THE EFFECT AND POWER OF DISCOURSE:
A CASE STUDY OF A METAPHOR IN HOSEA

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Abstract

At the core of this article are two article are two questions. Where do metaphors come from? What do metaphors do? As the article will demonstrate these are not idle questions, but questions that matter. The article presents a literary and sociological analysis of women in Hosea, with particular reference to Hosea 1-3. The first section examines the marriage-harlotry metaphor in two parts. The first part of this examination focuses on three analyses of the marriage-harlotry metaphor by feminist biblical scholars. The second part of the examination concentrates on the nature of metaphor. This discussion leads into the second section in which I explore the relationship between language and life, particularly the life of women in Israel. The third and concluding section reflects on the relationship between language and the sociological location of women in the biblical text and our own South African context. The power of metaphor in the biblical text and our context challenges us to discourse carefully and critically concerning all metaphors, but particularly those metaphors in which women are not only the vehicles but also the victims.

1. Language, metaphor, and women

There is general agreement among scholars that Hosea uses a marriage metaphor (Setel 1985; Bird 1989; Leith 1989; Paolantonia 1989; Weems 1989; Laffey 1990). It is also generally agreed, and this is of specific interest to this paper, that Hosea is one of the earliest texts, if not the first text, in the Old Testament to use this metaphor (Plum 1990; Bird 1989:80; Leith 1989:97, 106 note 17; Paolantonio 1989; Weems 1989:89 note 7; Setel 1985:86, 90, 93-94). And although Renita Weems argues that (male) biblical scholars have 'failed to consider in any substantial way the significance of Hosea's use of sexual imagery and gynomorphic language to describe the volatile character of the divine-human relationship' (Weems 1989:89), there is general agreement among female biblical scholars that the marriage metaphor presents a negative view of women (Bird 1989; Leith 1989; Weems 1989; van Dijk-Hemmes 1989:85; Laffey 1990:169; Setel 1985:94).

In analyzing the 'marital-harlotry' metaphor (Weems 1989:89), feminist/womanist biblical scholars like Phyllis Bird, Mary Joan Winn Leith, Renita Weems, Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, and T Drorah Setel have recognized the negative features of the metaphor as an entity and in its component terms.

Bird, in her inquiry into 'the birth of a metaphor', the metaphorical use of *znh* in Hosea, argues that the root *znh* in Hosea has 'the same basic meaning exhibited

elsewhere in historical-legal usuage, namely 'to engage in illicit/extramarital sexual activity, to fornicate'. The subject is always female (Bird 1989:88).[1] 'Alongside this basic meaning and corresponding to it in its primary images', continues Bird, 'is a metaphorical usage created by Hosea to characterize and indict Israel's worship' (88). Through this metaphor Israel 'is depicted as a promiscuous wife who abandons her husband for lovers, behaving like a common prositute in pursuit of hire. The activity represented by the metaphor is cultic activity, which the metaphor reveals to be in effect service of 'the baals' rather than Yahweh' (88-89). Bird concludes:

> The metaphorical use of *znh* invokes two familiar and linguistically identified images of dishonor in Israelite culture, the commom prostitute and the promiscuous daughter or wife. As a sexual metaphor, it points to the sexual nature of the activity it represents. Its female orientation does not single out women for condemnation; it is used rather as a rhetorical device to expose men's sin. By appealing to the common stereotypes and interests of a primarily male audience, Hosea turns their accusation against them. It is easy for patriarchal society to see the guilt of a 'fallen women'; Hosea says, 'You (male Israel) are that woman!'

Like Bird, Leith argues that Hosea is addressing this metaphor to his fellow male Israelites, 'but not to Israelite women', who in patriarchal Israel were not 'full partners in the covenant' (Leith 1989:97)[2]. So through this metaphor Hosea 'is calling the Israelites women'; and, adds Leith, 'This is not a frivolous accusation' because the prophet 'plays on male fears of woman as other'(98). Leith suggests that it is conceivable that in this metaphor Hosea is alluding to an ancient Near Eastern treaty/covenant curse. 'Lists of curses in ancient Near Eastern treaties occasionally include a threat to turn the signatory's men into women'(98)[3] The point Leith wants to emphasize here is that in his characterization of Israel as a woman, Hosea is saying 'that Israel has become precisely what it defines itself as *not* being' 99.[4]

But, while Bird and Leith remind us that the focus of the metaphor is Yahweh, not Gomer, my question remains: 'Why is woman the vehicle of this metaphor?'

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1   Bird does note that there are three instances of the *hiphil* in Hosea (4:10, 18; 5:3), all involving some textual problems, and that a 'provisional survey of these occurrences suggests that the *hiphil* is meant to represent the male activity in fornication' (Bird 1989: 94 note 50).

2   In a note she argues that unlike Amos (4:1) and Isaiah (3:16) who blame Israelite women for their sins, 'Hosea blames the men of Israel for the sexual improprieties of the women'. But this is not good news, 'Women, it would appear, do not even exercise autonomy over their sins' (Leith 1989:106 note 15)

3   See for example the treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mati'ilu of Arpad, and a vassal treaty of Esarhaddon (Leith 1989:98, 106 note 16; see ANET, 533, and ANET, 540).

4   This negative view of women is reviewed. At the end of the story 'Israel is still a woman; no sex change has occurred to restore Israel's manhood.'... He [Hosea] keeps the image of the woman, but in a different context. The 'wife of harlotry' belonged to the semantic wordfield of the covenant curses. By the time the woman has undergone her punishment, there is an entirely new context in which to view the woman, centred on ideals of social legitimacy and moral rectitude. It is now acceptable for Israel, if only metaphorically, to be a woman (Leith 1989:104) But Leaith hastens to add, 'Hosea is no closet feminist; though Hosea rejects the idea of God as elevated lord, he derives his model of God as husband and Israel as wife from marriage in patriarchal Israel: th husband was the dominant partner' (Leith 1989:108 note 50)

Why is Israel represented in the image of a faithless wife and not, for example, a rapist? (van Dijk-Hemmes 1989:85; see also Snyman 1993).

In her study of the marriage-unfaithful woman metaphor in Hosea, Weems acknowledges the insights the metaphor provides, but also counts the cost of the metaphor. She argues two things:

> *First*, as a literary device the metaphor provides *particular* insight into the nature of YHWH and Israel's relationship in ways that other Hoseanic metaphors cannot. *Second*, even though the marriage metaphor serves as an effective literary device, to the extent that it depends on the image of the sexual abuse of a woman to develop and defend its point, as a dominant theological model the marriage metaphor is limited, if not risky (Weems 1989:90)

Notwithstanding the metaphor's poetic versatility and important insights, 'the basic premise of his [Hosea's] message evolves around the untenable image of violence against a woman'. Further, the fact that 'the marriage metaphor is '*only* a metaphor' and the motif of sexual violence '*only* a theme' of the metaphor' does not 'insulate them from serious theological scrutiny'. The prophet's use of this metaphor associates God with sexual violence against women (100).

Weems not only recognizes the need for 'serious theological scrutiny' of such a metaphor, she also argues that the questioning of a metaphor such as this is 'not tangential to the exegetical task nor insignificant to biblical scholarship' (100). I would agree. And like my discussion below, Weems' scrutiny leads her into an analysis of the nature of metaphor.

She draws on Sallie McFague's discussion of metaphor, in which 'thinking metaphorically means spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events, or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known (McFague 1982:15; Weems 1989:100). But the problem arises, argues Weems,

> when the metaphor 'succeeds', meaning that the reader becomes so engrossed in the pathos and the details of the metaphor that the *dissimilarities* between the two are disregarded. When that happens, McFague points out, God is no longer *like* a husband, God *is* a husband; namely the thing signified *becomes* the signification itself. In this case, a risky metaphor gives rise to a risky deduction: here, to the extent that God's covenant with Israel is like a marriage between a man and a woman, then a husband's physical punishment against his wife is as warranted as God's punishment of Israel (Weems 1989:100).

Sandra Schneiders makes a similar point when she argues that metaphors are 'unstable linguistic entities' constituted by the linguistic tension between an 'is' and an 'is not' (Schneiders 1991:29). And like ambiguity, tension 'always has a tendency to resolution, to suppression of tension'. Metaphors, therefore, 'tend to either banalization or literalization. But while both are dangerous, the more dangerous way of resolving the tension of the metaphor is to suppress its negative pole, that about it that 'is not', and to affirm only the positive pole, that about it that 'is'. But, continues Schneiders, 'when we do this, the literalized metaphor goes underground and works on the subconscious level creating vast reservoirs of

cognitive untruth and distorted affectivity'. 'Literalized metaphor is the cancer of the religious imagination, powerfully and pathologically at work' (29-30).

My contribution to this discussion, like that of Setel's, is not so much to offer yet another analysis of this metaphor nor the nature of metaphor, but to ask where (this) metaphor comes from. This is a particularly pertinent question when we accept the claim of a host of writers on the subject of metaphor that what is identified and described by a metaphor 'is identified and described uniquely by this metaphor', that 'a metaphor is genuinely creative and says something that can be said adequately in no other way', and that a metaphor is 'an embodiment of a new insight' (Soskice 1985:48; see also Camp 1993:14,33; Thistlethwaite 1993:60; Gerhart, Healey and Russell 1993:170; Elgin 1993:212; Landy 1993:220). Such an understanding of metaphor raises the question, 'Where does this *new insight* come from?', and more specifically, 'What discourse context generates this *new way of speaking about women (and God)* in Hosea?'

The question becomes even more precise when we remember that there is agreement that Hosea is one of the earliest texts, if not the first text, in the Old Testament to use this metaphor, this new way of talking about God and women (Plum 1990; Bird 1989:80; Leith 1989:97, 106 note 17; Paolantonio 1989; Weems 1989:89 note 7; Setel 1985:86, 90, 93-94). Even if, as Moshe Weinfeld has pointed out, 'such a concept was probably already latent, though not explicit, in the ancient Pentateuchal concept of convenant' (Weinfeld 1972:81, 6; Weems 1989:89 note 7), and even if, as Leith has suggested, Hosea is alluding to an ancient Near Eastern treaty/covenant curse (Leith 1989:98), Hosea is one of the earliest Old Testament texts to *speak* explicity, overtly, and directly in this new way about women (and God). Why?

A cursory response to this question might be, 'Because Hosea derives his model of God as husband and Israel as wife from marriage in patriarchal Israel where the husband was the dominant partner' (see Leith 1989:108 note 50). While this answer would seem to account for the negative view of women in the metaphor, it does not adequately answer the question, 'Why does this metaphor occur now, in the time of Hosea?'

2.   Society, metaphor, and women

In her anlaysis of the marriage-harlotry metaphor in Hosea, Setel attempts to answer this question. Setel too recognizes that language and life are related. 'Hosea's metaphor has both theological and social meaning', it is not 'a random representation but a reflection and reinforcement of cultural perceptions' (Setel 1985:92). Like Bird, Leith, and Weems, Setel argues that Hosea's 'underlying concern is to contrast Yahweh's positive (male) fidelity with Israel's negative (female) harlotry' (Setel 1985:93). However, she also goes further when she argues that in so doing

> he introduces the themes of the degradation of females and their identification with the land and denies their positive role in human reproduction and nurturance. In his use of the cultural paradigm of marriage as an analogy for the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, Hosea transforms the earlier,

material understanding of nonmarital sexuality into an ethical transgression. Or, rather, Hosea witnesses to that historical transition (Setel 1985:94).

To fully grasp Setel's argument here it is necessary to consider briefly the historical and sociological background of Israelite women generally and of female sexuality specifically.

In her detailed and careful reconstructions of the life of ordinary women in the premonarchic period Carol Meyers presents us with a historical and sociological analysis of women in the rural extended household structure in early Israel (see also Hackett 1985). Women were involved in crucial household economic activities (Meyer 1988:142-149), in the socialization and education of her children (149-154), in the jural-legal functions of the family (particularly in her authority over dependent or junior family members) (154-157), and in the cultic or religious life of the household (157-164). In addition to her considerable power in the functioning of the household, the woman was also the childbearer, and therefore played a significant role in determining the population growth necessary for the household's and community's labour and survival needs (95-121).

Drawing on the work of Meyers, Gale Yee argues that 'Within this concentric social structure that extended from the family household outward to the tribe,the roles of women in pre-state Israel were significant. In their society, the lines between domestic domain and public domain were blurred' (Yee 1993:111). So what 'affected the public domain automatically impinged upon the domestic domain and vice versa. Women's decisive positions in the administration of domestic households gave them vital societal roles' (111)[5]. In a society organized in this way 'female power will be as significant as male power, and perhaps even greater' (Meyers 1988:176)

Given this reconstruction, Meyers argues that although 'incipient gender hierarchies may have existed even in earliest Israel and were certainly present in the monarchic period', 'female power deriving from the various roles (economic and other) played by women in the complex peasant households enabled them to minimize or offset whatever formal authority was held by males' (181). It must be stressed, Meyers continues, that 'Assumptions of male dominance and female subservience in ancient Israel, derived from formal texts and from postbiblical traditions, may be part of the 'myth' of male control masking a situation of male dependence'. We must recognize, she says, that

> Gender relationships are the consequence of complex influences, involving specific social and economic arrangements; reconstructing the internal dynamics of a society thus is the only legitimate way to dispel the 'myth' and to increase the visibility of Eve. Our examination of Israelite society allows us to see Eve as a figure no less powerful than her male counterpart (181).

Meyers' reconstructions make the women of the premonarchic era visible: 'the peasant woman now seen is hardly the exploited, subservient creature imagined by

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5   Yee notes in a footnote that anthropologists 'have argued that 'perhaps the most egalitarian societies are those in which public and domestic spheres are only weakly differentiated, where neither sex claims much authority and the focus of social life itself is the home '' (Yee 1993:111, note 7).

those who have been influenced by the androcentricity of the biblical canon and by the misogyny of much of the postbiblical tradition' (189). But, Meyers goes on to ask, 'What happened to her? Why did she become hidden behind the cultural legacy of a male-dominated society?'

'One reason', she argues, 'it is so difficult to accept the idea of a powerful Eve, working interdependently with her mate to establish a nonhierarchical society with Yahweh alone as the sovereign force, is that the traces of that pristine balance of gender relationships have been nearly erased by the documents left by succeeding generations'. 'Yet, she maintains, they have not been completely removed, and here and there a biblical passage preserves a sense of the parity of the early generations'. Meyers' mode of reading teases out those passages and contextualizes them with the help of archaeological materials and anthropological analogies (189).

But while Israel retained many of the ideals of its formative period (190), Meyers recognises that monarchic rule almost certainly curtailed the power of ordinary women, even those in isolated and relatively intact village settings (193; see also Yee 1993:114 and Mayes 1989:81).

For example,

> The eventual disruption of the lineage system certainly reinforced social and political hierarchies, which would have contributed to gender hierarchies. Furthermore, the development of a market economy would probably have exaggerated the division of labor along gender lines with more prestige and control going to the males dominating the extradomestic economic life (193).[6]

Demographic changes would also have affected the structure and values of Israelite society. While the strategy of increasing the population was necessary and effective in the early stages of tribal Israel, population increase in the time of the monarchy placed enormous pressure on agriculturally productive land. Under such conditions of population density and argricultural intensification the transgenerational transmission of land becomes highly formalized and restrictive' (193-194)

> The implications of gender differentiation are enormous when property inheritance is reckoned patrilineally. The problem of establishing proper heirs becomes critical, and the sexual behavior of females becomes restricted. The double standard in treatment of females in terms of extramarital or premarital sexual activity is first a pragmatic response to this situation of inheritance legalities and only later a matter of morality (194)

It was not only the centralization of political and economic power in the development of the monarchy that effected the lives of Israelite women. The concurrent expansion of an exclusively male priesthood with its complicated ritual and ideological purity system also impacted on women's lives (Setel 1985:88).

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6   Similarly, the rise of the monarchy with its standing army would have also fixed the earlier fluid notions of gender and the public/domestic domains of influence (Meyers 1988:189-196; Yee 1993:114).

The fact that women are rendered 'taboo' through the life-bearing functions of the reproductive cycle can be seen as a recognition of their participation in divine power. At the same time, the system of ritual purity, by emphasizing the continual need to distinguish the realm of the divine from the realm of the human, serves to diminish - or even negate - the power of female human beings in the life process. It may be seen as a means of male (priestly) control over what may have originally been perceived as female power on both a material (reproductive) and spiritual (procreative) level (89).

Given this historical and sociological perspective it is not difficult to see why a metaphor with a negative view of women as its vehicle emerges in Hosea. The answer to the question, 'What discourse context generates this *new way of speaking about women* in Hosea?' begins to become apparent.

The relationship between language and life becomes even clearer if we take into consideration the political developments of the late eighth century BCE. 'For the first time the threat of national destruction was serious and real, and captivity loomed for the survivors of the impending disaster. Loss of the land and the end of the state were not remote and theoretical possibilities but present and impending realities' (Andersen and Freedman 1980:43; Setel 1985:94)

Setel argues that the primary relationship between a dualistic worldview and the objectification of women has been a key tenet of feminist theory (86). While the development of dualistic perspectives in biblical tradition has yet to be adequately analyzed, there are features of the eighth century BCE that might suggest that it represents a point of transition from earlier periods (94). According to Setel there 'appears to be evidence of an intellectual framework focused on separation between categories previously seen as interrelated', such as the growing separation between rich and poor, urban and rural, rulers and ruled, and between ritual and ethical action (94). 'To the extent that these separations became generalized into a broader dualistic view of experience, it is possible to understand the development of a perceived dichotomy between female and male human nature' (94). In other words, 'The emergence of objectified female imagery in Hosea and the other literary prophets can be seen as related to the intellectual and psychological disruptions caused by political events' (94).

Even if Hosea 1 and 3 are dated later than the 'original' Hosea the argument would still hold because the 'ultimate displacement of females from the parity they held with males in the premonarchic period and well into the monarchy in many rural quarters could not have come until the late preexilic period' (Meyers 1988:196), and even then would not have been completely hegemonic (194).[7] In addition, the destruction of the northern kingdom resulted in a large influx of refugees to the south and a consequent concentration of population in the urban centers. 'With the concentration of population in the urban centers, urban life became the prevailing mode', and so 'Urban life with its androcentric character finally overpowered traditional rural values and folkways' (Meyers 1988:195). Furthermore,

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7   Meyers argues that 'despite all the forces that may have operated under the monarchy to limit female power and autonomy, Eve's power in fact never completely disappeared' (Meyers 1988:194).

The eventual conquest of Israel involved not only an assertion of the military weakness of the nation but also a significant challenge to previous understanding of the relationship between Yahweh and the people of Israel. The sense of separation from divine protection may have entailed what seemed a basic reversal of right order: the people who were supposed to be superior under the aegis of divine power were proven inferior and rendered powerless. Certainly part of the prophets' response to this problem was a reinterpretation of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. Another aspect of their reaction may have been to assert their personal and collective dignity as men over against a negative characterization and restriction of women (Setel 1985:95).

So an answer to the question, 'What discourse context generates this *new way of speaking about women* in Hosea?' begins to take shape. The political and psychological state of Israel behind the text of Hosea is, I would suggest, the discourse context which generates this new way of speaking about women. While Hosea does reflect views of women which were prevalent in the early premonarchic period, and these must not be forgotten or neglected,[8] it seems to be the first 'to use objectified female sexuality as a symbol of evil' (Setel 1985:86).

3.   Metaphor and women

A central issue for contemporary religious feminists is the extent to which texts such as these in Hosea continue to define women in our present societies (Setel 1985:95). This is particular relevant to our discussion of the marriage-harlotry metaphor because

> to the extent that religious language and metaphors are not bankrupt as some tend to suppose, that at least in some settings they continue to inspire, mobilize, convict, instruct, challenge, and transform, then the question of the insights and limitations of biblical metaphors should be a priority for all theological enterprises devoted to liberation, especially those who propose to speak for the alienated (Weems 1989:101).

Soskice reminds us that Jewish-Christian religion is indeed 'a religion of the book', not a book of historical fact, but a book whose texts are 'chronicles of experience, *armouries of metaphor*, and purveyors of an interpretive tradition' (Soskice 1985:160). Metaphors are at core of the Christian tradition; prophets like Hosea use metaphors to say that which can be said in no other way but which, once said, can be recognized by many (153). This is both the liberative and oppressive power of biblical metaphors.

So what then do we do about a metaphor that relies upon the physical and sexual abuse of a woman in order to develop a theological insight about divine love and retribution? (Weems 1989:90 note 10).[9] This question becomes even more urgent when we recognize the effect of this new way of speaking about God

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8   What is suppressed and lost through the male controlled canonical process (195-196) must be
     recognized, recovered, and aroused (Welch 1985; West 1992).

9   As I have already indicated, the marriage metaphor in Hosea provides a new way of speaking
     about women and God.

and women It legitimated male oppression of women in Israel, and it still today legitimates the oppression of women by men. Life shapes language and language shapes life.

The answer to this question is complex and follows diverse paths. In some of my work I have attempted to chart these paths (West 1991). Different women have different judgements about the potential resources of the biblical tradition to orient human life in a meaningful, truthful, and powerful way (Cady 1986:460-461). But certain elements of the task are clear.

> *First*, we need to recognize that metaphor is 'a key to an understanding of language - including itself - as a form of struggle' (Bal 1993:205). The marriage-harlotry metaphor in Hosea is a site of struggle in both society and language.

> *Second*, it is not adequate to dismiss this way of talking about women in Hosea as 'a dead'. metaphor. Dead metaphors are the most dangerous. They become 'the conceptual framework on which language is stretched. They are, paradoxically, quite alive; indeed, they are 'metaphors we live by'' (Camp 1993:17; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Or more precisely, dead metaphors are 'metaphors he lives by' (Bal 1993). The marriage-harlotry metaphor in Hosea, although based on 'the accidents of culturally generated contiguities' (Camp 1993:23),[10] is effective and powerful today. It constructs our social life. 'It offers gendered subject positions' (29). This historically specific discourse generates 'natural' ways of being in the world - a socially and linguistically constructed 'common sense' which we may not even notice (29).

> *Third*, our analysis of metaphor must demonstrate that and how metaphors constitute gender, race, class, etc. (29). And because part of the metaphoric process is sublimation (Gerhart, Healey, and Russell 1993; Bal 1993), 'The work of analyzing metaphors becomes, then, a labour of blowing up the marginal and elaborating the implicit features of the object of the metaphor' (Bal 1993:185). The analyses of feminist scholars of the marriage-harlotry metaphor in Hosea do just this.

But for those who choose to remain within the Jewish-Christian tradition the task also includes recognizing, recovering, and arousing the dangerous and subjugated metaphors within and behind the biblical texts (Welch 1985; West 1992). Metaphors are important. Not only are they 'a form of memory' and an opportunity for 'the possibility of continuity' (Landy 1993:231), they also have the power to change our world. Indeed, as Suzette Elgin argues, they may be 'the *only* efficient way to bring about real change in human attitudes', particularly because they function as 'perceptual filters' (Elgin 1993:211; see also Camp 1993:28).[11] The marriage-harlotry metaphor in Hosea has changed our world. By analyzing and deconstructing this historically important metaphor we not only see more clearly 'the role metaphor plays in the structuring of historical discourses' (Camp 1993:33); we are also reminded 'that the re-structuring of discourses, and

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10 This is Umberto Eco's notion of metaphor.

11 Elgin tells a delightful story to illustrate her argument (see 212). Camp is here drawing on the work of George Lakoff and Mark Turner (1989) and Chris Weedon (1987).

the empowerment of minority discourses, will likely depend on the capacity of new metaphors to replace old ones' (33)

The hidden transcripts (Scott 1990) of the margins of text and society, the domain of poets, the poor, artists, and women (see also Schreiter 1985:66-67), is place to look for these new metaphors. Using these dangerous and subjugated metaphors to change the centre is our task, an appropriate and primary task for those of us engaged in biblical, theological, and religious studies.

It is appropriate to conclude this paper with the reminder that all religious language represents our partial and inadequate attempts to comprehend and articulate what if often beyond comprehension and articulation, the divine and our experience of it (see Weems 1989:101). 'Biblical metaphors simply heighten our defeat. Biblical metaphors such as the one [in Hosea] which depends on sexual violence to make its point simply highlight[s] our defeat' (Weems 1989:101).

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