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Author(s): Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes

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THE METAPHORIZATION OF WOMAN
IN PROPHETIC SPEECH:
AN ANALYSIS OF EZEKIEL XXIII¹

by

FOKKELIEN VAN DIJK-HEMMES

Utrecht

“The process of metaphorization of woman to a sign of something else enacts a form of disembodiment of the female subject. The imaging of woman as something else betrays habits of definition within a frame of reference that is dominated by the interests and the perceptions of the ‘first’ sex.”²

The point of departure for my analysis of Ezek. xxiii is two statements from Carol A. Newsom’s illuminating article, “A Maker of Metaphors: Ezekiel’s Oracles Against Tyre”.³

(1) “It is now generally understood that far from being merely decorative, metaphors have real cognitive content. If one tries to paraphrase a metaphor, what is lost is more than just a certain effect. What is lost is part of the meaning itself, the insight which the metaphor alone can give.”

(2) “Metaphor derives much of its convincing power from the fact that it does not allow its hearers to be passive but requires them to participate in the construction of the metaphorical meaning.”⁴

For the purpose of my analysis I derive the following questions from these two statements:

¹ This article was delivered as a paper at the IOSOT Congress in Leuven, August 1989. I wish to thank Professor Mieke Bal, Professor Athalya Brenner and Professor Sara Japhet for their helpful and critical comments. A more comprehensive version will be published in A. Brenner and F. van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts. Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden, 1993).

² This quotation is taken from the Introduction to the Utrecht Interfaculty Women’s Studies Research Program, “Women between Control and Transition”.

³ In James Luther Mays and Paul J. Achtemeier (ed.), *Interpreting the Prophets* (Philadelphia, 1987), pp. 188-99. The quotations are taken from p. 189 and 190.

⁴ For an extensive treatment of the concepts behind and the working of metaphors see e.g. George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason. A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago and London, 1989).

(1) What is the specific insight which the metaphor used in Ezek. xxiii can give us? In other words, what makes it necessary to present a reenactment of Israel's history within this specific metaphorical language, through an imagery in which Israel's behaviour is represented as the conduct attributed to YHWH's two adulterous wives?

(2) How does the metaphorical language used in Ezek. xxiii require or entice its target audience and modern readers to participate in the construction of its metaphorical meaning?

I shall start my analysis with the second question, which focuses attention upon the interaction between the text and the audience or reader. It poses the question of how the literary strategies which are deployed in the text affect the reader and how they organize or mobilize his or her view. I refer to the audience or reader in a gender-specific way not only because feminist literary theory has convincingly shown how relevant it is to do so,⁵ but also because, in this case, the text itself requires us to do so. Ezek. xxiii ends with an explicit warning, intended for women, not to behave like the metaphorical harlots Oholah and Oholibah (*v.* 48). Thus the extended metaphor which is presented to us in Ezek. xxiii speaks not only of women, but also—albeit indirectly—to women in a specific way. What exactly is the message which Ezek. xxiii conveys to women? Does the text require women to participate in the construction of its metaphorical meaning in a different way from men?

As a woman reader I want to answer these questions and, consequently, to analyse the literary strategies deployed in the text, by making use of a model which is offered by T. Drorah Setel, in her article "Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea".⁶ According to Setel, there is a significant congruence between biblical and especially prophetic texts on the one hand and modern pornographic depictions of female sexuality on the other hand. In both cases objectified female sexuality is used as a symbol of evil. This implies that contemporary feminist theory on the nature of female objectification can and should be applied to the examination of prophetic texts which deal with the same subject.

⁵ See e.g. the section "Reading as a Woman" in Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction. Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London, 1983), pp. 43-64.

⁶ In Letty Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 86-95.

In summarizing the theoretical material on pornography Setel distinguishes four categories of analysis: *features*, *function*, *definition* and *causes*. In this article, however, I shall confine myself to two categories only: those of features and function.

Setel characterizes the distinguishing *features* of pornography as follows. (1) Female sexuality is depicted as negative relative to a positive or neutral male standard. (2) Women are degraded and publicly humiliated. (3) Female sexuality is portrayed as an object of male possession and control. This includes the depiction of women as analogous to nature in general and the land in particular, especially with regard to imagery of conquest and domination.

The *function* of pornography can, according to Setel, be summarized as the preservation of male domination through a denial, or misnaming, of female experience. If this is accepted then I should say that the denial or misnaming of female experience should also be considered a distinguishing feature of pornography.

To what extent do we find this and the other features mentioned by Setel in Ezek. xxiii? The text is presented to us as a speech (*dābār*) from YHWH to Ezekiel, the (male) prophet who lives in exile in Babylon and who figures as the I-persona in the text: “The word of YHWH came *to me*”. This means that the intended audience is required to hear the text via Ezekiel’s ears. Ezekiel is addressed by YHWH as “Son of humanity” (*ben-ʿādām*). YHWH’s speech starts like a story:

Son of humanity,
Two women,
Daughters of one mother were there (*v.* 2).

The close relationship between the two sisters is stressed by the chiasmic structure of the verse: *štayim nāšīm bēnôt ʿem-ʿaḥat*. No mention is made of a father. The story continues with a description of the conduct of the two sisters. The first part of the description again has the form of a chiasmus:

They played the harlot in Egypt
In their youth they played the harlot,
There their breasts were squeezed,
There the teats of their maidenhood were pressed (*v.* 3).

The words “in Egypt”, closely connected to “in their youth”, prevent the intended audience from listening to the story further as more or less interested outsiders. They are invited to engage them-

selves in it. The story about the two sisters who play the harlot seems to present the audience's own history. In the following verse, the suggestion that the two sisters are metaphors and that, consequently, the audience itself, as a part of the people of Israel, is transformed into these two metaphorical women, is confirmed.

Their names were
 Oholah, the elder one,
 and Oholibah her sister:
 They became mine
 and they bore sons and daughters.
 Their names were
 Samaria-Oholah
 and Jerusalem-Oholibah (v. 4).

The implicitly formulated information of the two sisters'-cities' marriage to YHWH is enclosed by the twofold announcement of their names. Oholah, which is traditionally understood to mean "(she who has) her own tent (i.e. "sanctuary")", represents the capital of Northern Israel Samaria, while Oholibah, "my tent (is) in her", represents Jerusalem.⁷ YHWH's portrayal of himself as being prepared to accept as his wives two women "who already in their youth denied their virginity" (Zimmerli [n. 7], p. 540), must have been designed to shock the audience. After having been required to look at themselves as depraved since the very beginning of their history, they now shamefully have to acknowledge that YHWH was nevertheless willing to take the risk of a marriage relationship with them.

Although this may be the intended audience-response and although this in fact is the reader's response of most modern commentators to the beginning of our metaphorical story, one "detail"

⁷ See, however, Walther Zimmerli, who states the following: "Die beiden Frauennamen dürften bei Ez ganz einfach den leicht archaischen Klang beduinischer Namengebung wachrufen und sagen wollen, dass die beiden Mädchen mit den gleichklingenden Namen (Ewald verweist hierfür auf die Ali-Söhne Hasan und Husein) in Ägypten nicht zu den eingeborenen, sondern zu den von der Wüste herkommenden, in Zelten wohnenden, Herden weidenden (Gen 4 20) Leuten gehören. Ganz so wie bei der Erwähnung der kanaänisch-amoritisch-hetitischen Herkunft Jerusalems (... [Ez] 16 3) stossen wir dann auch hier auf ein Element guter geschichtlicher Tradition." Nevertheless, he does not exclude the possibility that the girls' names might also contain an allusion to the meanings, which traditionally have been attributed to them (*Ezechiel* [Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1969], p. 542).

in the text is in this case overlooked. The activities of the two sisters which are signified by *znh*. ‘‘play the harlot’’, are specified in the following part of *v.* 3 not as activities but as receptivity: they were acted upon.

There their breasts were squeezed,
 There the teats of their maidenhood were pressed; or, literally:
 There they (masculine; see also *v.* 8) pressed the teats of their maidenhood.

As a woman reader I have some difficulties in naming such a being-acted-upon situation as ‘‘playing the harlot’’, and so I suggest that here we may have an example of what Setel calls ‘‘misnaming of female experience’’. It would have been more adequate to describe the events during the sisters’ youth as: ‘‘They were sexually abused in Egypt, in their youth they were sexually abused’’. In this way, justice would have been done to the fate of the metaphorical women, and the audience would not have been seduced to viewing women or girls as responsible for and even guilty of their own violation. In short, there would have been no question of ‘‘blaming the victim’’.

Does this mean that the people whom the metaphorical women represent should actually see itself as a victim as well? This appears not to be the intention of the text. In Ezek. xx, where we find a non-metaphorical evaluation of Israel’s history, we read that Israel is accused of having been rebellious against YHWH and of having worshipped idols already during its sojourn in Egypt (*v.* 8). This accusation, in which there is no reference to Israel’s oppression, should be seen as YHWH’s crushing response to Judah’s rebellion against Babylon undertaken in the hope of obtaining help from an Egyptian alliance during the last few years before the destruction of Jerusalem. So from ch. xx onwards, in contrast to the preceding chapters as well as the common prophetic view on Israel’s history, Israel is indeed presented as apostate from the very beginning of its history. According to the logically arbitrary way in which Ezek. xxiii 3 conveys this message, Israel’s sin in Egypt actually consisted of its being oppressed. Apparently, the lack of logic of such a statement can be made acceptable by the transformation of the people into metaphorical women. The sexual molestation acted upon these women is in that case metaphorical for the people’s slavery in Egypt. Within an androcentric framework women can easily be

seen as guilty of their own abuse. Hence, the imagery of women is indispensable for conveying a message which is a “contradiction in terms”: the people are guilty of their own past enslaving inasmuch as women are, by definition, guilty of their own sexual misfortunes. Referring to the first question derived from Newson’s statement (see above), we can state that it is this specific and illogical insight which the metaphor of Ezek. xxiii can give us. The literary strategy deployed in the text appears to be successful.

The misnaming of female experience is continued further in the metaphorical story, where first Oholah’s and then, in much greater length and detail, Oholibah’s alleged behaviour is described. Oholah’s lusting after her Assyrian lovers by which, according to an over-zealous interpreter, she exposes her “hankering after the flamboyance of foreign military masculinity”,⁸ is explained by her having enjoyed the violence, done to her in her youth:

Her harlotry from since (her days in) Egypt she did not give up
For they lay upon/raped⁹ her in her youth
And then men pressed the teats of het maidenhood
And they poured out their harlotry upon her (v. 8).

So the audience, which has already been required to consider the sexual abuse of the maidens as harlotry, is now seduced into seeing this as something Oholah had enjoyed so much that she could not do without it for the rest of her life. Her “harlotry”, however, is even more clearly depicted here as violence, acted out upon her.

The story of Oholibah too culminates in the remembrance of her youth in Egypt attributed to her own consciousness. Her behaviour is depicted as much more corrupt than that of her sister. She not only “lusted after” the Assyrians (v. 12), “but she carried her harlotry further” (v. 14). After having seen “men portrayed upon the wall, the images of the Chaldeans” (v. 14), she sends messengers after them, “brazenly attracted by mere appearances” (Andrew [n. 8], p. 115), They, the Babylonians, “came to her into the bed of love” (v. 17), but when she has been defiled and polluted by them, “she turned from them in disgust” (v. 17). Despite the fact that her behaviour in its turn leads to YHWH’s turning in disgust away from her “as I had turned from her sister” (v. 18),

⁸ M.E. Andrew, *Responsibility and Restoration. The Course of the Book of Ezekiel* (Dunedin, New Zealand, 1985), p. 115.

⁹ For this meaning of *škb* ²*t*, see also Gen. xxxiv 2 and 2 Sam. xiii 14.

She increased her harlotry
 Remembering the days of her youth,
 When she played the harlot in the land of Egypt.
 She lusted after the paramours there
 Whose organs are like the organ of asses
 And whose ejaculation is like the ejaculation of stallions (*vv.* 19-20).

And then, for the first time, Oholibah is directly addressed by YHWH:

You longed for the lewdness of your youth,
 When those from Egypt pressed your teats
 For the sake of your young breasts (*v.* 21).

The enjoyment of her own abuse, which had been attributed to Oholah, is surpassed by the perverse sexual appetite attributed to Oholibah. Her lusting after stallion-like males is said to derive from “the lewdness of your youth”. The depiction of Oholibah’s desire in terms of the sizes of male members seems not so much to be an example of mere misnaming of female experience, but a distortion of it. Instead of reflecting female desire, it betrays a male obsession.

In both cases, the remembrance of the sisters’ youth in Egypt marks the transition to the announcement of their punishment. The intention is probably to strengthen the audience’s idea that both metaphorical women, so perverse since their very maidenhood, indeed deserve the utterly degrading and devastating treatment to which they are exposed. Modern male reader-responses show the success of this literary strategy. According to those, the torturing of the sisters is appropriate and “brings out the ironic justice of being punished by their own lovers”.¹⁰ Thanks to the model, offered by Setel, this mode of participating in the construction of the metaphorical meaning of the text is no longer necessary. Setel’s model enables us to recognize the other distinguishing features of pornography in the description of the sisters’ treatment too. Both are degraded and publicly humiliated in order to make clear that their sexuality is and has to be an object of male possession and control.

¹⁰ Andrew, p. 115. See also Zimmerli, Walther Eichrodt, *Der Prophet Hesekiel* (Göttingen, 1966), B. Maarsingh, *Ezechiel II* (Nijkerk, 1988), and numerous others.

Coming back now to the question whether the text speaks differently to men and to women, we can state the following. YHWH's speech to Ezekiel transforms the people of Israel and thus the intended audience, males and at least indirectly also females, into his metaphorical wives. Both sexes are thus required to identify with these women, and especially with the second one Oholibah, since Oholah figures chiefly as a warning signal for her sister. Through Oholibah the audience is several times directly spoken to by YHWH in an utterly degrading manner. In this way they are forced to see the shameless stupidity of their political behaviour and the absolute hopelessness of their situation. Jerusalem will definitely be abandoned to destruction. The impact of that insight, which implies the utmost humiliation, apparently can only be communicated by such (gender-)specific metaphorical language.

The androcentric-pornographic character of this metaphorical language must indeed be experienced as extremely humiliating by the male audience forced to imagine itself as being exposed to violating enemies. Nevertheless, it is exactly this androcentric-pornographic character which at the same time offers the male audience a possibility of escape: the escape of an identification with the revengeful husband or, more modestly, with the righteous men who, near the end of the text, are summoned to pass judgement upon the adulterous women (*v.* 45). Thus, the text receives the function of a specific warning towards women which, as we have seen, indeed happens in the penultimate verse of the text.¹¹

According to Zimmerli (pp. 553-5) and many other commentators, these last passages are later additions. If this is correct, these additions can be seen as male readers' responses to the metaphorical story of Oholah and Oholibah. These readers' responses realize and at the same time testify to the possibility of escape that the text offers to its male readers.

No such possibility of escape is left to the female reader. In respect to her, the metaphorization of woman in Ezek. xxiii performs first and foremost a violent speech act which, at the same time, shapes and distorts her (sexual) experience.¹²

¹¹ There is a continuous movement within the text from the metaphorization of women as cities towards the metaphorization of women per se. Hence, any appeal to women (*v.* 48) should be understood as an appeal to the cities as well.

¹² In her article, "Feminist Insights and the Question of Method" (in Adela Yarbro Collins [ed.], *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* [Chico, California,

1985], pp. 35-42), T. Drorah Setel states the following: “It is possible, for example, to understand the extreme misogyny of Ezekiel as the author’s response to his own experience of powerlessness and humiliation. Yet it is also important to recognize and examine the fact that he used specifically female imagery and to interpret his prophecy in *relationship* to the means he chose, not as something external to it” (p. 41). It is exactly this that I have tried to do in this article.