

○ RECENT FEMINIST APPROACHES TO THE PROPHETS

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Esther Fuchs reviews *Woman's Body and the Social Body in Hosea* by Alice A. Keefe (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001, 243pp.) and *Circumscribing the Prostitute: The Rhetorics of Intertextuality, Metaphor and Gender in Jeremiah 3:1-4:4* by Mary E. Shields (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2004, 184pp.)

The two books under review deal with prophetic literature, with Hosea and Jeremiah respectively, but in more than one way they continue an ongoing debate between critical and appropriative feminist trends in biblical criticism in general. Very briefly, the critical trend challenges patriarchal discourse, norms and paradigms in the biblical text and in biblical scholarship, while the appropriative trend configures the biblical text as a reflection of a distant time, and much of traditional Bible scholarship as supportive of women's struggles. Keefe's book exemplifies the latter trend, which has originated with Phyllis Trible and developed by Tikva F. Kensky and Susan Ackerman to name a few of the leading practitioners of this approach. Shields's approach is informed by the work of Esther Fuchs, Cheryl Exum, and Alice Bach. Both Keefe and Shields recognise the impact of previous feminist scholarship on their work, though Keefe prefers to challenge the critical trend and Shields avoids for the most part engaging in this debate. The books are different also in goal and scope. Keefe's work is more ambitious and comprehensive, seeking to redefine the parameters of scholarship on the book of Hosea in general, whereas Shields's is based on her doctoral dissertation on a limited text in Jeremiah. Nevertheless, because they represent opposite sides of the debate, I hope to highlight their contributions to current scholarship – as well as their shortcomings – by focusing on these differences.

Though both Keefe and Shields focus on the marital metaphor, the image of God as husband and Israel as wayward wife, the former argues that gender is a secondary factor, a means of verbal expression, which can and should be distinguished from Hosea's ethical and political message, Shields argues that the metaphor of the sinful woman is constitutive of the prophetic message, and that gender cannot be separated out from it as a figure of speech. Keefe's study draws on structural literary criticism, which allows for a separation between verbal expression and meaning, while Shields's use of postmodern criticism does not allow for a separation between expression and meaning. Keefe's tendency to subordinate expression to meaning takes her to the social sciences, history and sociology as disciplinary methods of inquiry into the political constraints that have generated Hosea's discourse. Loyal to her postmodern perspective, Shields explores the ways in which gender constructs and is constructed by prophetic discourse, using intertextuality rather than history as points of substantiation for her thesis. Keefe uses traditional biblical scholarship to buttress her argument, while Shields uses literary theory in her pursuit of proof. Both approach the prophets from two different disciplinary vantage points, not only from two different theoretical standpoints. If Shields's work avoids reference to the ongoing theoretical debate between critical and appropriative approaches, Keefe, in an equally problematic move, tends to equate feminist critiques of the prophets and the Hebrew Bible with androcentric approaches, as she indicts them both equally for projecting their anachronistic biases on the text.

For Keefe, the construction of woman as Other is postbiblical, while for Shields the construction is the result of biblical rhetorical power. That either one of them is allied to a particular theory, and why, are issues that neither one discusses. Thus, both books lack an awareness of their own social locations and epistemological positions, and each ignores the value in the other's perspective.

Though she agrees that gender asymmetries determine Hosea's language about women, Keefe argues that as a reflection of eighth century BCE norms, this language is rooted in an imagination of the body as a locus of sacred meaning. Rather than sexist dualisms, contemporary readers ought to consider Hosea's language about female fornication and the breakdown of the family as powerful metaphors for a socio-economic and political crisis against which the prophet seeks to warn his audience. In her introduction, Keefe argues that the dominant interpretations of Hosea's sexual metaphors failed to 'appreciate the social dimensions of sexuality and the sacral dimensions of sociality in the world of ancient Israel' (p. 35).

Keefe sets out then in chapter 2 'Female Fornication and Fertility Religion' to reject androcentric approaches that have sought to establish the biographical details of Hosea's relationship with Gomer, the woman of fornications. She aptly questions the excesses of such interpretations that romanticised the relationship as a manifestation of a woman's treacherousness and betrayal. Numerous traditional commentators historicised the image of Gomer. Thus, James Mays identified Gomer as a cult prostitute (*quedeshah*) one who regularly participated in the sexual rituals at the shrines, while Hans Wolff suggested that Gomer was an ordinary Israelite woman who offered up her womb for sexual use, as part of a bridal, pre-marital ritual of initiation. More recent commentaries by Francis Anderson and David Noel Freedman subscribe to the notion that Hosea's sexual imagery is related to the practice of sacred prostitution in eighth century Israel. The identification of the woman of fornications with orgiastic Canaanite fertility cults is often associated with speculations about ancient Near Eastern fertility goddesses. Keefe brilliantly rejects this interpretive tradition as an aspect of the 'predilection of the predominantly male guild of biblical scholars to label as "fertility" goddesses any and all female deities they encounter' (p. 52). She argues persuasively that most ancient Near Eastern goddesses, including the Canaanite goddess, Asherah, are depicted as the mothers of gods, charged with overseeing the sea, or in the case of Anat, with supervising wars. The association of Gomer with a fertility cult is to say the least baseless. Keefe further challenges the hypothesis of cult prostitution as ancient Near Eastern institution and practice. While biblical references to the '*quedesah*' are few and ambivalent, the main source of this hypothesis is the Greek historian Herodotus, whose testimony is unreliable. For one thing, most classical historians had no access to primary ancient Near Eastern documents, and most were invested in an attempt to discredit the 'Orient' as inferior to Hellenistic religions. This approach was later endorsed by Christian historians who sought to prove their superiority by deepening the rift between the alleged debauchery of Canaanite fertility cults and the superior quality of their own roots in Yahwism. Even Albright argued that the goddesses of the ancient Near East are either sacred courtesans or mother-goddesses. The androcentric revulsion from ancient Near Eastern sacral sexuality and fertility has been reversed according to Keefe in contemporary feminist appropriations of allegedly ancient religions. Contemporary feminist scholarly and theological reclamations of alleged fertility goddesses and sexual cults in fact reclaim male-produced fantasies and projections.

In chapter three, however, Keefe reverts to conventional androcentric scholarship regarding the similarity between – and even sameness of – Israelite and Canaanite religion. Here she does

not offer any fresh innovations or departures from traditional (male) scholarship. Repeating the scholarly consensus regarding the indebtedness of Yahwism to Baalism, 'The Fertility Cult Revisited' rejects the traditional association of Baal, the Canaanite god of rain, as the epitome of pagan immanence and Yahweh as the God of history and divine transcendence. This dualistic representation of Canaanite and Israelite religion was upheld by Protestant scholars who projected on the past their Christian dichotomization of the world into sacred spirituality and profane matter. Baal was no mere nature deity, but rather the god of the city-state of Ugarit and the Lord of the Earth. Similarly, Yahweh was never exclusively the god of history and spiritual transcendence. Fertility of the land and the womb were among the blessings Yahweh dispensed to men and women. Biblical texts, particularly Hosea, do not evidence a dualistic distinction between nature and history. Yahweh was the singular god of Israel and Judah, much as Dagon was the god of Philistine cities, as Chemosh was the god of Moab, or as Milkom was the god of Edom. These gods were no mere fertility deities. They were all equally national religions where the relationship between king, god and sacred center defined the connection between cultic practice and political life. It is this connection that Hosea condemns, according to Keefe. The bull icons, the prostitutes, and various sexual rituals are condemned not as actual deviations from Yahwism, but as symbols of the corrupt collaboration of priestly authorities and monarchic powers. Keefe argues then that prostitution and fornication are symbolic and rhetorical terms of invective, which ought not be taken literally. While Keefe's critique of traditional Hosea scholarship is insightful, I find her alternatives a bit weak and simplistic, possibly rooted in a Christian allegorical or symbolic imagination.

In Chapter Four, 'Covenant and Apostasy', Keefe suggests that the term 'berit' or covenant refers not to the theological – and according to Keefe anachronistic – concept that most commentators posit in relation to Israel's loyalty to Yahweh, but rather to a familial concept. The disintegration of the land-owning family unit, precipitated by international diplomacy that required the exchange of women and the sharing of deities, is the historical background for Hosea's condemnations. The prophet castigates the political elite of his time not for following foreign gods, but for endangering the cultural integrity of national culture. Again, stressing that Hosea used metaphorical language, Keefe insists that the 'lovers' and 'ba'alim' are foreign nations, and that the root *znh*, or the concept of fornication, describes the dangerous alliances and interrelations that the political elite has undertaken at the expense of Israel's national and social integrity. While Keefe's critique here too is fresh and suggestive, her alternative allegorical interpretations are somewhat disappointing because they are too general.

Chapters five and six move to a critical consideration of feminist approaches to Hosea. Here, again, Keefe offers insightful critical observations. Thus, for example, she argues in Chapter Five, 'Feminist Approaches to Hosea', that the resistant approach to Hosea's sexual and marital imagery is grounded in modern notions of individual sexuality. What Drorah Setel, Renita Weems and Yvonne Sherwood, among others, castigate makes sense in terms of modern Western society as the object and possession of a rational autonomous self, 'But in Hosea 1-2 one finds an imagination of the female body as a sign for the body social; this symbol needs to be read within the context of a world-view in which corporate rather than individual meanings of the human and human embodiment are primary' (p.160). Endorsing what she calls a socio-literary approach, Keefe suggests a more contextual approach that attends to the specific circumstances of ancient Israel. In Chapter Six, 'Women, Sex and Society', Keefe argues that control of female sexuality

was a cultural priority in ancient Israel because the order of the world was founded on the integrity of the family, and patrilineal continuity. Drawing on male-centred scholarship by Raymond Westbrook, Anthony Phillips, and Henry McKeating she re-authorises the objective description of adultery laws in the ancient Near East. These laws reveal that adultery was a breach in the sacral-social or cosmic sense. In Israel's ancient society sexual violence, like the rape of a virgin, was considered a breach of social order: 'In a society structured around patrilineality, it is not difficult to see how female sexual transgression could be taken as a symbol for social chaos; by association, woman herself may come to symbolize chaos' (p. 176). Much as the violation of the woman's body signified destruction and social upheaval, it also symbolised the sacral locus and meaning of the socio-national body in ancient Near Eastern cultures.

Chapter Seven, 'Rereading Hosea's Family Metaphor', reminds us yet again that the social turmoil described in Hosea is related to the transition from a family-based reciprocal village economy to a royal 'command economy'. Hosea, Keefe suggests, was a partisan for the traditional values of highland society with its localised systems of land tenure. Fields once used to produce subsistence crops were being lost to larger estates whose produce was dedicated to luxury consumption and export. Keefe argues that when Hosea proclaims that Israel has become an *eset zenunim* he is speaking of a class of powerful men aligned with the interests of the monarchy. But Keefe does not explain just why Hosea uses a female metaphor to refer to a powerful male elite. At the end she does not answer the question she herself raises as to 'why Hosea chooses a female metaphor to name the sins of men?' (p. 202). Her references to the loss of the traditional values of the *bet av*, and to the nation's deepening involvement in cosmopolitan life styles and internationalism, do not offer an answer either. The connection of the family as bound up with maternal reproductive efforts and her references to the woman as the symbol of the land still do not explain Hosea's image of the fornicating woman. Her invoking at the end the symbolism of woman in Hosea and in the Hebrew Bible in general as evocative of the female body as an icon of sacred maternal power (p. 218) reverts to the romantic glorification of woman as mother, a tack which she so eloquently criticises as one of the archetypal dualisms of Christianity. Keefe repeats that Hosea's imagery of Israel as the woman/land who sells her body to multiple lovers and bears alien children is no simple allegory for apostasy but a complex symbol of the death of the nation. Yet, she does not address the prophetic invectives and frequent negative associations attributed by prophetic discourse to women's bodies. This task is taken up by Mary Shields.

Gender emerges as a focus of discussion in Chapter Two of Mary Shields's *Circumscribing the Prostitute*, after a rather technical discussion of the importance of intertextuality and metaphor in Jeremiah, a discussion that, despite its drawing on Julia Kristeva, Jonathan Culler and Mikhail Bakhtin, does not clarify the exclusion of other literary strategies, or the particular relevance of these strategies to gender. Chapter Two, 'Gender Construction and Intertextuality of Culture', draws on biblical law regarding male control of female sexuality and reproduction as the necessary explanation of the metaphorical equivalence of the land and woman's body: 'It is precisely the marginality of women, their place at the boundaries of patriarchal society, which makes the imagery work so well' (p. 64). Following Carol Delaney and Carolyn Pressman's interpretations of adultery, Shields suggests that the prophet's rhetoric reinforces rather than challenges the marginal status of women as sexual chattel. In Chapter Three, Shields discusses the ways in which the metaphor of God as husband itself reinforces the power asymmetry of social gender relations. Following Wayne Booth and David Cooper, Shields points out that metaphors in general do not

simply re-inscribe equivalences and sameness, but rather seek to redefine social reality, to effectuate change. Jeremiah's male audience is exhorted not only to return to Yahweh, but also to increase their marital control of their wives, to relinquish their feminine treacherous behavior by becoming real men, or rather loyal sons (p.112). Chapter Five, 'Jeremiah 3:14-18: A Model for the Future' points up the problematic switch from the marital metaphor of the wife's infidelity to the father-son relationship as the ideal one. In contrast to the positive images representing the loyal sons, all associations with female images are negative. While shame and dishonor is described in female terms, the liturgy of repentance in Jeremiah 3:21-25 uses male terms. The ideal future when Israel will return to Yahweh is described in male terms exclusively.

In Chapter Eight, Shields goes on to show – following Nancy Jay and Howard E. Schwartz – how Jeremiah 4: 1-4 furthers the exclusion of women by drawing on the metaphor of circumcision. Sacrifice and circumcision are both rituals that seek to replace the mother's power of fertility with male symbolic sovereignty over offspring and genealogy. In Chapter Nine, Shields summarises the rhetorical strategies at work in Jeremiah's text as follows: 'Male behavior is prescribed while female behavior is circumscribed by this text' (p. 166). Though Shields clearly focuses on a limited text in Jeremiah, the progression from the image of the prostitute to the suppression of women in the description of a redemptive future exemplifies nicely what she refers to in her title as 'circumscribing the prostitute'.

The treatises I reviewed here could not be more different from each other. While according to Keefe prophetic metaphors use gender as a mere literary figure, which highlights the religious meaning of the female body, according to Shields prophetic metaphors construct and are constructed by gender in such a way as to reinforce male control of female sexuality and reproductive powers. While Keefe tries to prove that Hosea and the prophets in general celebrated the woman's body as a sacral metaphor, Shields deconstructs the metaphor and points up its investment in legitimizing male hegemony. If Keefe is right in her critique of the excesses of feminist scholars who decry prophetic texts as pornography, Mary Shield's dissertation exemplifies the best in critical approaches to the prophets, as it is a careful reading of a circumscribed text, a reading that is attuned to historical context, biblical scholarship and contemporary literary and feminist theory. Both Keefe and Shields have given us valuable readings of prophetic texts, and their serious engagement with their respective texts promises to deepen and further encourage the current debate in biblical feminist criticism. Scholarly disagreement is the mark of a vibrant field of studies, and, if nothing else, my hope is that this review has demonstrated its growing maturity.