

The Metaphor of Adultery in the Prophets

By Renee Duffy

In the biblical books that we know as The Prophets, God employed metaphor and imagery to call his people back to faithful worship and service under the Mosaic Covenant. During the time that these prophets were receiving and declaring the word of the Lord, Israel and its sister kingdom Judah were already many generations into a pattern of unfaithfulness that would bring judgment on the people. The prophets' messages were urgent, but they were falling on deaf ears and blind eyes (Is. 1:9,10; Jer. 5:21; Eze. 12:2). The prophets employed metaphor and imagery to turn up the volume on God's message in order to give the people every opportunity to turn from their unfaithfulness. This intensity serves us today by showing the depth of Israel's failure and the height of God's love for them.

One metaphorical theme used by God in the messages of the prophets is spiritual adultery expressed in sexual and marital language by the prophets. A well-known example of this is found in the message of Hosea who, not only employs the language of metaphor but also lives out a sexual and marital metaphor through his actual marriage to an unfaithful woman. Another example is the allegorical narratives in Ezekiel which portray Israel and Judah as sisters, Oholah and Oholibah, whose harlotry is described in startling detail (Eze. 16:38-41; 23:5-49). These examples and others will be surveyed here to better understand why these metaphors are used by the prophets and what is gained from a clearer understanding of them.

The Message of the Prophets

The messages of the major and minor prophets have a shared foundation of the covenant made between God and Israel at Mount Sinai. Through the prophets, God is confronting his

people with the covenant promises that they made and their failure to stay faithful to them. Together, the prophets call the people of Israel and Judah to return to God in repentance and to recommit to their covenant promises. Because everything the prophets say is based on this covenant,¹ their use of sexual and marital metaphoric language has meaning in relationship to the covenant as well. This paper will show that the use of these metaphors gives depth of meaning to the type of relationship that God had with his people through the Mosaic Covenant. Specifically, these metaphors give a relational framework that is necessary for our understanding of the exile, the depth of God's sacrificial love for his people, and the devastating nature of the people's unfaithfulness to the covenant.

Background for the metaphor in Old Testament Narrative

The metaphor of spiritual adultery would have been familiar to the prophets' audiences. This is evident beginning with the Sinai covenant. God used the language of exclusivity and jealousy to describe the nature of his relationship with the people. "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex. 20:3)². "You shall not worship them [idols] or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God" (Ex. 20:5a). The covenant instructed the newly formed nation of Israel in how to view their relationship with God. It was to be exclusive, not one amongst many of the same kind. And the bond of the covenant was so sure and enduring that to rupture it would cause jealousy in God. This jealousy is not primarily an emotional response, but a response of intense, even violent, activity on God's part.³ As such, the jealousy of God is an expression of his love for

¹ Peter John Gentry, *How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), chap. 1, Kindle.

² All Scripture quoted from *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

³ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 2, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 164.

his covenant people much like that of a husband for his wife.⁴ It is natural to see these relational characteristics as fitting with sexual and marital metaphors.

God first uses an adultery metaphor at the renewal of the Sinai covenant (Ex. 34:14-16). In this text, God is renewing the covenant that was quickly broken by the people's idolatry with the golden calf. God reiterates his command to exclusive worship, reminds the people that his response to unfaithfulness is jealousy, and goes further to warn them about future unfaithfulness which he calls harlotry. Here, God is specifically commanding the people not to make covenants with the people who inhabit the Land and to smash the altars and pillars that belong to those people lest they end up worshiping their gods. This warning is against both political alliances and idolatry. This shows that from the first days of the covenant, the people had an understanding that their relationship with God was understood as incorporating their lives beyond religious worship. It is worth noting that in this text the author doesn't use the term "adultery" to describe unfaithfulness. But the sexual language of "harlotry" with its immoral implications is being used in the context of the covenant relationship. This combination is certainly within the category of metaphoric adultery. However, by their use of varied referents, the prophets also require us to consider both the sexual and marital language used as contributing to their messages beyond the fact that together they contribute to the metaphor of adultery.

The Metaphor of Adultery in the Prophets

The metaphor of adultery and the use of sexual and marital language is employed most extensively by four prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea. These men prophesied to both the northern (Hosea) and southern (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) kingdoms, imploring the people of God to recognize the depth of their unfaithfulness and calling them to return to faithful

⁴ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 17, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 158.

worship of God according to the covenant. Of these, Isaiah and Hosea are the earliest prophets and ministered at roughly the same time when the Assyrian empire was in power in Israel. Neither kingdom had yet experienced exile, but the threat of exile was a major element of these prophets' messages.

Isaiah explicitly uses sexual language in relation to Israel's covenant with God in the poetic opening of the book. "How the faithful city has become a harlot, she who was full of justice!" (Is. 1:21a). The condition of the city is summarized as having turned from faithfulness to behavior characterized by immoral sexuality. What is Isaiah talking about when he describes Israel as a harlot? We may expect that Isaiah is talking about idolatry based on God's commands and warnings at the establishment of the covenant and its renewal. However, as we listen to Isaiah's accusations, we remember that Israel's faithfulness to the covenant isn't limited to avoiding idol worship, though he points to these practices as well (2:8). They are also guilty of failing to act with justice and righteousness. "Your rulers are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and chases after rewards. They do not defend the orphan, nor does the widow's plea come before them." (v. 23). Isaiah's claim of unfaithfulness is detailed by their failures of morality (justice and righteousness) and their failures within relationships (murder.)⁵ Isaiah has applied similar sexual language to talk about Israel's failure to adhere to God's measure of justice as was used in Exodus to talk about idolatry. Ultimately, both failures are unfaithfulness to her covenant with God. Israel agreed to exclusive devotion to God and the practical outworking of that devotion included practicing justice and righteousness. Their failure to be exclusively devoted to God (idolatry) can now be seen in their failure to practice his standards of morality (justice and righteousness.) Both the metaphor of adultery and the sexual

⁵ J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 55.

language contribute to our understanding of Isaiah's message. The people have been metaphorically adulterous by failing to uphold the covenant and their adulterous behavior is of an intimate character comparative to sexual immorality.

Hosea's ministry and message are heavily laden with the metaphor of adultery. Hosea, a prophet to the northern kingdom, was charged by God to live out his marriage to an unfaithful wife as a parallel of not only Israel's unfaithfulness, but also God's commitment to be sacrificially faithful to his promises in the covenant (Hos. 1:2, 7, 10). First, Hosea marries a woman named Gomer who is called "a wife of harlotry" and they have "children of harlotry" (1:3). She separates herself from Hosea, having left him in order to pursue other lovers (2:5). She shunned all the good gifts that Hosea had given her (2:8) and refused to return to him. God commands Hosea to *pursue her* although she has chosen to remain with another man in adultery. God's command to Hosea is to "go again, love... even as the LORD loves the sons of Israel" (3:1)⁶ and Hosea obeys in verse two, "So I bought her," and in verse three, "Then I said to her, 'You shall stay with me for many days. You shall not play the harlot, nor shall you have a man; so I will also be toward you.'" Hosea's love is demonstrated through the actions of redemption and restoration.⁷ The text tells us this is Hosea loving his wife "as the Lord loves the sons of Israel" (3:1).

Following the symbolic message of Hosea's marriage to Gomer (1:1-3:5), the rest of Hosea contains prophetic messages that center on the adultery metaphor and God's condemnation of Israel's unfaithfulness as well as hope for her restoration. Hosea describes Israel's idolatrous acts, "My people consult their wooden idol, and their diviner's wand informs

⁶ I'm using the interpretation of the ESV, NIV, and NET against the NASB here which translates 3:1 "Go again, love a woman who is loved by her husband, yet an adulteress" the sense of the NASB does not fit the context of Hosea going to her despite her unfaithfulness. Either interpretation would, however, fit my argument.

⁷ David A. Hubbard, *Hosea: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 24, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 100.

them; for a spirit of harlotry has led them astray” (4:12), and their lack of loyalty to the Lord, “For your loyalty is like a morning cloud and like the dew which goes away early” (6:4). Still, just as Hosea was commanded to go after Gomer, so the Lord pursues Israel. “My heart is turned over within Me, All My compassions are kindled” (11:8). And, like Hosea’s speech to Gomer after purchasing her back, the Lord will restore Israel to holiness. “They will walk after the Lord” (11:11). The relational language of Hosea is the undeniable central tenant of God’s message to his people. The intense sexual language and cutting accusations are unsettling to read, but they serve to illustrate just how far Israel has strayed from covenant faithfulness and just how far God will go to restore her. One scholar writes that the portrait of God in Hosea is God torn between justly destroying Israel, letting her go, and wooing her back.⁸

Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesied after the fall of the northern kingdom and during the time period of Babylonian power in Israel. The use of sexual and marital language shows up overtly in Jeremiah’s prophetic messages three times. First, God points out how inappropriate was their unfaithfulness in light of what God did for them by bringing them out of slavery (2:20). Second, God points out their inconsistency and their denial of their unfaithfulness (3:1) which is incredible because of the extent and frequency of their unfaithfulness. “Lift up your eyes to the bare heights and see; Where have you not been violated?” (3:2a). Third, God explains that Israel’s exile can be understood through the metaphor of divorce as a consequence of unfaithfulness. “And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also” (3:8). Judah could have learned a lesson from witnessing Israel’s divorce/exile, but she did not. Exactly what this harlotry was is mostly assumed to be understood by the reader as it

⁸ Mary Alexis Montelibano-Salinas, “Husbands, Wives, and Other Strangers: Another Look at the Hosean Broken Marriage Metaphor,” *Landas* 22, no. 1 (2008): 43.

is detailed in figurative language more than literal. A clue in verse nine is that they “committed adultery with stones and trees,” which points to worshiping idols made of wood and stone. Israel was guilty of breaking the covenant because they were no longer devoted to God. “Surely, as a woman treacherously departs from her lover, So you have dealt treacherously with Me” (3:20). A unique element of Jeremiah’s message is the insistence that Judah has chosen a ridiculous path for herself. She has ignored the example of Israel’s exile and continued to act in preposterous ways. She is like a bride who forgets her wedding dress (2:32). She is like a woman who sits by the road waiting to be violated (3:2). Yet, Judah still expects good things from God whom she has spurned. God declares, “If a husband divorces his wife and she goes from him and belongs to another man, will he still return to her?” (3:1). The answer is a resounding, “No!” according to the law (Deut. 24:4). But the heightened sense of impossibility for Judah’s repentance is not the only point. It also shows us the exceptional character of God’s own dedication to his people.⁹ It may look impossible that Judah would repent, but how much more extraordinary that God is going to restore her (3:18)!

Ezekiel gives two prophecies that feature the adultery metaphor and sexual language prominently. In chapter sixteen, Ezekiel’s message contains an elaborate allegory based on the metaphor of God as the husband of Israel. Before covenant faithfulness had a vague connection to marriage, here it is described unmistakably. “Then I passed by you and saw you, and behold, you were at the time for love; so I spread My skirt over you and covered your nakedness. I also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine,” declares the Lord God (16:8). In exchange, however, Jerusalem “played the harlot” and poured out “harlotries on every passer-by who might be willing” (v. 15). Ezekiel seems to have idolatry in view when he

⁹ Sharon Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 100.

uses the language of sexual immorality here. He describes her making “high places” and “male images” for herself (vv.16,17). And most horrifyingly, “You slaughtered My children and offered them up to idols” (v.21). This idolatry was widespread. “You built yourself a high place at the top of every street” (v. 25).

The second prophecy focusing on the nation’s unfaithfulness is found in chapter twenty-three. In this prophecy, Ezekiel gives another allegory, this time treating the divided nations as sisters named Oholah (the Northern Kingdom) and Oholibah (the Southern Kingdom). Unlike chapter sixteen which focuses on Israel’s unfaithfulness in the form of idolatry, chapter twenty-three focuses on political alliances made by Israel’s leaders, thereby leading her into another form of unfaithfulness.¹⁰ “She lusted after the Assyrians, governors and officials, the ones near, magnificently dressed, horsemen riding on horses, all of them desirable young men” (v. 12). To be sure, there is a connection between these political alliances and idolatrous practices (v. 7), but the political motives of Israel are the focus of God’s accusations in this allegory. Just as Moses warned the people at the renewal of their covenant, both the political and the spiritual aspects of unfaithfulness are significant to covenant faithfulness (Ex. 34:12-16). The nation is now clearly reaping the fruit of its unfaithfulness in Ezekiel’s generation. This is yet another example of the wide range of references for sexual and marital language in metaphor in the prophets. For Ezekiel, political alliances touch the same nerve of intimate betrayal as idolatry and injustice do. And this betrayal comes back to the relational aspect of Israel’s covenant with God.

Conclusions

¹⁰ Ralph H. Alexander, “Ezekiel,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 851.

This paper has attempted to survey the prophets' uses of the metaphor of adultery which includes sexual and marital language in order to better understand why the authors chose these metaphors and what meaning they bring to the prophets' messages. It is clear from the authors' varied referents within these metaphors that we cannot assume that all of the occurrences of sexual and marital language have the single referent of idolatry. As it has been shown, the prophets have a wide and varied list of associations in mind when they use this language including absurdity, cultic defilement, desire for control, political expediency and more.¹¹ Their utilization of sexual and marital language contributes to our understanding of the vast and varied connections that exist within the relationship of God and his people. For instance, the marital language of divorce provides a framework for understanding Israel's and Judah's exiles (Is. 50:1; Jer. 3:8; Hos. 2:2). Marital and sexual language also provides a framework for us to better comprehend the nature of God's relationship with his people as intimate as opposed to singularly authoritative and as a relationship of love as opposed to owner or employer. Marital language includes the concepts of legal responsibility as opposed to fickle feelings and the possibility of an irrevocable breach which is not similarly possible in the parent-child relationship. Still, the reader, when confronted with the prophets' language may wonder, "Why would these prophets using such disturbing language?" Some scholars have attempted to lessen the force of the prophets' words by explaining that negative reactions to these provocative metaphors are unfortunate but irrelevant to the message of the text.¹² However, given that the purpose behind these prophets' messages was to get the attention of God's people who were careening toward judgement, we would be wrong to assume that the provocative aspects of the text can be dismissed as unfortunate side effects of the historical or cultural context. In fact, the context of

¹¹ Sharon Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 276.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

these prophetic messages is a landscape of uncertainty and upheaval which posed a serious threat to the worship of God.¹³ It is reasonable to assume that these words were just as shocking to the original audience as they are to us. And so, we do not need to rescue these biblical authors from the scandal of their shocking words because they are meaningful in their provocativeness. It has already been noted that these concepts give a framework for understanding the complexities and characteristics of God's relationship with his people. It is also true that the provocative and shocking words that the prophets use to describe the social, political, and religious actions of God's people also shed light on the nature of their injustice, their lack of trust, and their idol worship. They are as ugly and as damaging to the people of God as sexual immorality is to the human being. The people were following after worldly wisdom believing it to be good in their own eyes and expedient to their desires. But in reality, they were destroying God's treasured possession. The prophets needed the people to see that worshiping God and being faithful to his covenant was not equal in value to what they were doing, because there is no one and nothing like YHWH.

¹³ Ibid, 42.

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