Prophetic Pornography Revisited

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In the late 1990s the problem of sexual violence in prophetic texts—violence in which God is the subject and the object of his abuse is female-personified Israel or foreign nations—was widely discussed, at least among female biblical scholars. The texts in which God abuses his “wife” Israel or Judah or Jerusalem are different from those in which foreign cities or nations are the object because his covenant with Israel gives God ownership of his wife and control over her sexuality. In these texts, which are my focus here, perceived (essentially male) sins of social corruption and religious infidelity are sexualized and projected onto women. Sin is identified with uncontrolled female lust and unrestrained female sexuality, and it is the promiscuous and rapacious wife’s fault that she is sexually abused because she has invited it by deliberately flaunting her husband’s will. Male control is seen as necessary and desirable. As a means of correction, the woman is punished sexually for her sexual sin in the most degrading way, and this violent physical assault paves the way for the battered woman’s reconciliation with her abusive spouse.

Such texts are pornographic because they involve objectification, domination, vindictiveness, pain and degradation. They raise serious ethical questions not only because they are offensive and demeaning but also because they could be seen to give biblical sanction to the sexual abuse of women. Because most readers are likely to read with the text’s ideology and privilege God, the abusive husband’s behaviour is not open to question. Indeed, the woman


2 As Judith Sanderson observes, “To involve God in an image of sexual violence is, in a profound way, somehow to justify it and thereby to sanction it for human males who are for any reason
is considered solely responsible for the success of the relationship, and the husband, far from sharing any blame, is portrayed as the wronged party who deserves our sympathy. The divine husband’s superiority over his nation-wife lends legitimacy to the human husband’s superiority over his wife, who is subservient to him and totally dependent on him.\(^3\) Through messages about gender relations encoded in these texts, men are taught to exert their authority and women are taught to submit.

In my contribution to this volume honouring Hans Barstad for his pioneering work on the prophets and many other distinguished contributions to the field, I return to the topic of prophetic pornography to consider to what extent, if any, the naming of the problem and discussion of the serious ethical issues it raises have influenced mainstream biblical interpretation. Is the gender bias of the texts recognized? Is it criticized? Or is the gender bias that characterized scholarly interpretation before the mid-1990s still prevalent, and the problem of prophetic pornography ignored or excused? Does it matter?

Due to space constraints I can offer only a sample that is by no means definitive, but I suspect it is representative. Since I am interested in mainstream interpretation, I do not deal with monographs or selected studies that specifically address the problem. Rather I have limited my observations to books published in English in the past fifteen years that specifically identify themselves as commentaries—both standard commentaries scholars would be likely to use and commentaries teachers, students, preachers and an interested general audience might consult—and to the following key passages: Hos 2:9–10 [11–12 H]; Isa 3:16–26; Jer 13:20–27; Ezekiel 16 (especially vv. 35–42) and 23 (especially vv. 22–48).\(^4\)

1 Hosea

Hosea 2 personifies the land of Israel as a harlot, whom God threatens to strip naked and slay with thirst (v. 3). After denouncing her shameful behaviour

\(^3\) On the woman’s utter dependence upon male support, see Setel, “Prophets and Pornography,” 86–95; especially 92; for a sobering and saddening application of the biblical marriage metaphor to the situation of battered women; see Gracia Fay Ellwood, Batter My Heart (Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 282; Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1988).

\(^4\) My translations of these texts, with explanatory notes, can be found in Exum, “Prophetic Pornography.”