

Article

“(Not) Her Husband”: Hosea’s God and Ricoeur’s Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Trust

Tchavdar S. Hadjiev

Belfast Bible College, Belfast BT17 9JP, UK; chadjiev@belfastbiblecollege.ac.uk

Abstract: Hosea’s reception history shows the existence of two distinct interpretative traditions in relation to the metaphor “God is a husband” employed in the first three chapters of the book. Many commentators, reading with the grain, focus on the unfaithfulness of Israel, the justice of her punishment and the love of God. More recently, feminist scholars have highlighted the problematic nature of this metaphor since it glorifies maleness and normalises gender-based violence against women. At first glance, these two approaches seem contradictory and mutually exclusive. However, Ricoeur’s discussion of the “conflict of interpretations” provides a fruitful way forward in dealing with this contradiction. Rather than being incompatible with one another, feminist and androcentric interpretations of Hosea are a particular example of the dialectical tension and integration of the hermeneutics of trust and the hermeneutics of suspicion. Both play a vital role in the reading process. One unmasks the idols produced by the false consciousness of the ego, the other opens oneself to hearing the voice of the Sacred, which comes into the text from beyond the realms of language.

Keywords: Hosea; Ricoeur; gender violence; love; hermeneutic of suspicion; God; feminist hermeneutics; reception history



Citation: Hadjiev, Tchavdar S. 2022. “(Not) Her Husband”: Hosea’s God and Ricoeur’s Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Trust. *Religions* 13: 163. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020163>

Academic Editor: Bradford A. Anderson

Received: 26 January 2022

Accepted: 9 February 2022

Published: 14 February 2022

Publisher’s Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The complex structure, memorable imagery, and ambiguous plot of the opening chapters of the book of Hosea have long fascinated and puzzled its readers. In a recent survey of reception history, [Anderson \(2021\)](#) identifies several points in Hosea 1–3 that constantly resurface in ancient and modern discussions. One of them, unsurprisingly, is the marriage metaphor, which depicts the troubled relationship between Yahweh and the people of Israel and raises important theological and ethical issues. With the rise of feminist criticism, this metaphor has become one of the thorniest issues in contemporary biblical interpretation. Traditionally seen as capturing the wonders of divine love standing against the depths of human depravity, the picture of an angry but forgiving divine husband now poses questions about gender-based violence and domestic abuse. This new way of looking at the text is increasingly difficult to reconcile with traditional readings, and require the commentator to make a choice. Should we admire or abhor Hosea? Should we read with or against the grain of the text? The argument of this article is that Ricoeur’s dual hermeneutics of suspicion and trust help us to look beyond the conflict of two mutually exclusive interpretations to the dialectical unity they form.

2. God, the Rejected Husband: Traditional Readings of Hosea 1–3

Hosea 1–3 offers plenty of opportunities for scholarly discussion and dissent. There are lively debates in the history of interpretation about whether the text describes Hosea’s dealings with one or two women and whether the marriage was a parable/vision or a reality ([Anderson 2021](#), pp. 2–5). Greater agreement exists on the overall message of the story. For many, this is a powerful revelation of God’s undying love for his wayward people. The Babylonian Talmud, for example, understands the prophecy as a proclamation of God’s attachment to the Jewish people who, alongside the Torah, Heaven and Earth, and

the Temple, are one of God's four special acquisitions in the world (*b. Pesachim* 87a–b; for rabbinic readings see [Simkovich 2021](#), p. 230). Writing from a different religious perspective, [Jerome](#) (2017, p. 171) notes:

“[B]ecause the prophet loves an adulteress and nevertheless is not joined to her by matrimony or by fornication but only loves her, although she transgresses, he is a type of God, who loves the very wicked children of Israel . . . [T]his adulteress signifies the present time of the Jews, who, even without God and knowledge of the Scriptures . . . are loved by the Lord.”

Cyril of Alexandria, who also refers to the prophet as a type of God, offers a similar interpretation. God communicates to the unbelieving Jews that “in his innate kindness he loves them as the God ‘who wants all human beings to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth’” ([St Cyril of Alexandria 2007](#), p. 95). Commenting on the promise of 2:19, [Luther](#) (1975, p. 13) exclaims:

“These are wonderful words. He does not say, ‘I will make a covenant,’ as He said to the fathers, but, ‘I will betroth.’ There is on earth no love more ardent than between a groom and his betrothed. The groom gives his bride not a gift but himself, the deepest love of his heart and all his property.”

In more recent times, the theme of divine love has increasingly become the focus of attention. Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, [von Orelli](#) (1897, p. 24) explains:

“The covenant between Yahveh and Israel is a covenant of love, corresponding to the most intimate and tender covenant on earth, that between married persons, which rests . . . on spontaneous, reciprocal inclination . . . Hosea . . . opened a glimpse into the depth of the gospel purpose of love. He is never weary in insisting that the covenant relationship, to be true and pure, must also be tender and intimate, a relation of mutual love and cordial inclination springing from internal fellowship and affinity.”

According to [Harper](#) (1905, p. cxliv), from Hosea's domestic experience came the message of “the great love of Yahweh in spite of faithlessness . . . the wonderful *love* on the part of one who was released from all obligations of nature or contract” (italics original). For [Feinberg](#) (1947, pp. 28–29), Hosea ch. 3, which proclaims the “boundless love of God for Israel,” is one of the “greatest prophetic pronouncements in the whole revelation of God.” According to [Kidner](#) (1976, p. 41), Hosea's love is “heroic . . . for it was to be God's love in miniature.” The proclamation of God's love is “the centre and core of Hosea's message . . . [and] the most significant element in the Nature of God” ([Snaith 1953](#), p. 82). The “overpowering strength” of this love, embodied in Hosea's obedience, “leads Israel through judgement to salvation” ([Wolff \[1965\] 1974](#), pp. 63–64). In 2:2, the prophet “modifies the imagery of divorce to portray the depth of YHWH's countercultural, but no less exasperated, love” ([Hwang 2021](#), p. 102), which in chapter 3 is revealed as a “persisting and purifying love,” and an “irrational commitment to shameful people like us” ([Hwang 2021](#), p. 135). In [Pentiuc's](#) (2002, p. 90) summary:

“The main idea of this chapter [3] is that God loves us not because we were worthy of his love but simply because he is a loving God. This is the pure, unconditional, and, to a certain point, incomprehensible, love of God towards men.”

A good example of the wider cultural and religious appeal of this reading is Francine River's 1997 best-selling novel *Redeeming Love*, whose plot is based on Hosea 1–3. [Neal](#) (2006, pp. 157–66) explores the impact of the novel on evangelical readers, as it has provided them with a vision of a “romancing God” who offers unconditional love, care, and acceptance. In contemporary Jewish life, the prophecy of Hosea plays a similarly important role. In speaking of God's willingness to forgive and to accept back those who have been unfaithful, it serves as a basis for the premarital counselling of Jewish couples and of efforts to promote reconciliation in Jewish marriages ([Fuchs 2021](#), pp. 361–62).

The emphasis on the love of God is not the only theme in Hosea's reception history. For Calvin, the message of love plays a subsidiary role. It sustains people in the time of their exile so that they do not lose hope, but the main concern is to show that God cannot be accused of cruelty for abandoning his people. The punishment of the Israelites is justified by their sins (Calvin 1984, pp. 75–78). "We then see what the Prophet intended to do, —to vindicate God from every blame, that men might not raise a clamour, as though he dealt unkindly with them" (ibid., p. 88).

The marriage metaphor turns out to be a suitable way of justifying God's dealings with Israel for an audience to whom the actions and feelings of the wronged husband seem understandable and perfectly natural. Julian of Eclanum suggests that God uses the symbolic figure of a marriage with a prostitute (Julian believes the story is a parable, not a description of a real event) in order to help Hosea understand the reasons for the divine anger and not to be troubled by the proclamation of divine vengeance upon his people. It is as if God says to the prophet:

"[A]dopt the persona of a kind-hearted husband, of a man who has for a long time put up with the courtesan behavior of his spouse. And welcome children who may either be regarded as of doubtful parentage or, more logically, who should be attributed to the unchastity of another. And try to see whether you can have constant patience . . . In order to show forth faithfully the harshness of the judge, he [Hosea] gets a taste of the injury that God has been dealt." (Julian of Eclanum 2021, pp. 113–14)

In a similar vein, Matthew Henry (1712, pp. 1119–20) exclaims: "What an odious thing would it be for a prophet, a *holy man*, to have a whorish wife, and children whorish like her! What an exercise would it be of his patience" (italics original). Later, in relation to the threats in 2:3, he states: "God will deal with her as the just and jealous husband at length does with an adulterous wife that has filled his house with spurious brood" (ibid., p. 1127). The sympathy with the husband's plight is common in this line of interpretation. "Hosea is drawn into the pathos of the subjective God, a God who feels deep pain and rejection" (Muhlhan 2013, p. 353). "Hosea's agony mirrors God's agony" (Varghese 2015, p. 1116) and unless his wife concedes to change her wayward ways, Hosea "will be *forced* to pass judgement on her (2:3). Not only that, but he will be *forced* to disinherit her children" (ibid., pp. 1118–19; italics mine). The morality of God's actions and the rights of an aggrieved husband to punish severely his wife are not questioned in the tradition (Anderson 2021, pp. 14–15).

The blame lies squarely with the woman who is an appropriate symbol of the "unbelieving and obdurate mass of the Jews" because "a woman, after all, would very clearly be understood as a symbol of weakness and an unmanly and fractured way of thinking" (St Cyril of Alexandria 2007, p. 56). "Her unfaithfulness, and not any wrongdoing on the part of the husband, has destroyed this marriage" (Carew 2006, p. 1015). The situation is that of a "loving husband about to caress his wayward wife but she would spitefully turn her face from him" (Pentiuc 2002, p. 85). In her actions, she has "imitated horses and mules that lack intellect" (Jerome 2017, p. 172). Her "bestial depravity" as she "prostitutes herself to adulterers, and no more cherishes or retains in her heart any love for her husband" (Calvin 1984, p. 100) evokes a feeling of disgust and strengthens the contrast with her husband. It is only natural that the children addressed in chapter 2 will "blame their own mother, and rightly so, and not in her place the truly holy Lord, who loves virtue and who does not deign to keep a prostitute as a spouse" (St Cyril of Alexandria 2007, pp. 65–66). This line of interpretation is especially clear in Theodore of Mopsuestia.

"In fact, while everyone could not but be surprised that a man who was very conscious of propriety should pass over women who enjoyed a good reputation and choose to take a prostitute into the marriage relationship, the novelty of the event provided the prophet with the occasion of telling them their duty, and in addition of demonstrating the greater marvel of God's condescending to choose such ungrateful men for special attention by the powerful example—namely,

the remarkable prophet's doing his duty by entering into association with a prostitute." (Theodore of Mopsuestia 2004, p. 41)

3. Israel/Samaria, the Abused Wife: Feminist Readings of Hosea 1–3

Over the last decades, feminist scholars have drawn attention to the androcentric nature of Hosea's reception history and the patriarchal character of the prophecy itself. Earlier readers did not pay much attention to the close link between gender and theology established in the text. More recently it has become increasingly clear that Hosea pictures divine mercy and human guilt as "gender-specific since the 'aberration' of the woman is depicted in categories of deviant female sexuality" (Wacker 2012, p. 373), while divine grace is embodied in a male figure (Yee 2003, p. 81). Love, mercy and righteousness belong with the man, while shame, corruption and guilt belong with the woman (Weems 1995, p. 101; Brenner 1996, p. 64). To read with the grain of the text, one needs to embrace fully its male perspective by sympathizing with the male protagonist of the story (O'Brien 2008, p. 67). The gendered perspective is hidden beneath the surface as the male is presented as a neutral description of what is normative while the woman is the "other" (Scholz 2021, p. 299). This androcentric perspective of the text is solidified by a long interpretative tradition (Sherwood 1996, pp. 255–65).

However, female readers relate more naturally to the female character, whose depiction is problematic on several levels (van Dijk-Hemmes 1989, p. 75; Exum 2012, pp. 107, 114; Scholz 2021, p. 304). The image of a promiscuous woman who brazenly pursues other men sounds like the product of male fantasy aimed at justifying a husband's control over his wife, even to the point of using violence to keep her in line (Weems 1995, pp. 41–42, 79; cf. Wacker 2012, p. 374; Exum 2012, p. 108). Consequently, the reader is invited to accept the woman's abuse and rejection as legitimate. In the text, she is silenced, objectified and dehumanized (Brenner 1996, pp. 76–77). Her actions are irrational and abhorrent. She never speaks, apart from a few occasions when her words are quoted by the male speaker to underline her depravity. She acts with disastrous results. Only when she becomes completely passive and the male protagonist makes her the object of his actions does the story take a positive turn. The woman is voiceless, and her own desire is suppressed (van Dijk-Hemmes 1989, pp. 79–86).

The most problematic aspect of Hosea's imagery is its legitimisation of the violence against the woman and in doing so tacitly condoning male abuse and domination of women in general (Fontaine 1995, pp. 63–64; Yee 2003, p. 81). "[O]ur text details very explicitly a case of domestic abuse" (Graetz 1995, p. 131). This violence is based on the rights of the husband to expect sexual fidelity from his wife and to punish her for failing to meet her obligations. Thus, the text creates a convincing impression that the husband, who has all the power at his disposal, is the victim of his powerless but deviant wife (Weems 1995, pp. 19, 31, 49). It "details violent misogyny" and promotes humiliation as the most effective strategy of taming a disobedient woman (Sherwood 1996, pp. 299–300).

The forgiveness and reconciliation that come in the second half of chapter 2 complicate, rather than resolve, the issue. They underline even further the woman's lack of agency. Contrary to Luther's assertion, cited above, that there is "on earth no love more ardent than between a groom and his betrothed," Baumann (2003, p. 93) suggests that the betrothal has negative overtones because it is introduced by the man's determination to "deceive" or "prevail upon" (Hos. 2:14[16] פתה) his erring spouse, going against a long Christian interpretative tradition of trying to explain this concept in positive terms (cf. Anderson 2021, pp. 15–16). Moughtin-Mumby argues that the narrative in chapter 3 redefines the concept of love. This is "not a tender love; nor is it a love of forgiveness and redemption . . . it is revealed in punishment and loss" (Moughtin-Mumby 2008, p. 235). The series of sign acts convey a "profoundly negative message" as a "dreadful future is set out before Israel . . . God's 'love' . . . is a wrathful love, which demands punishment in the absence of obedience" (ibid., pp. 240–41). More broadly, the very sequence of punishment–reconciliation leaves the female reader with uncomfortable questions. As Exum explains:

“To make matters worse, physical assault paves the way for the abused woman’s reconciliation with her abusive spouse. Abuse is thus complexly and confusingly linked with love in a pattern that consistently challenges women’s sense of worth and self-esteem” (Exum 2012, p. 117).

Of course, the focus of Hosea’s metaphorical depiction is not gender but the divine–human relationship. Recognising this, however, does not elevate the difficulty. Via the metaphor “God is a husband”, the culturally specific institution of the ancient Israelite marriage is suddenly lifted out of its historical particularity and given transcultural significance. Through its association with God, the metaphor maps ancient cultural stereotypes onto the way gender relationships are construed in the modern world. In this way it has the secondary effect of legitimising and shaping certain types of behaviour in the present. Weems (1995, p. 101) notes that:

“One must be conscious of the ways in which symbolic speech . . . draws us into its designs and attempts to mould our beliefs and identity . . . If the metaphor is read uncritically, women find themselves casually accepting the way in which they are demonized and victimized, and husbands begin demanding the authority and reverence generally reserved for deities”.

Moreover, the problem is not incidental to the imagery and cannot be resolved by a superficial removal of the offending features. It resides at the very core of the metaphor and permeates the whole ideological framework which controls its meaning. Contrary to modern romantic notions, the marriage assumed in the text is not an egalitarian relationship governed by mutual recognition and respect. It is a strictly hierarchical bond in which the man “takes” and “rules” his wife while the woman obeys her husband. The husband cannot be described as whoring against his wife, neither can the wife punish or discipline her husband (O’Brien 2008, pp. 63, 66; Exum 2012, p. 116). The metaphor emphasizes the exclusivity and the inequality of the relationship, not its intimacy (Yee 2003, p. 107; Graetz 1995, p. 139). The dilemma is well summed up by Weems (1995, p. 85):

“[W]hat to do with a metaphor that promotes a world that is hierarchical, that demonizes and marginalizes women, and that rationalizes violence, a world that many modern readers cannot—even for the sake of argument—abide . . . Put simply, what does pairing of divine judgement with rape and battery of women do to audiences who are unwilling to live in such a world?”

The theological stakes in the paradigm shift ushered by feminist interpretation are immense. The introduction of a female point of view changes the way the male character in the story is perceived. He is no longer the holy and righteous victim of his wife’s infidelities but a “deeply ambivalent man, one who can be as cruel and pitiless towards his wife as he can be gentle and giving” (Weems 1995, p. 71). This “outraged, menacing, and unpredictable” partner (ibid., p. 72) corresponds closely to the “image of the jealous, controlling, possessive husband” popular in Western culture (ibid., pp. 91–92). “As the analogy with domestic battering reveals, such thinking implicitly portrays God as an abuser to be feared, even in moments of care” (O’Brien 2008, p. 75). More radically, Hornsby (1999, pp. 116–17) thinks that God is presented as an “obsessive and dangerous individual” who is “willing to resort to cruelty, lawlessness, perhaps even self-humiliation” just to have the woman he desires to control and possess. Baumann recognises the theological problem with her suggestion that the marriage metaphor is contradicted and relativized within the book by the image of a caring parent in Hosea 11. The redactors of the book used a wider metaphorical network as a way of “correcting” the marriage imagery in chapters 1–3 (Baumann 2003, p. 104). However, even if “God is a husband” is subverted by the parallel metaphor “God is a parent”, the question of the theological usefulness of the husband metaphor still needs to be addressed. By leaving the “corrected” marriage metaphor in the text, the redactors of Hosea suggest that it still has a place in the reader’s quest to understand the nature of God.

4. The Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Trust: Ricoeur

The two trends in Hosea's reception history seem mutually exclusive. The reader faces a dilemma: either to accept the text as a portrayal of a just and loving God or to reject it as a legitimization of the patriarchy. Modern commentators choose one option or the other depending on their ideological commitments. Brenner (1996, p. 85) prefers to "expose and then reject" what she regards as pornoprophetic texts. Exum (2012, pp. 127–31), likewise, argues that such texts need to be systematically deconstructed. A detailed deconstruction of Hosea is attempted by Sherwood. To give just one example, she suggests that "Yahweh's own metaphor militates against him, and his rhetoric is deconstructed by the inadequacies of the male figure with whom he identifies . . . [T]he fact that his wife has left him suggests inadequacies in Yhwh's character" (Sherwood 1996, p. 223). Following in her footsteps, Moughtin-Mumby (2008, p. 266) discerns in chapter two the contours of an "assertive female who is thoroughly unimpressed by YHWH's claim on her, determined to take control of her life, and actively make her own choice." By listening to the quiet voice of this figure, the prophetic text can be deconstructed and its disturbing imagery is undermined (ibid., pp. 266–68).

Commentators at the other end of the ideological spectrum continue to read Hosea primarily as a revelation of the sovereignty and the love of God. The unpalatable aspects of the text are part and parcel of ancient patriarchal culture, but they do not completely rob the prophecy of its value (Routledge 2020, pp. 29–30). According to Hwang (2021, pp. 116–20), what happens to the woman in chapter 2 is what must happen in honour–shame cultures. The point is that God acts "counterculturally;" he takes the risk of losing face by welcoming back his wayward wife. Fuchs (2021, p. 360) notes: "As distasteful as many critics find the marriage metaphor in Hosea, it still points . . . to a positive message."

A more nuanced position is adopted by commentators advocating a "dual hermeneutic" which resists and appreciates the text at the same time (van Dijk-Hemmes 1989, p. 77; Weems 1995, p. 100). The idea goes back to Schweickart (1986, pp. 42–44) who asks why female readers find male texts appealing and powerful despite their patriarchal ideology. The power of such texts derives from their ability to arouse authentic desires, such as longing for love or aspirations to freedom. A text then works on two levels; it can simultaneously oppress by playing on the false consciousness of the reader, and liberate by speaking to their authentic self. Such texts merit a dual hermeneutic capable of simultaneously offering a negative critique and a positive appropriation.

These brief proposals leave unexplored the basis and nature of such "dual hermeneutics." In my view, Ricoeur's insightful discussion of the "conflict of interpretations" provides a theoretical framework robust enough to explain this dual hermeneutic and substantiate its application. In the remainder of this article, I will outline his approach and indicate how it might assist with contemporary readings of Hosea.

Ricoeur (1970, pp. 26–35) begins his seminal work on *Freud and Philosophy* with the observation that there is a radical disagreement in hermeneutics between two different types of interpretation. The first is based on the conviction that the text addresses the reader with a proclamation. The task of interpretation is to hear that message and to understand the divine that addresses itself to human beings through language. The second type of interpretation operates on the suspicion that no sacred object exists behind the text. What appear to the unsuspecting reader as messages from the realms of the sacred are in fact the illusions produced by their own consciousness. The two different stances give rise to two diametrically opposed types of interpretations. A hermeneutic of trust aims to achieve the "recollection/restoration of meaning" invested in the text by the divine. A hermeneutic of suspicion seeks to unmask the "illusions and lies of consciousness."

Ricoeur's central argument is that, on the surface the two hermeneutics, seem irreconcilable but in fact they are integrated in a dialectical unity. The key to understanding their unity is the "archaeology and teleology of the subject." Ricoeur (1970, pp. 419–58) uses the metaphor of "archaeology" in a temporal and spatial sense. Temporarily, it describes an individual's past, going all the way back to the formative stages of infancy and childhood.

Spatially, just like an ancient archaeological site, it depicts the structures of the psyche shaped during this process, with the unconscious buried underneath human consciousness. According to Ricoeur, Freud's psychoanalysis is valuable because it brings to light the archaeology of the subject. It reveals the "dark, inaccessible part of our personality", or the "cauldron of seething excitations" (ibid., p. 444) hidden beneath the surface of our consciousness. It is indispensable because the instincts and repressed desires residing there manifest themselves in the consciousness only in a distorted or concealed manner. Meaning, therefore, does not belong to consciousness. We see there only the disguises of our primal desires and narcissism which constantly seek to mislead us. We always begin with a false consciousness blinded by self-delusion, giving birth to idols. A hermeneutic of suspicion is the only way to unmask our illusions.

However, whilst Freud as a "master of suspicion", helps us to become aware of the inadequacy of our own self-awareness, he does not pay sufficient attention to the interpersonal dimension of human existence or to the forward process through which the child becomes an adult and achieves full personhood. To account for that, Ricoeur proposes the concept of teleology, based on Hegel's phenomenology of spirit. He insists that this is not a mechanical juxtaposition of two distinct, disconnected systems of thought. Teleology is implicit in the practice of psychoanalysis and in Freudian concepts like identification and sublimation (ibid., pp. 473–93).

Teleology focuses on the journey to psychological maturity, the developmental process through which the child becomes an adult and achieves self-consciousness. This "itinerary of consciousness" (Ricoeur 2007, p. 474) is marked by the encounter with "figures of spirit," i.e., various institutions and cultural artefacts which are objective, durable expressions of human subjectivity. They function as the "mirrors" of the self, upon which it needs to reflect in the process of development. As consciousness encounters the various spheres of meaning presented to it, it internalises the intellectual movement they represent. Ricoeur (2007, p. 175) identifies the sequence of three such spheres, economics, politics, and culture, each defined by three basic feelings: the longings for having, power and self-worth. The distorted versions of these feelings appear as the lust for possession, the desire for domination, and vanity. In the quest to satisfy these longings, human beings develop new relationships with other people and with the material world. According to Ricoeur, full personhood, the "constitution of the self," is completed in the third sphere, the region of culture. At this point, human dignity emerges and the existence of the self is no longer constituted by possessing or dominating others, but by being recognised and valued by them. The indestructible Freudian instincts, which are constantly at work, reappear throughout this process, but they are also surpassed and transformed in it. Therefore, there is a second locus of meaning in teleology, no longer in the hidden recesses of the unconscious where the id and the superego reside, but in the forward movement constituted by the successive "figures of spirit," internalised by the self, where each figure is contained in the subsequent figures and finds its meaning there (Ricoeur 1970, pp. 462–72, 507–10).

The key conclusion Ricoeur draws is that consciousness is "humiliated" and "dispossessed" as the "home of meaning", i.e., its initial impression that it is the master of meaning proves to be false. Meaning is only manifested in human consciousness but originates elsewhere. The dialectic of the archaeology and teleology of the subject suggests that meaning originates simultaneously in two opposing locations, in the inner recesses of the unconscious, revealed by archaeology, and in the various "figures of spirit," through which the self will travel on its journey to full personhood. Meaning, therefore, comes to us from below, controlled by our past, and from above, offered by our future.

The final piece of Ricoeur's puzzle is his concept of symbol (Ricoeur 1976, pp. 53–69). Symbols, according to him, have a dual structure, consisting of a linguistic and a non-linguistic element. On the linguistic plane, the symbol is an expression with double meaning; its semantic traits coincide with those of metaphor. However, whilst metaphor is a purely linguistic phenomenon, symbols are rooted in human experience; they connect life and language. Ricoeur defines "life" primarily as power. This can be the power of human

instincts and desires repressed in the unconscious, or the power of the Sacred, manifesting itself in the cosmos, the “supernatural forces, which dwell in the depths of human existence, transcending and dominating it” (ibid., p. 58). Symbols stand on the boundary separating these various powers on one hand, and the meaning articulated in language on the other. “[W]hat asks to be brought to language in symbols, but which never passes over completely into language, is always something powerful, efficacious, forceful” (ibid., p. 63).

Because of their dual nature, symbols are the key to solving the conflict between the hermeneutics of suspicion and trust (Ricoeur 1970, pp. 494–524). The dialectic unity of the archaeology and teleology of the subject, which displaces the origin of meaning simultaneously in two opposing directions, is manifested concretely in symbols. “[S]ymbols carry two vectors. On one hand, symbols repeat our childhood in all senses, chronological and non-chronological . . . On the other hand, they explore our adult life” (ibid., p. 496). In symbols, our archaic instincts manifest themselves in disguised form, but they are also transformed and purified. This is especially true for works of art and literature where the focus is not so much on the projection of primal desires and conflicts but on providing a sketch of their solution. Symbols are, therefore, “overdetermined” and perform two functions. “While they conceal the aims of our instincts, they disclose the process of self-consciousness” (ibid., p. 497).

As the divine addresses itself to humans, it enters language and becomes discernible through it. Thus, the dialectic of archaeology and teleology points beyond itself to the inexplicable spheres of the sacred. Works of literature may be simultaneously “figures of spirit,” i.e., expressions of human consciousness, and “symbols of the sacred”, through which the divine call enters human experience. As a cultural artefact, a literary work is a symbol that gives expression to primal desires seeking to manifest themselves in a concealed way, and to the human capacity to transcend and transform those desires. As a symbol of the sacred, that same work may be a sign of God drawing closer to humanity. “We might say these symbols are the prophecy of consciousness. They manifest the dependence of the self on an absolute source of existence and meanings” (Ricoeur 2007, p. 333). In other words, a symbol may be rooted in two different types of power, the power of human desire and the power of the sacred. Its ambiguous structure could reflect the interplay of those forces. Consequently, the two types of hermeneutics must be applied together. The hermeneutic of suspicion unmasks the hidden power of narcissism, which is always at work, distorting truth and turning symbols into idols. The hermeneutic of trust can operate once the idols are destroyed and the sacred addresses itself to the listener through symbols (Ricoeur 1970, pp. 524–49; 2007, pp. 468–97).

Ricoeur (2007, pp. 289–309) distinguishes between primary and mythical symbols. Primary symbols are the “elementary language” which describes human experience. Mythical symbols are the longer and more elaborate narratives that explore that same experience. Both are opaque, culturally contingent and give rise to equivocal interpretations (Ricoeur 2007, p. 317). Most importantly, they are irreducible to rational knowledge and contain an element of mystery which does not allow meaning to be extrapolated and separated from them. In this sense, symbols are “indestructible.” “The meaning of the sacred remains eschatological and can never be transformed into knowledge” (Ricoeur 2007, p. 332).

5. Conclusions: Reading Hosea with Ricoeur

Ricoeur’s cursory mentions of Hosea were penned before the rise of feminist readings and very much reflect the traditional approach to the book: Hosea’s God is a God of love (Ricoeur 1970, p. 536; 2007, p. 489). His hermeneutical matrix, however, offers a more sophisticated and convincing way of dealing with the complexity of the husband metaphor and the conflicting interpretations it has generated. It allows the reader to escape the pitfalls of radical rejection of the text or uncritical acceptance of its imagery by considering the story as a “mythical symbol” which draws its meaning simultaneously from the instincts of the unconscious and the power of the sacred.

Let us begin with the instincts of the unconscious. On the primary level, the male readers of the book of Hosea are invited to identify with the female character in the story. Her guilt speaks of their transgressions, and the violence to which she is subjected reflects their experience of defeat and exile. On a secondary level, the male readership also relates to the male protagonist who is the perpetrator of violence. They can feel his indignation and understand his rage. The widespread sympathy for the husband in reception history illustrates this clearly enough. Thus, the trajectories of guilt and aggression connect the two characters in the story to the experience of the reader. The “murderous fantasy” (Landy 1995, p. 51) of the husband, springing from wounded pride and desire to possess his spouse, is able to recapture the narcissistic impulses of the reader and nurture his aggressive tendencies. The symbol of the divine husband feeds off archaic instincts, notably the death instinct, which forms the basis of our “primordial hostility” towards other human beings (Ricoeur 2007, pp. 127–29). In Ricoeur’s framework, this divine symbol is an idol, a disguised manifestation of repressed desire emanating from the depths of human “archaeology.” Because it represents the “return of the repressed” it appears in the consciousness in a concealed form. It is instructive that the androcentric hermeneutic has not been able to see the problematic nature of the prophecy unaided. It takes another consciousness to decipher the deception. In this case, feminist criticism fulfils this function by unmasking the horrors of the inflicted violence and the manipulative nature of the narcissistic love of the abusive partner. A hermeneutic of suspicion destroys the idol produced by the false consciousness of the male authors, editors and interpreters of Hosea.

However, the symbol of the husband is “overdetermined” by its dual rootedness in the unconscious and in the realm of the divine. The book of Hosea is a “figure of spirit,” part of the human quest to transcend and transform the forces of its primal instincts. Moreover, as part of the canon of Scripture, it is simultaneously a symbol of the sacred, invested with meaning which comes from beyond the realm of language and finite human existence. The symbol does not stand on its own, but participates in a larger symbolic system created by the Bible and, later, Jewish and Christian traditions. Space does not allow me to explore all the other images, such as the exacerbad parent of Hosea 11, that constitute this system and propel its dynamic movement. For our purposes, it is enough to note that, working within its context, the interpretative tradition has heard, in the symbol of the divine husband, the message of God’s justice, discipline, and love. The overlay of human narcissism and aggression neither negate nor exhaust Hosea’s message of divine judgement, mercy, and self-giving love. The two vectors appear together in the overdetermined structure of the symbol.

Commenting on the character of God in the book of Hosea, Sharp (2008, p. 61) notes that there are too many “aggressive images of sexual violation, mangling, and evisceration that drive the speech of this savage God” to allow for us a straightforward theological appropriation of the prophetic book today. Her solution is to split Hosea’s imagery in two. The violent God of chapters 1–3 is an idol, rejected by the God of love and mercy who speaks in 14:8. The dual hermeneutics proposed here allow for a different approach, one which does not equate simplistically the idol with violence and the divine with love. The symbol of the husband in its totality, the punishment and the forgiveness together, gives rise to the idol. Simultaneously, the same symbol echoes a sacred message and embodies a revelation of the divine. How that works is impossible to explain fully. Here, Ricoeur’s insight that symbols cannot be reduced to rational knowledge and should not be treated as simple allegories is especially helpful. The symbol of the husband links human suffering and human hope in paradoxical ambiguity with the mystery of the divine. That symbol cannot be waved away and replaced by a rational explanation without destroying its intentional structure, which both reveals and conceals the meanings that come from beyond it. The paradox challenges the reader to reflect on the deceptiveness of their own hidden desires even as they seek to hear the voice of God.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Anderson, Bradford A. 2021. Family Dynamics, Fertility Cults, and Feminist Critiques: The Reception of Hosea 1–3 through the Centuries. *Religions* 12: 674. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Baumann, Geraldine. 2003. *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press.
- Brenner, Athalya. 1996. Pornoprophetics Revisited: Some Additional Reflections. *JSOT* 70: 63–86. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Calvin, John. 1984. *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets. Volume I. Hosea*. Translated by John Owen. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. Originally translated in 1846. Originally written in 1557.
- Carew, Douglas. 2006. Hosea. In *Africa Bible Commentary*. Edited by Tokunboh Adeyemo. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, pp. 1013–26.
- Exum, J. Cheryl. 2012. *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, 2nd rev. ed. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.
- Feinberg, Charles Lee. 1947. *Hosea: God's Love for Israel*. New York: American Board of Mission to the Jews.
- Fontaine, Carole R. 1995. A Response to 'Hosea'. In *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*. Edited by Athalya Brenner. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, pp. 60–69.
- Fuchs, Stephen L. 2021. The Minor Prophets in Jewish Life Today. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Minor Prophets*. Edited by Julia M. O'Brien. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 358–71.
- Graetz, Naomi. 1995. God is to Israel as Husband is to Wife: The Metaphoric Battering of Hosea's Wife. In *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*. Edited by Athalya Brenner. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, pp. 126–45.
- Harper, William R. 1905. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Henry, Matthew. 1712. *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Volume IV. Isaiah to Malachi*. Mclean: Macdonald Publishing Company.
- Hornsby, Teresa J. 1999. 'Israel has Become a Worthless Thing': Re-Reading Gomer in Hosea 1–3. *JSOT* 82: 115–28. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hwang, Jerry. 2021. *Hosea*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic.
- Jerome. 2017. *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*. Edited by Thomas P. Scheck. Downers Grove: IVP, vol. 2. Originally written at the end IV/beginning of the V century CE.
- Julian of Eclanum. 2021. *Commentaries on Job, Hosea, Joel, and Amos*. Translated and Edited by Thomas P. Scheck. Downers Grove: IVP. Originally written in the first half of the Vth century CE.
- Kidner, Derek. 1976. *The Message of Hosea*. Nottingham: IVP.
- Landy, Francis. 1995. In the Wilderness of Speech: Problems of Metaphor in Hosea. *BibInt* 3: 35–59. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Luther, Martin. 1975. *Luther's Works: Lectures on the Minor Prophets*. Edited by Hilton C. Oswald. Saint Louis: Concordia, vol. 18.
- Moughtin-Mumby, Sharon. 2008. *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Muhlhan, Brett. 2013. A Determined and Subjective Love: Agreeing with Luther's Evangelical Reading of Hosea 2. *New Blackfriars* 94: 340–57. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Neal, Lynn S. 2006. *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- O'Brien, Julia M. 2008. *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor: Theology and Ideology in the Prophets*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Pentti, Eugen J. 2002. *Long-Suffering Love: A Commentary on Hosea*. Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1970. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. Translated by Denis Savage. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1976. *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth: TCU Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2007. *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays on Hermeneutics*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Routledge, Robin. 2020. *Hosea*. London: IVP.
- Scholz, Susanne. 2021. Reading the Minor Prophets for Genre and Sexuality. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Minor Prophets*. Edited by Julia M. O'Brien. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 299–312.
- Schweickart, Patrocinio P. 1986. Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading. In *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts and Contexts*. Edited by Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, pp. 31–62.
- Sharp, Carolyn J. 2008. Interrogating the Violent God of Hosea: A Conversation with Walter Brueggemann, Alice Keefe, and Ehud Ben Zvi. *HBT* 30: 59–70. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Sherwood, Yvonne. 1996. *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea's Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Simkovich, Malka V. 2021. The Minor Prophets in Early Judaism. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Minor Prophets*. Edited by Julia M. O'Brien. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 228–42.
- Snaith, Norman. 1953. *Mercy and Sacrifice: A Study of the Book of Hosea*. London: SCM.
- St Cyril of Alexandria. 2007. *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets, Volume I (The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, Volume 115)*. Translated by Robert C. Hill. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press. Originally written in the V century CE.

- Theodore of Mopsuestia. 2004. *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets. The Fathers of the Church*. Translated by Robert C. Hill. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, vol. 108. Originally written in the IV century CE.
- van Dijk-Hemmes, Fokkelien. 1989. The Imagination of Power and the Power of Imagination an Intertextual Analysis of Two Biblical Love Songs: The Song of Songs and Hosea 2. *JSOT* 44: 75–88. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Varghese, Santosh. 2015. Hosea. In *South Asia Bible Commentary*. Edited by Brian Wintle. Udaipur: Open Door, Carlisle: Langham, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, pp. 1115–28.
- von Orelli, Conrad. 1897. *The Twelve Minor Prophets*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Wacker, Marie-Theres. 2012. Hosea: The God–Identified Man and the Woman/Women of Israel. In *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*. Edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker. Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, pp. 371–85.
- Weems, Renita J. 1995. *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Wolff, Hans W. 1974. *Hosea*. Translated by Gary Stansell. Philadelphia: Fortress. First published 1965. (In German)
- Yee, Gale A. 2003. *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress.