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The Woman's Voice in Ezekiel 16

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Ezek. 16 has received considerable attention in recent years and much of this negative. The social evil of domestic violence, whether experienced first hand or known through the media, enters into one's reading of the metaphor and effectively denies the modern audience the ability to identify with the husband. For example, Day analyses the

husband's (i.e. YHWH's) actions and its three phases in terms of the behavioural patterns of wife bashing; indeed, she even postulates that much of the woman's alleged activity may have been the imagined projections of her overly jealous and possessive husband.¹ The woman's portrayal, especially when it comes to her punishment, has also caused concern. The woman is dehumanized and objectified; but the portrayal is seen to go beyond the mere act of dehumanizing and objectifying her. Violence and abuse make this piece more than just an erotic fantasy.² Weems considers the metaphor as a risky trope, one which asks of women, even those who may have suffered rape and abuse, to align with its 'misogynistic impulses' (p.61) and which more generally 'teaches audiences how to imagine women in humiliating situations and how to perpetrate violence against women' (p.88).³ For Brenner such texts as Ezek. 16 are beyond redemption. As she observes: 'I fail to see how the texts'

¹ L. Day, 'Rhetoric and Domestic Violence in Ezekiel 16', *Biblical Interpretation* 8 (2000): 222. Van Dijk-Hemmes, 'The Metaphorization of Woman in Prophetic Speech: An Analysis of Ezekiel XXIII', *Vetus Testamentum* 43 (1993): 162-170, in her discussion of the parallel story in Ezek. 23 argues that the prophet misnames the abuse and thus distorts the woman's experience. Ezekiel blames the victim. Thus whilst Day contemplates the possibility of projection to account for the active promiscuity of the women, van Dijk-Hemmes appeals to her passive experiences and their proper interpretation as abuse.

² A. Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge. On Gendering Desire and 'Sexuality' in the Hebrew Bible*, (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 171. See also Mary E. Shields, 'Multiple Exposures: Body Rhetoric and Gender Characterization in Ezekiel 16', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14 (1998): 5-18.

³ R.J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1995), discusses Ezek. 16 within the larger context of the marriage metaphor in Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. She seeks to understand the metaphor in terms of its speaker and his intended audience, the male elite of Judah, but she contrasts these rhetorical tactics of the author with the reading tactics of its (modern) audience (p.85). On the one hand, the metaphor is told to explain Judah's national experience of God as 'unpredictably abusing' (p. 71), but Weems eloquently asks, 'what, if anything, there is to gain today from continuing to use a metaphor that elevates violence against women to a theological insight?' (p.99).

unsavoury properties can be neutralized and separated from their religious message.’⁴ The modern audience whether in the guise of historian, literary critic or religious adherent finds it difficult to read the text dispassionately. It cannot be viewed with antiquarian disinterest, nor should it be, because by its discursive power literature can mold and manipulate social attitudes, a point well made in Phyllis Trible’s pioneering work entitled *Text of Terror*.⁵ In the words of Weems, ‘Metaphors matter because they are sometimes our first lessons in prejudice, bigotry, stereotyping, and in marginalizing others – even if only in our minds’.⁶

In response to this assault some have sought to understand Ezekiel in terms of his own experience. For example, Yee argues that both Ezek. 16 and 23 are to be understood as products of a ‘personal and collective male experience of foreign colonization and conquest trauma’, his response to the experience of ‘state-sponsored terrorism’, where ‘sexual images often become

⁴ Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge*, 174. See also C. Dempsey, 'The Whore of Ezekiel 16: The Impact and Ramifications of Gender-Specific Metaphors in Light of Biblical Law and Divine Judgement', in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. D.H. Matthews, B.M. Levinson and T. Frymer-Kensky (London: T&T Clark, 1998) esp. 56-57 and 77-78, who focuses on the picture of YHWH as vengeful and abusive to question whether the text can be considered revelatory. Even YHWH’s forgiveness is given for reasons of spite and to create a feeling of shame in the woman (pp.74-75). It is not only the violence against the woman that offends the modern reader but the idea of her pollution and defiling nature. G. Baumann, *Love and Violence. Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 145, notes Ezekiel’s introduction of such terms as טמא and תועבה into the marriage imagery and sees this as a result of the prophet’s intention to justify YHWH in the light of his action against Jerusalem.

⁵ P. Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 3, describes her study in the following terms: ‘It interprets stories of outrage on behalf of their female victims in order to recover a neglected history, to remember a past that the present embodies and to pray that these terrors shall not come to pass again. In telling sad stories, a feminist hermeneutic seeks to redeem the time.’ Her studies of Hagar (pp.9-35) and the Levite’s concubine (pp. 65-91) intersect with the present study, Hagar in terms of her foreign origins and slave status, and the concubine in terms of her marital status, namelessness, silence and the statement in the MT that she left the Levite after playing the harlot (זונה, Judges 19:2).

⁶ Weems, *Battered Love*, 107.

tropes for colonial dominance'.⁷ The victim in order to establish meaning resorts to self-blame but by using the image of the promiscuous woman to reinscribe 'the male status quo and the entitlements of his assumptive elite world' (p.122) succeeds in shifting them to the female body. Another recent approach to the reading of Ezek. 16 is that of anti-language, i.e. the language of antisocial groups and counter-cultures. For Stiebert, Ezek. 16 and 23 represent a discourse 'inculcated to subvert and resist the values of a ruined culture and to construct an alternative counter-reality'.⁸ In particular, Ezekiel uses 'distorted and exaggerated rhetoric' (p.171) to create in his hearers a sense of shame in order to effect internal purity.

Ezek. 16 only presents one side of the story, that of the husband; the condemned wife is not only silent but silenced. Indeed, the story, though constructed in the form of a legal case,⁹ does not allow the woman to utter a word. After the command to the prophet to make known to Jerusalem her abomination, Ezek. 16 starts its recount of the husband's (i.e. YHWH's) kindnesses and Jerusalem's ungrateful wickedness. It begins by graphically portraying the girl's

⁷ G.A.Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve. Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 111 and 117. Of interest is the reading of the women's punishment in terms of Ezekiel's trauma at the siege and conquest of Jerusalem, pp.129-131. On the use of trauma to analyse Ezekiel more generally see B.E. Kelle, 'Dealing with the Trauma of Defeat: The Rhetoric of the Devastation and Rejuvenation of Nature in Ezekiel', *JBL* 128 (2009): 469-490.

⁸ J. Stiebert, *The Construction of Shame in the Hebrew Bible*, (Sheffield: JSOT, 2002), 162, but cf. 151-62, 170-3.

⁹ The prophet is called upon to make known (הודיע) to Jerusalem her abominations. הודיע belongs to the legal register and is used by the plaintiff to call on the accused to render account of the charges which follow. The accused may equally counter with charges of his own and preface them also with הודיע. See Job 10:2, 13:23, 38:2 and 40:7. The structure (הודיע followed by a statement of the charges) is found at Ezek. 16:2, 20:4 and 22:2. But there is an important difference between Job and Ezekiel. Job uses the imperative in a legal context when one party asks the other to explain his actions. Ezekiel, however, envisages a unilateral action in which YHWH is not only a party to the dispute but also its judge. Thus his judgement immediately follows the charges. Indeed הודיע is not used to elicit a response from the accused, but is addressed to the prophet. The effect of this is to deprive the accused of a voice.

abandonment at birth and the kindness extended to her. When she reaches puberty, YHWH takes her to wife and adorns her with gifts. Up until this point the girl has been entirely passive, but now starts a listing of her crimes where she appears to wrest control of her situation. But in reality it is the prophet as YHWH's spokesman who remains in control as he recounts and colours her actions. The list ends with the spokesman again graphically asserting YHWH's control with the issuing of his judgment. In all of this we only hear what YHWH's spokesman wants us to hear and the woman stands silent before her accuser and judge. It is the aim of this paper to suggest a voice for the woman, a plausible response to the charges made against her.

Metaphor, parable and allegory

The way in which speakers and hearers engage in metaphorical language is complex and there is in this complexity the potential for multiple interpretations or in Black's words 'different or even partially conflicting readings'.¹⁰ The reasons for this are becoming clearer. According to the interactive theory, metaphor aligns vehicle and topic in a creative manner where a 'system of associated commonplaces' or 'set of associated implications' is mapped or projected between the vehicle (or focus) and topic (or frame).¹¹ This 'system' is not predetermined, but constituted by the interplay of speaker and hearer, vehicle and topic, the context of the utterance, the cultural

¹⁰ M. Black, *Perplexities* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), 55.

¹¹ Black, *Perplexities*, 62, later preferred to see this as a modelling of the frame or topic in terms of the set of associated implications entailed in the referent.

and linguistic habits and competencies of the participants etc.¹² In most instances the signal that an expression is metaphorical is the difficulty in understanding it literally.¹³ The idea, however, that metaphor merely maps attributes from vehicle to topic is too simplistic. It can express the human response when descriptive language fails or may convey succinctly the emotional attitude that should accompany the message. What passes between vehicle and topic encompasses attributes, associations, principles, beliefs or attitudes. For the purpose of succinctness we will name these the ‘metaphorical consideration’.

At the level of sentence, one word or an expression can be used metaphorically (the vehicle) whilst the rest (the topic) is literal. In the case of proverbs and parables the whole sentence or story is used metaphorically. Here the sentence or story, which may at one level appear literal, is the vehicle which is used to explain, interpret, add insight etc. to something else (the topic). The Hebrew Bible contains a number of parables, e.g. the parable of the vineyard (Isa. 5:1-6), Nathan’s parable to David (2 Sam. 12:1-4), the parable of the women of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14:6-8), and the parable told to Ahab (1 Kgs 20:39-40). In the main the metaphorical consideration of each is determined by the parable’s frame of reference in the narrative. Some parables have a measure of realism in themselves. In other words, the story may seem plausible at the literal level. Other parables do not always achieve that degree of realism. In such cases it seems as if the topic is determining elements of the story. When there is such interference by the

¹² Cf. M. Black, *Models and Metaphors. Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1962), 25-47, idem, *Perplexities*, 47-76. Cf also P. Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (London: Routledge, 1978) and L.D. Ritchie, *Context and Connection in Metaphor* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

¹³ It may not always be the case that a difficulty in assigning literal meaning is the signal of metaphor. Cf. T. Cohen, ‘Metaphor, Feeling, and Narrative’, *Philosophy and Literature* 21 (1997): 223-244.

topic we speak of allegory rather than parable. Indeed, it is not so much a one-for-one correspondence between vehicle and topic that defines allegory (such a definition is too strong) as it is the degree to which the topic influences and colours the vehicle. Ezek. 16 is such an allegory,¹⁴ a story that speaks of a foundling girl who was taken in, cared for, married, only later to play the whore with every stranger she met. The topic, however, is Jerusalem (the foundling girl)¹⁵ who has acted faithlessly against YHWH (the speaker) by taking other gods and in making foreign treaties (the lovers). Moreover, the referent becomes transparent in the telling of the story (e.g. the nature of the punishments exacted by the husband)¹⁶ and the perceived need to blacken the character of the woman, which leads to quite bazaar behaviour on her part. Indeed, unlike most parables where the metaphorical referent only becomes clear at the end, in Ezek. 16 the characters' identities are made explicit at the outset, thus facilitating the audience's understanding of its multiple referents.

An effective metaphor should project or map to the topic the metaphorical consideration evoked by the vehicle. The topic and its context of utterance (frame) also have a role to play in

¹⁴ J. Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 10 and 90.

¹⁵ Weems, *Battered Love*, 44-45, details how the feminization of cities in the Hebrew prophets is used to draw a connection in understanding between their audience's conception of women and the nation/land/capital, the referent of the metaphor not always easily determined. On the ancient Near Eastern conception of the city as a woman married to the patron deity see also Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*, 20-23, and C. Maier, 'Jerusalem als Ehebrecherin in Ezekiel 16', *Feministische Hermeneutik und Erstes Testament*, ed. H. Jahnnow et al. (Stuttgart, 1994), 87-88

¹⁶ The influence of the referent on the topic can be seen when the woman's lovers are themselves not punished but even called upon to execute judgement against her; such a detail reflects Jerusalem's punishment, not that of an adulterous wife. See Peggy Day, 'The bitch had it coming to her: Rhetoric and Interpretation in Ezekiel 16', *Biblical Interpretation* 8.3 (2000): 231-254; *eadem*, 'Adulterous Jerusalem's Imagined Demise: Death of a Metaphor in Ezekiel XVI', *Vetus Testamentum* 50 (2000): 285-309; and Dempsey, 'The Whore of Ezekiel 16', 71-72.

determining what is mapped. The allegory of the adopted but unfaithful wife (i.e. Ezek. 16) should map to the topic the metaphorical consideration evoked by the vehicle and thereby allow the hearer to understand why YHWH feels and acts as he does against Jerusalem. The metaphor is meant to be both cognitive and emotive; it affords an understanding of YHWH's anger and violence by allowing the audience to identify with what Ezekiel believes is an analogous but human (male) experience.¹⁷ And this identification with the male speaker rests on two assumptions, namely:

- (a) The audience must understand the anger as not only plausible but justified. The point here is that they should not entertain explanations for the woman's actions except her sheer ingratitude and depravity, and the telling of the story unfolds in such a way that the audience is given little room in which to move with regard to their perception of her; and
- (b) The audience must believe that the husband has the right to physically discipline his wife.

On both assumptions the allegory, which once may have been effective, struggles today. Ezekiel assumes that his hearers will find no justification for the wife's actions and accordingly will identify with the 'cuckolded' husband. However, both the modern recognition of "mitigating circumstance" and our reticence to assign blame to only one party in a relationship cause uncertainties to arise. Perhaps the woman did have her reasons. And even if her actions were inexcusable, there can be no excuse for the violence perpetrated against her. Clearly, the issue of the husband's honour and his right to seek amends for loss of face has been reconfigured

¹⁷ The criticism may be offered that the topic of the metaphor envisages both male and female inhabitants of Jerusalem and therefore is not misogynistic. But the topic is not the inhabitants but Jerusalem, the city, and the vehicle assumes in the hearer the attitudes in question. One cannot just look at one element of the metaphor (i.e. topic) without looking also the other (i.e. vehicle).

today. As a result, the metaphor is now under strain and volatile. If identification with the husband fails to occur, then there may well be a mapping of metaphorical considerations, but not those necessarily intended by Ezekiel. In other words, a metaphor is not just a linguistic device whose meaning is fixed in the words and ideas used, but rather it is interpreted in the light of an ever-evolving context, both proximate and distant (e.g. culturally mediated tradition) and the particular experience of each hearer.

Deviant behaviour and a sympathetic ‘reading’

Extended metaphor can powerfully engage its audience as they identify with or against the characters of the narrative. Because it is extensive (i.e. narrated) it also allows the speaker to direct the reception of the story in the course of its telling. Thus a resistant reception can be cut short as new elements are introduced into the narrative to preclude such an interpretation.

In the case of Ezek. 16 this occurs when the narrator extends the received metaphor of the unfaithful wife and provides her with a history, a monstrous biography - *eine ungeheurerliche Bibliographie* - in Maier's description, adding crime after crime to form a litany of deviant behaviour.¹⁸ Not only does she take foreign lovers, she also sacrifices her children to them; she

¹⁸ Maier, 'Jerusalem als Ehebrecherin', 102.

does not receive payment for sexual favours, but pays her lovers instead. These crimes condemn her and leave little room for understanding her situation.¹⁹ As Moughtin-Mumby observes:²⁰

Jerusalem may take the initiative to free herself, but she - and the resistant reader - face forceful opposition as the 'empty places' of the text constrict, leaving no space into which to speak her alternative story of the events.

Without this litany of deviant behaviour, which by the way contributes to the allegorical effect, the story can be 'read' differently; it tells of an abandoned female child who was pitied by an adult male who took her in and cared for her. As a female there was no reason to adopt her since she would, as a daughter, produce no heirs; rather her future was to serve in her master's household. However, this changed when on reaching puberty her master spied her naked and desired to have her. Her wishes and desires were never an object of concern in any of this. But she made herself heard; her master's intentions and gifts were not appreciated. She spurned these as she sought satisfaction in the arms of other lovers. When Ezek. 16 is stripped of its allegorizing details, one sees why Ezekiel may have felt the need to counter a resistant 'reading'.

As has been noted, the woman is voiceless throughout Ezek. 16. The speaker is YHWH, the allegorical husband of the oracle, and not only does he present the plea in his favour but also utters the judgement against her. The conventions of speech predispose us to give him the benefit of the doubt, until such time as we hear the other side. But this never happens and so the

¹⁹ The woman's deviant behaviour is intended, as Weems, *Battered Love*, 18-19, observes, to remind Jerusalem of YHWH's possession over her and to justify the violent punishment enacted against her. We will return to these ideas below when we compare the stories of Ezek. 16 and Harriet Jacobs.

²⁰ S. Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 183. Cf. also Weems analyses how this history that Ezekiel has provided is used, as in other marriage metaphors.

audience is left with a one-sided account. The second part of this paper seeks, by stressing the importance of circumstance for understanding a character's behaviour, to redress this deficit. It will use another's voice, namely, that of the autobiographical character of Brenda in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, to give to the woman a voice.

Born into slavery

Harriet Jacobs (Brenda²¹) was born 1813, in Edenton, North Carolina. As her parents were trusted slaves, a degree of freedom was extended to them. In consequence, for the first six years of her life Harriet was unaware of being a slave and it was only with the death of her mother that she overheard conversations and learned the truth. Even so her childhood remained carefree and protected from the harsh realities of slave life. Harriet's mistress, Margaret had been nursed and brought up together almost as a 'foster sister' to Harriet's mother. She was kind to Harriet, teaching her to read and spell, and even promising to manumit her when she died. Such proved not to be the case. Upon Margaret's death when Harriet was 12 years old, Harriet was bequeathed to her mistress' niece. However, as her new mistress was only a child of five years when the will was read, Harriet came under the authority and control of her father, Dr James Norcom (Dr Flint). Harriet would later 'try to think with less bitterness of this act of injustice' (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.16) against her.

The mood in the new home was quite different, 'cold looks, cold words, and cold treatment' (p.18) and Harriet enumerates the multiple cruelties experienced under the Norcoms.

²¹ The names in brackets are those of the characters in the autobiography. Harriet Jacobs was extremely wary of publishing her story and preferred anonymity for her actors.

But Harriet, no doubt due to her childhood experience, did not think as a slave and resisted the idea that she was ‘made for (Dr Norcom’s) use, made to obey his command in everything’ (p.29). Harriet’s situation would worsen. When she was 14 years of age (‘enter on my fifteenth year’, p. 44), Norcom started displaying sexual interest in her, making crude remarks and writing notes to her.²² In her words, he ‘peopled my young mind with unclean images ... He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things’ (pp.44-45). As Jacobs comments more generally on the lot of the female slave:

No pen can give adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery. The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers. (p.51)

Harriet’s sense of shame and loneliness is telling. She longed to confide in someone about what was happening but fear prevented her. No sympathy was forthcoming from Norcom’s wife who suspected her husband’s intention and viewed Harriet rather as ‘an object of ... jealousy and, consequently, of ... hatred’ (p.53). Harriet did, however, find consolation in a mutual affection between herself and a free-born coloured man. He wished to purchase her freedom and marry her, but when Norcom was informed of the pair’s intention, he refused permission and in a heated exchange both physically and mentally assaulted her.

²² It was common for the female slave to be the object of the sexual depredations of the white males in the household. Her semi-nudity (read, her scanty attire fit for work), the greater acceptance of premarital sex and divorce in her community and the callous calculus over her powers of reproduction to replenish the workforce and turn a profit for her master, which are all in stark contrast to the moral precepts governing nineteenth century, white females, goes only some of the way to explain her very vulnerable position. One should never underestimate the abuse that can occur when one individual is made subject to the power of another. On the image of female slave as a Jezebel (i.e. ‘governed almost entirely by her libido’, p.29) see D.G. White, ‘*Ar’n’t I A Woman?*’ (New York: W.W. Norton Co, 1985) 27-46. The social construct, as White observes, ‘soothed many a troubled conscience’ (p.61).

Norcom's unwanted advances continued after Harriet reached 15 years of age. Matters came to a head, however, when Norcom proposed to build a house for her 'in a secluded place, four miles away from the town' (p.82). Harriet suspected that his intentions were to get her away from the relative protection afforded by Norcom's household and the townsfolk. At the same time Harriet had been flattered by the interest shown in her by another white man, an unmarried lawyer, by the name of Sawyer (Mr Sands). What started as friendship turned into a consensual sexual relationship and she became pregnant.²³ As Harriet explains:

... to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment. It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. A master may treat you as rudely as he pleases, and you dare not speak; moreover, the wrong does not seem so great with an unmarried man, as with one who has a wife to be made unhappy. There may be sophistry in all this; but the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible. (pp.84-85)

In view of Norcom's continued advances Harriet also saw in this relationship a way both to hurt her master and advance her own interests.

Revenge, and calculations of interest, were added to flattered vanity and sincere gratitude for kindness. I knew that nothing would enrage Dr Flint so much as to

²³ On miscegenation in antebellum America see White, '*Ar'n't I A Woman?*', 34-46. As she observes, 'If, in order to ease the burdens of slavery, they (black women) made themselves available, they only fulfilled the prophecy of their lustfulness, which in turn made it more difficult for other black women to reject the overtures made by white men.' (p.38)

know that I favoured another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way. I thought he would revenge himself by selling me, and I was sure my friend, Mr Sands, would buy me. (p.85)

In part her action had its desired effect; Norcom felt that the action was directed against him and he responded with suppressed anger.

You obstinate girl! I could grind your bones to powder! You have thrown yourself away on some worthless rascal. You are weak-minded, and have been easily persuaded by those who don't care a straw for you. The future will settle accounts between us. You are blinded now; but hereafter you will be convinced that your master was your best friend. My lenity towards you is a proof of it. I might have punished you in many ways. I might have had you whipped till you fell dead under the lash. But I wanted you to live; I would have bettered your condition. Others cannot do it. You are my slave ... I came here ... to make you a friendly proposition; but your ingratitude chafes me beyond endurance. You turn aside all my good intentions towards you. I don't know what it is that keeps me from killing you. (pp.91 and 92)

Harriet later goes on to speak of his 'old threadbare discourse about his forbearance and my ingratitude' (p.117), a refrain under which she had already suffered with her earlier intention to marry (p.62). However, the sense of triumph in telling Norcom was short-lived due to the shame that she had brought on her family and grandmother in particular.²⁴ Also her hope for sale was never realized but she did bear two children to Sawyer.

²⁴ The strength of the female social network and the strength of the bond between mothers and daughters (read also grandmothers and granddaughters) is well made by White, '*Ar'n't I A Woman?*', 119-160.

Methodological issues

(a) Differences

Immediately an objection can be raised against a comparison of Harriet Jacobs and the woman in Ezek. 16: the cultural and social, not to mention temporal and geographic distance between the two women must surely compromise any comparison. Indeed, one must note the cultural specifics of each narrative. For example, Jacobs' appeal to and reinscription of the rhetoric of the American Revolution²⁵ (e.g. the innate desire for freedom and the right to revolt against the unjust oppressor) against her oppressor culturally frames her story. Jacobs also appears to tailor her message to its largely white northern female audience. She adheres to the morality of contemporary white society. For example, before her grandmother she is deeply shamed by her sexual liaison and fears rejection, but uses this very issue as a key weapon in her arsenal to fight slavery. As Travers observes: 'Jacobs upheld the ideal of sexual and religious purity, while arguing that slave women should not be judged by the same moral standards as free women.'²⁶ Whereas Jacobs' story is literal and one told by a black woman who had experienced first hand the perils of slavery to a white man in a society operating under the veneer of Christianity and its ethical demands, Ezekiel's story is figurative and told by one of the elite about a foundling reared to serve but taken as wife/concubine by her master. The former contemplates a morally condemned, though frequently practised, relationship between slave and master, and the latter a socially condoned relationship. But one should not be under any illusion

²⁵ Maggie Sale, 'Critiques from Within: Antebellum Projects of Resistance', *American Literature* 64 (1992): 701-2.

²⁶ A. Travers, 'Spiritual Purity and Sexual Shame: Religious Themes in the Writings of Harriet Jacobs', *Church History* 56 (1987): 65.

as to the nature of ancient marriage in terms of the exercise of power and control, and especially so in the case of a concubine.²⁷ Needless to say, Ezekiel's context was also very different. As a priest he constructed the world in terms of purity and impurity. And impurity could adhere even when there was no deliberate act of transgression. As heir to a prophetic tradition he used the metaphor of the unfaithful wife to picture Israel's covenant faithlessness and thereby justify YHWH's judgement against Jerusalem.²⁸

If we accept the objection of social and cultural distance *tout court*, it becomes difficult to compare any two culturally distant narratives, thus putting at risk the whole endeavour of historical investigation, i.e. our ability to imaginatively reconstruct the past. Some progress towards solving this dilemma is made by noting similarities between the narratives, especially the subservient position of the female characters and the interest in sexual control of the dominant males. But that line of argument can only take us so far. So how to proceed? Can Harriet Jacobs' story be used as a heuristic device to frame the questions we ask of Ezek. 16? But questions produce answers in response to their contexts and the terms in which they are asked. Questions such as 'Did the woman see through the speaker's kindness?'; 'What motivated her actions?'; and 'What do her actions reveal to us about her situation?', assume that the allegory narrated a real story. Moreover, the endeavour risks circularity confined, as it is, within the parameters of a story with multiple interpretations, and with the reader unable to step outside

²⁷ Ezek. 16 does not make explicit the marital status of the woman; however, if marriage was constituted by an arrangement between two families and an exchange of the bride-price, the woman in the story is more likely to be seen by the audience as a concubine.

²⁸ Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*, 78-81, 88, 103 and 127-28, notes that Ezekiel adds the charge of impurity to that of adultery found in the use of the image by other prophets. She argues that the reason for this is that Ezekiel sees the woman/Jerusalem as a cipher for the temple and must explain why YHWH had to depart.

the hermeneutical circle to question the characters directly. We must be resigned to practise an art not a science. Given this reservation, Ezek. 16 may still be discussed as a story based on human behaviour and experiences, and a new interpretation offered, if for no other reason than that its purpose is to create understanding by drawing on that experience.

(b) Similarities

Jacobs' autobiography presents us with an interesting insight into the ideology of possession in Ezek. 16. The male characters in both stories appear to stress the possession of the woman and emphatically remind her of what substantiates his possession over her. Apart from the obvious verbal claims, various behaviours are employed to underline the male's possession; in particular the offering of gifts and pleasantries. Ezek. 16:10-14 lists the material gifts that the male provided, even substantiating his authority and claim to own her beauty (v.14). What is important to note here is the emphasis placed on the debt created by acceptance of the gifts. Likewise, in Jacobs' story the male character, Norcom, employs pleasantries and a gentle nature in order to reinforce the totality of his possession over her.²⁹

As already noted, possession is more obviously identified through verbal assertions such as:

“You became mine”(Ezek. 16:8)

“I might have punished you in many ways. I might have had you whipped till you fell dead under the lash. But I wanted you to live; I would have bettered your

²⁹ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 44, 56, 62 and 64.

condition. Others cannot do it. You are my slave ...” (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p.91)

The outright assertion of the woman’s subservience may produce a variety of interpretations given the implications of context. In particular, it must be considered that in both contexts verbal assertions of dominance would be traditionally accepted and even expected. They could also be seen as outbursts of rage caused by the disobedience of the woman in each story. But more appropriately, they should be viewed as examples of verbal degradation used to reaffirm possession of the woman.

The woman’s defiance and the male’s perceived need to reaffirm possession and control indicate how fragile domination could be. In both instances the male sought to gain control over the woman’s sexuality. Furthermore, one observes that the women were raised as children in the household and it was only when they reached puberty that the male’s lustful desires were aroused. Slavery, in so far as it only recognized the child’s maternal relationship, sought to replace the father with the master. But the system operated without the social taboo against incest, with the result that sexual abuse by masters of their female slaves was endemic in antiquity and in antebellum America. Harriet Jacobs is eloquent in pointing out the corrupting double standard of slave-owning society - the white master and pillar of the community who abused his slaves. And she pleads not to be judged by the standards that that society set on white-female decorum. The standards expected of the white woman are not to be expected of the enslaved black woman.

The issue of race/ethnicity, a unifying thread through the story of Harriet Jacobs, lies close to the surface of Ezek. 16 as well. The theme is underlined from the outset when in v.3 the woman's father is described as an Amorite and her mother as a Hittite, native Canaanites subject to **הרם** (the ban) and with whom Israelites were forbidden to intermarry.³⁰ The foreignness of the woman plays into the racial stereotype of sexual promiscuity, as the list of her deviant behaviours enumerated by the prophet demonstrates. Cf. White's discussion of the black female slave's portrayal as 'Jezebel'.³¹ Of further interest here are Ezekiel's references to male genitalia. Not only does the woman take foreign lovers, but she makes for herself phallic models (**זכר צלמי**, v. 17) with which to fornicate. Apparently, the prophet's male audience, in so far as they identified with YHWH, was not well-enough endowed to satisfy the woman's wanton sexual appetite. That the prophet was not beyond such demeaning racial profiling is put beyond question in the sister passage to Ezek. 16, when it is said of the Egyptian lovers "whose members were like those of donkeys, and whose emission was like that of stallions" (Ezek. 23:20).

It has been observed above that extended metaphors can cut short a resistant reading by the insertion of new elements into the story which preclude a sympathetic interpretation. One such instance, it is argued, is the introduction of the charge that the woman sacrificed her children's lives to her own personal interests. Interestingly, Harriet Jacobs had to face a similar charge with her decision to run away. She is told by her grandmother: "Stand by your own

³⁰ Cf. Deut. 7:1-3. See Maier, 'Jerusalem als Ehebrecherin', 91, who sees the reference as an aspersion against the ethnic origins of Jerusalem itself and an attack on its so-called Zion-theology.

³¹ D.G. White, *'Ar'n' I A Woman?'* (New York: W.W. Norton Co, 1985), 27-46.

children, and suffer with them till death. Nobody respects a mother who forsakes her children; and if you leave them, you will never have a happy moment ...” (p.139). She addresses this charge. Her flight was prompted when the children were brought to the plantation where she worked to be ‘broke in’ (pp.143-44). Moreover, Harriet’s decision to leave despite her grandmother’s warning was actually a ‘sacrifice’³² on her part for the children. As she states: “... nothing less than the freedom of my children would have induced me to disregard her advice.” (p.145), for Harriet considered that as long as the Norcoms (i.e. father and son) had her in their power, the children would never be sold into freedom (i.e. to their biological father, p. 147).³³

The parallels between the stories are highly suggestive. Just as Harriet took a lover to spite her master, perhaps so did the woman in Ezek. 16. But the real point here is that both women had little choice in what happened to them. Power was in the hands of the male master, but each woman used what power she had, her sexuality, against the dominant male. As Moughtin-Mumby comments: 'It seems significant that within the narrative 'prostitution' itself

³² The use of ‘sacrifice’ in relation to Harriet Jacobs is metaphorical whereas in Ezekiel the charge is one of literal sacrifice. We refrain at this point from taking up the story of the slave woman, Margaret Garner (characterized in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*) who killed one of her children and attempted to kill the others to avoid their return to slavery. The point, however, is that the actions of both the woman of Ezekiel and Harriet Jacobs are seen to be unmotherly and thus a damning stain upon their character. On infanticide in antebellum America see White ‘*Ar’n’t I A Woman?*’, 87-88 and 125-5.

³³ Jacobs, given her audience, also needed to establish her maternal credentials; she could not just flee north and leave her children as this would not play to the audience. Thus the seven years spent in hiding in her grandmother’s attic, in the same house with her children! See further Thomas Doherty, ‘Harriet Jacobs' Narrative Strategies: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl’, *Southern Literary Journal* 19.1 (1986): 90. On the figures of female runaways see White, ‘*Ar’n’t I A Woman?*’, 70-71. Women were much less likely to run away than men and when they did, they did so with their children. Indeed, according to White (p.73) it was the fear of losing their children that prompted the flight.

seems to take on associations of power, with the female's sexuality becoming a weapon to be unleashed in the battle against YHWH'.³⁴ Again, if we can understand Harriet as she asks us to, we should also extend the same understanding to the woman in Ezek. 16. Although we do not know the circumstance in which she lived, with the assistance of Jacobs' story we are led to ask whether she really was the adulterous and defiled woman portrayed by the prophet.

Conclusion

The women in our stories utilized their sexuality against the dominant male. The question is raised as to why? Ezek. 16 recounts a one-sided reproach of the woman for her adulterous behaviour, and this impairs our ability to discern the motives behind her actions. In direct opposition to this Jacobs' story directly explains from the woman's point of view the reasons behind her actions; we clearly understand her circumstance and how self-interest and revenge played a part in her defiance. However, this is problematic, for the circumstance of each individual is what explains her motivation, and it is this that makes a comparison somewhat strained. We just do not know the circumstances of the woman of Ezekiel other than what the offended party chose to tell us in his reproach of her. However, what we may gain from the use of the Jacobs' story is an awareness that there are reasons behind such actions and that any woman in a subservient position should be afforded a sympathetic consideration of her circumstance.

³⁴ Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors*, 118.

The charge might be laid that this interpretation forgets that our story is only a literary construction and an extended metaphor at that. According to this objection, there is no reason to analyse the motives of a fictional character conjured up in the imagination of an author. However, such an objection overlooks the fact that the power of the metaphor lies in bringing the known (vehicle) to bear on the unknown (topic). It plays on the audience recognizing and identifying with the husband in the story and using that knowledge and emotion to understand the anger of YHWH. In other words, Ezek. 16 invites the audience to look at the motives of the characters, to identify with the motives of the husband and to disdain those of the woman. If the husband, why not the woman also?³⁵

³⁵ It also is worth observing that Ezekiel invites this approach when he disrupts or suspends the illusion of the metaphor. This happens when Ezekiel's female contemporaries are confused with the women in the parables. In Ezek. 23:48 the prophet breaks from the metaphor to warn women in his audience against fornication; no longer is 'woman' a cipher for Jerusalem; but 'woman' is 'woman'. Cf. also 23:10. The same break in parabolic illusion also occurs at Ezek. 16:41 when the judgement of Jerusalem is portrayed as occurring before the eyes of many women. The punishment of the metaphorical woman Jerusalem is as much a lesson for women as women. See further Maier, 'Jerusalem als Ehebrecherin', 98 and 102, who considers that the generalizations of vv.32 and 44 destroy the metaphor.