupations. However, to concentrate only on the gender issue is not what I envision to do in this book. I perceive that as a one-sided and incomplete sort of interpretation. My starting point is that there is more to understanding a text than to comply with or to resist one of the perspectives

involved in it. What I will do is analyze several elements within the texts, the elements of internal cohesion, the structural features and communication effects, and finally to present these elements together. On the basis of these investigations every reader then has the opportunity to decide what his or her response is to the text.\(^{76}\)

In response to the issue of pornography in prophetic texts two more specific points may be raised which mark my disagreement with the position taken by Van Dijk-Hemmes and Brenner.

The first is a question about the term pornography.\(^{77}\) Is this a descriptive term without further evaluation or an evaluative term that necessarily implies a negative assessment? Within feminist discourse, the term ‘pornography’ seems to function as a synonym for ‘unacceptable’. What precisely is unacceptable, the element of pornography in these texts or the texts as a whole? If the latter holds true, this brings me to my most vital question and that is: is the designation ‘pornography’ compatible with other approaches to the text labelled as pornographic? Or is the only way out either ‘to identify with the male poet’s viewpoint’ or ‘to resist this kind of religious pornography’?\(^{78}\) The latter statement demonstrates a sense of absoluteness that I feel uncomfortable with. Used in this way, the term ‘pornography’ is too absolute and puts an end to all discussion. I find the supposed exclusivity of the label ‘pornography’ problematic in light of the principle that no text can be adequately described by one term. In more general terms the same point has been stated by Carroll:

\[\text{I do not think that texts should be subjected entirely to a one-sided imposition of meaning by the modern reader. There should be room in every reading for the text to resist the imposed meaning of the reader. [...] I prefer to see texts as polysemous and therefore as being capable of resisting single-meaning readings.}^{79}\]

I agree with Carroll insofar as he points to the multi-dimensionality of texts and understand this in the sense that no interpretation can be final or have the last word. Interpretation in principle is an open-ended activity.

A second point is the clash of values between the biblical texts and the modern world and the role this plays in interpretation. My problem with the term ‘pornography’ is not only that it is anachronistic with respect to biblical texts. It is indeed a modern and abstract term and to apply this term to biblical texts implies that ancient documents are judged by a modern standard that is fund-

\[^{76}\text{In some sense my approach resembles the ‘dual hermeneutic’ envisioned by P.P. Schweickart, but the theoretical background and the focus on the different stages in interpretation is similar to that of E.J. van Wolde. According to Schweickart ‘certain [...] texts merit a dual hermeneutic: a negative hermeneutic that discloses their complicity with patriarchal ideology, and a positive hermeneutic that recuperates the utopian moment’ (quoted by Van Dijk-Hemmes, ‘Imagination’, p. 77).}\]


\[^{78}\text{Brenner, ‘Jeremiah’, p. 273, suggests that these are the only two alternatives.}\]

\[^{79}\text{Carroll, ‘Desire’, p. 293.}\]
damentally alien to them. Historically speaking it is a form of misreading when one expects prophetic texts to reflect feminist gender patterns or when one con­demns these texts for not conforming to this standard. Nonetheless, since these texts function as influential documents in belief communities at present, there is some justification for explaining them with the help of a modern concept such as ‘pornography’.

What I find more problematic is the lack of distinction between the project of ‘understanding these texts’ and ‘adopting their values’. That is a narrow and truly anachronistic reading perspective, since the implicit assumption is that texts could speak and could only speak to us in a modern voice.\(^80\) It rather seems that we need to learn to distinguish between reading and analyzing a text and adopting all of its values. As Carroll puts it:

> But we need to learn how to read these ancient texts without allowing our own cultural holdings to transform them into modern documents. [...] Our val­ues are different from those of the text and in seeking to understand such ancient harangues it is not necessary to abandon our own ethical stances. We need to understand these texts, we do not need to adopt their values as our own.\(^81\)

I understand this remark as a plea for a careful approach to the biblical texts with husband-and-wife imagery, in the sense that there is a significant distinction between ancient texts and modern ethical norms, on the one hand, and between understanding a text and adopting all its values, on the other hand. These principles of interpretation will lead to different interpretations of Hosea 1-3 and Jeremiah 2-3 than the ones just discussed.

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80. On the issue of anachronism see Carroll, ‘Desire’, pp. 293-294, who writes: ‘I remain loyal to my roots in the historical-critical methodology for reading the Bible – at least to the extent that I wish to avoid the modern tendency to practise an aggravated anachronistic approach to ancient texts’.