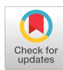

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Incest as a rhetorical device: The shock effect of the allegory in Ezekiel 16

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Abstract

Ezekiel 16 paints one of the harshest pictures in the Hebrew Bible. In a brokenhearted cry of rage, the prophet contemplates Jerusalem's history of relationship with God. Employing familial imagery, the relationship is characterised by constraints and penalties, including instances of sexual violence imposed by God. Consequently, the allegory challenges the perception of the deity as an exemplary figure. This article posits that the allegory deliberately delivers a jolt to its recipients by depicting God as transgressing a social taboo, by altering his role for the people from a father to a spouse. This depiction of incestuous relationship wields the power to evoke threat and terror. It acknowledges that the breaching of the taboo of a father–daughter incestuous relationship, albeit inadvisable, is possible. By ascribing to God a behaviour that fathers strive to avoid, the reproach captures the imagination of its recipients, leaving a profound impact upon them.

Keywords: Ezekiel; familial imagery; incest; prophetic rhetoric; sexual violence

Ezekiel allegory – a shocking message

The allegory in Ezekiel 16 has troubled readers ancient and modern. Its narrative of an evolving relationship of YHWH and Jerusalem moves from the latter's infancy to her maturity, when her reputation becomes that of a brazen whore, resulting from disloyalty to YHWH, her patron-spouse. Admittedly, Ezekiel is not the first prophet to use metaphors of marriage and adultery in portraying God and Israel's relationship. Some pre-exilic prophecy (e.g. Isa 1:21; Jer 2:2, 3:2–10, 20; Hosea 2:4–25) is recognisable as the textual basis or inspiration for Ezekiel's allegory.[1] Nonetheless, Ezekiel's account surpasses others in its blunt sexuality and violence.

[1]Textual influence on the Ezekiel allegory is usually ascribed to Isaiah 1 and Hosea 2. See George A. Cooke, *The Book of Ezekiel* (New York: Scribners, 1937), p. 159; Hans W. Wolff, *Hosea* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 12–17, 30–7, 70–93; Phyllis Bird, 'To Play the Harlot: An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor', in Peggy Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 88–9; Drorah T. Setel, 'Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea', in Letty M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1985), pp. 86–95.

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Recent scholarship on the chapter has addressed gender and feminist concerns.[2] Many have pointed out that its sexual imagery reflects contemporaneous social norms of patriarchal hierarchy and sexual violence. Renita Weems claims in regard to biblical prophecy in general that 'more than any other material in the Bible, the portraits of women's sexuality drawn by Israel's prophets have contributed to the Bible's overall impression that women's sexuality is deviant, evil, and dangerous'.[3] This assertion conveys that prophetic imageries are indicative of normative social concepts such as patriarchal hierarchy, norms of oppressive conduct and the male's sexual rights over females. Corrine Patton (Carvalho) stresses regarding the sexual images in Ezekiel 23 that 'If God is allowed to abuse his "wives", human husbands will see a sanction for physical abuse of their own wives'.[4] Accordingly, one could suggest that the depiction of Jerusalem as a woman punished with a public stripping (Ezek 16:37–41) attests to an acceptable lawful punishment for adultery. Similarly, the gang rape practice in Ezekiel 16 could demonstrate authorised punishments for women's promiscuity.[5] In the words of Robert Carroll, 'we may catch echoes and traces in the text of socially oppressive practices… The anchoring of such images of violent action in the activities of YHWH only strengthens the ideology of violence informing the text. For a violent god breeds violent men; or, better still, violent men produce violent images of gods'.[6]

The supposition that the Ezekiel allegory reflects known social norms at the time of writing implies that the depictions did not aim to be as shocking as they are today for contemporary readers of the Bible.[7] Consequently, while Ezekiel's addressees may have found its rhetoric harsh, they would not have perceived it as presenting unacceptable practices.

[2]See a survey in Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, 'Ezekiel in Abu Ghraib: Rereading Ezekiel 16:37–39 in the Context of Imperial Conquest', in Stephen L. Cook and Corrine L. Patton (eds), *Ezekiel's Hierarchical World: Wrestling with Tiered Reality* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), p. 141.

[3]Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 5.

[4]Corrine L. Patton (Carvalho), '"Should Our Sister Be Treated Like a Whore?" A Response to Feminist Critiques of Ezekiel 23', in Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong (eds), *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), p. 221.

[5]Peggy L. Day, 'The Bitch Had It Coming to Her: Rhetoric and Interpretation in Ezekiel 16', *BibInt* 8 (2000), p. 238. Idem, 'Adulterous Jerusalem's Imagined Demise: Death of a Metaphor in Ezekiel XVI', *Vetus Testamentum* 50 (2000), pp. 286, 288–9. Day considers this view too literal. Likewise, Johanna Stiebert argues that 'often (possibly, more often than not) there may be a considerable discrepancy between social ideal and lived practice, including more tolerance and more lenience'. Johanna Stiebert, *Fathers and Daughters in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 172.

[6]Robert P. Carroll, 'Whorusalamin: A Tale of Three Cities as Three Sisters', in Bob Becking and Meindert Dijkstra (eds), *On Reading Prophetic Texts: Gender-Specific and Related Studies in Memory of Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), p. 76.

[7]On the effect of the text on contemporary readers see Kemp's definition of Ezekiel 16 as a 'troubling text' and a 'text of terror'. Joel B. Kemp, *Ezekiel, Law, and Judahite Identity: A Case for Identity in Ezekiel 1–33* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), p. 44. Also see Katheryn P. Darr, 'Ezekiel's Justifications of God: Teaching Troublesome Texts', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 55 (1992), pp. 111–3. These views stand in contrast to Andrew Sloane's rather apologetic tone regarding Ezekiel's depictions: 'The texts do not articulate and perpetuate misogynistic sexual politics… They are violent and offensive texts, but that violence is not directed against women, but serves to highlight the offensiveness of sin and the reality of judgement. Texts such as these were used by God to confront his erring people with the horror of their sin and its consequences'. Andrew Sloane, 'Aberrant Textuality? The Case of Ezekiel the (Porno) Prophet', *Tyndale Bulletin* 59 (2008), p. 76. My work herein pursues the human intentions that generated these texts.

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This supposition is nevertheless questionable. Several other scholars have recently asserted that the allegory aimed to alarm the recipients by deliberately playing on notions that disturbed an already traumatised society. Daniel Smith-Christopher claims that the imagery of a brutal and sexual violence emerged within the new geopolitical situation, following the Babylonian conquest, when invaders inflicted defeat and humiliation.[8] Accordingly, Ezekiel – a 'refugee' in the Neo-Babylonian empire – envisaged images of torture and humiliation from the reality surrounded him. This assumption is congruous with recent research on sexual violence in warfare, indicating the downgrading of victims with 'feminised' characteristics while the ethnic, religious and political position of the perpetrator is usually 'masculanised'.[9] One can deduce that the Ezekiel allegory utilises gendered images to depict the devastated circumstances of Jerusalem, woven into a narrative that maintains the conviction of God's superiority. As such, Ezekiel's rhetoric does not represent the normative patriarchal perspective of an average ancient Israelite, but rather an abnormal practice in times of war and distress. Consequently, if the text aimed at shocking its recipients by resonating with their traumatic violation by the Babylonian conquerors, the addressees' initial reaction was to identify with the 'female Jerusalem' rather than support the 'male God', as both men and women of the community were humiliated.[10]

Another scholar asserts the allegory's deliberately shocking effect by claiming that its brutality is meant to foster hurt and humiliation in Ezekiel's target audience. As such, they could not identify with God's lack of empathy, cruel and even sadistic, behaviour, and with his utilisation and objectification of the girl. Consequently, readers, male or female, would be critical of YHWH's actions and embrace the girl's perspective.[11]

I tend to agree with the above-mentioned suggestions that the allegory was produced with the intention of creating a sense of shock in the listeners. However, it is difficult to say whether or not listeners felt compassion and empathy towards the abused Jerusalem. People tend to experience different levels of concern and sympathy towards the weak and unfortunate,[12] even if the latter represent one's very own group or family.[13] Still, as both Koller and Smith-Christopher show, feelings such as distress and disgust, accompanied by shame and self-hatred, are relevant for characterising the allegory's possible impact.

The strongest impact the allegory had on its original audience, however, was not necessarily the vile description of sexual violence, nor the idea of God's insufficient treatment of the nation in its youth. Instead, listeners would have been appalled by the association of God with inadvisable though possible practices. In changing the relationship with Jerusalem from an adopted child to a sexual spouse, God fulfils a danger of a parental relationship in that he performs what would be considered taboo in a normative society. The discussion below will argue that while the allegory reflects social norms of gender hierarchy and female status, it also reveals the potential role of fathers

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[8]Smith-Christopher, 'Ezekiel in Abu Ghraib', pp. 148–9.

[9]See Inger Skjelsbaek, 'Sexual Violence and War: Mapping Out a Complex Relationship', *European Journal of International Relations* 7 (2001), p. 225.

[10]Smith-Christopher, 'Ezekiel in Abu Ghraib', p. 156.

[11]Aaron Koller, 'Pornography or Theology? The Legal Background, Psychological Realism, and Theological Import of Ezekiel 16', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 79 (2017), pp. 406, 412–3.

[12]See Jim Sidanius et al., 'You're Inferior and Not Worth Our Concern: The Interface between Empathy and Social Dominance Orientation', *Journal of Personality* 81 (2013), pp. 318–20.

[13]See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 271–2; Gili Kugler, 'Metaphysical Hatred and Sacred Genocide: The Questionable Role of Amalek in Biblical Literature', *Journal of Genocide Research* 23 (2020), pp. 15–6.

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in their daughters' lives. God here accomplishes something uncommon and wrong, yet legal and achievable.

An enduring familial relationship

Biblical prophetic discourse often ascribes a parental role to God in the establishment of Israel (e.g. Isa 45:9–12, 63:16–18, 64:7; Jer 2:27, 3:4, 19–22, 31:9; Hosea 11:1–4; Mal 1:6, 2:10). In the absence of a respective 'mother' who would give birth to the child-nation, the relationship with God is a type of adoption, taking the child-nation into his care and granting him a parental role.[14]

In so doing, God nurtures and disciplines the child. While these responsibilities would usually decrease as the child grows older, God's father-like influence is persistent, as God never grows old or dies. In the words of Second Isaiah, the nation continues to be carried by God[15]: 'even to your old age I am he; even when you turn grey I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save' (Isa 46:4).[16]

The idea that God is the bearer of the child-nation until the child's 'old age' is implied in the Ezekiel allegory, which recounts the pair's evolving and continuous relationship. But the persistence of God's presence in the child's life is explained in the allegory differently to Second Isaiah: the relationship with the deity is sustained by developing from a parent–child connection into a marital status. Thus, unlike the vision of Second Isaiah of God's continuous care and nurturing, the Ezekiel allegory portrays a relationship characterised by disappointments, unfaithfulness, torture and sexual violence. This is all possible thanks to the personification of Jerusalem: a female child.

When the child is a girl

The image of Israel as God's daughter is common in biblical prophecy. Jeremiah uses the term 'my people's daughter' (בת עמי, Jer 4:11, 6:26, 8:11, 19, 21–23, 9:6, 14:17; cf. Isa 22:4),[17] and 'the faithless daughter' (הבת השובבה, Jer 31:22; 49:4). Prevailing in prophecy is also the expression 'daughter Zion' (בת ציון, Isa 1:8; 16:1; 37:22; 52:2; 62:11; Jer 4:31; 6:2, 23; Mic 1:13; 4:8, 10, 13; Zeph 3:14; Zech 2:11, 14; 9:9; cf. Isa 3:16–17; 4:4). Elsewhere, the nation is considered a daughter with no specific term. In Jeremiah 3, Israel is mentioned as God's female offspring who will inherit a land, the better portion than that of the other nations ('I thought how I would set you [sg. f. אֲשִׁיתֵךְ] among my children, and give you [sg. f. לָךְ] a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations', Jer 3:19a). This image stands in disparity to the custom that female offspring do not inherit the land (cf. Num 27:3–4), hence God's proclamation of the exceptional

[14]The biblical language has no specific term for 'adoption'. Nonetheless, the nature of a 'non-biological' though familial relationship is depicted in biblical stories and prophetic metaphors, indicating familiarity with the concept of taking a child under one's responsibility. See the discussion in Jeffrey H. Tigay et al., 'Adoption', in Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Encyclopedia Judaica 1* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Cengage Learning, 2007), pp. 416–7.

[15]The context mentions God's womb, supposedly implying God's capacities of conception (Isa 46:3). But as I have shown elsewhere, the metaphor in Second and Third Isaiah does not usually present YHWH as the nation's mother. Instead, it is Zion who maintains a close and intimate relationship with the people (e.g. Isa 49:18, 22, 62:4, 66:11, 12).

[16]Unless otherwise stated, all biblical translations follow the NRSVue.

[17]Similarly in Lam 2:11, 3:48, 4:3, 6, 10.

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deviation in the case of the 'daughter', enabling her future return from the land of the north (Jer 3:18).[18]

While the daughter image elicits the sentiment of divine protection, it also reveals the daughter's vulnerability (cf. Isa 1:8; Jer 4:31).[19] These two characteristics reflect the patriarchs' 'honour–shame complex' concerning their daughter's behaviour and self-representation.[20] Nonetheless, many of the daughter-metaphor occurrences in prophetic discourse do not indicate nurturing and cherishing. More commonly, they highlight the daughter's negative characteristics of defeat (e.g. Isa 47) and disloyalty (e.g. Isa 1:21; Jer 2:20; 13:22–7). This tendency makes the daughter imagery close to that of the treacherous wife and the harlot, which justifies the husband's right to punish and inflict punitive measures. Only occasionally, when times are tough, is the daughter metaphor employed to provide hope for repair and restoration, often through promises to repair the relationship with the father and after ceasing her unfaithful tendencies. Sometimes the metaphor shifts between feminised images of daughter and wife, as in the opening message of the prophecy mentioned above (Jer 3:2–4; cf. Isa 54:1–8, 62:5–11; Jer 2:2). This metaphor plasticity reflects a conviction about YHWH's dual role for the nation as both a husband and a father. Correspondingly, the female figure is an unfaithful and promiscuous wife ('You have played the whore with many lovers; and would you return to me? says the LORD', Jer 3:1), who was earlier God's daughter, and wishes to restore this type of connection with him ('Have you not just now called to me, "My Father, you are the friend of my youth"', v. 4).

The allegory of Ezekiel 16 similarly refers to God as playing a dual role for the people, a father and a husband, yet it departs from the tendency to alternate between the imageries. It recounts a story of an evolving relationship, whose final and paramount phase occurs within the marital framework, within which any emendation would have to be made. Rather than shifting between the father–daughter and the husband–wife axes, indicating the relation's elasticity, the spousal imagery marks a progression, such that God plays an evolving role for the girl from an adopting father to a demanding husband.

Adopting an abandoned girl

The allegory in Ezekiel 16 narrates that God finds Jerusalem as an abandoned girl, born to a Canaanite father and a Hittite mother (Ezek 16:3).[21] God emerges in the girl's life at

[18]While it was uncommon for daughters to inherit the family land, it did happen. See Num 27:1–8; 36:1–12; Job 42:15.

[19]The metaphors operate on the listeners' capability to decode their characteristics and apply them on objects in different spheres. See Christl Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), pp. 17–9.

[20]See Stiebert, *Fathers and Daughters*, p. 189.

[21]Ezekiel elsewhere is familiar with the tradition of the patriarchs (e.g. 33:24) but denies it here. This is possibly part of the attempt to emphasise the role of God in redeeming Israel from her low and condemned status. Nonetheless, Ezekiel's rhetoric may rely on ethnic data that is attested in other places, such as the tradition of Jerusalem's Jebusite (i.e. Canaanite) origins (2 Sam 5:6–8), and the tradition in Joshua and Judges that the Canaanite population had continued to reside alongside the Israelites in the land. For a discussion of the purpose of Ezekiel's genealogy and of the way it was understood by medieval Jewish exegetes, see Dalit Rom-Shiloni, 'Jerusalem and Israel, Synonyms or Antonyms? Jewish Exegesis of Ezekiel's

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this crucial moment, when she still lies with her 'navel cord [which] was not cut… [when she was not] washed with water to cleanse… nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in cloths' (v. 4).[22] Being abandoned at birth, the girl had received no parental care: 'No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you out of compassion for you; but you were thrown out in the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born' (v. 5). The emphasis on the lack of support and compassion in the first days of the girl's life comprises the background for the following steps taken by God towards her: 'I passed by you, and saw you flailing about in your blood. As you lay in your blood, I said to you, Live! and grow up like a plant of the field' (Ezek 16:6–7a).

God's command to the child to live (ואמר לך בדמיך חיי, v. 6) should be understood as a response to her nearly dying in her deprived childhood. The MT version duplicates the imperative to the girl to live (ואמר לך בדמיך חיי ואמר לך בדמיך חיי), and proceeds with a statement about God's contribution to the child's growth: רבבה כצמח השדה נתתיך, 'I gave you (made you) multiply (lit. ten thousand) like a plant of the field' (v. 7, my translation). The duplication of the imperative is absent in the NRSVue translation, reflecting its omission in the LXX and the Peshitta, which consist of only one command to live ('…As you lay in your blood, I said to you, "Live!"', v. 6). Additionally, and more significantly, the NRSVue lacks an acknowledgement of YHWH's role in the girl's growth. While the MT mentions YHWH's action in the expansion of the girl (רבבה כצמח השדה נתתיך), the NRSVue indicates no involvement of YHWH in the girl's fulfilment of the imperative to live: 'and grow up like a plant of the field' (v. 7a). This contrasts not only with the MT version (with the verb נתתיך, I gave/made you), but this time also with the LXX version, which states: 'πληθύνου καθὼς ἡ ἀνατολὴ τοῦ ἀγροῦ δέδωκά σε…' (δέδωκά σε, 'I gave you').[23]

The silence about YHWH's role in the growth of the girl continues, surprisingly, in the work of contemporary scholars, some of whom bluntly overlook the verb that describes God's action in the scene, נתתיך (v. 7). They argue that the command to the girl to 'live' *in her blood* (בדמיך חיי) represents the recurrence of abandonment; as if God instructs the girl to survive but does not provide her with any means to ease her suffering. Mary Shields asserts that the imagery of the girl includes no reference to God's care, love or compassion towards her, 'until the girl/woman exhibits the "ornaments of ornaments"'. Instead, the rest of the verse reveals God's disdain for the girl, as he leaves her 'naked and bare' (v. 7).[24] Similarly, in a 1978 entry in the *Theological Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible*, Benjamin Kedar-Kopfstein considered the command

Prophecies against Jerusalem', in Andrew Mein and Paul M. Joyce (eds), *After Ezekiel: Essays on the Reception of a Difficult Prophet* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), pp. 99–103.

[22]See Malul's proposal that the portrayal of the failure to wash and feed the infant signifies parental denial of legal recognition, in Meir Malul, 'Adoption of Foundlings in the Bible and Mesopotamian Documents: A Study of Some Legal Metaphors in Ezekiel 16:1–7', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 46 (1990), p. 109. For a broader discussion of the practices that the newborn girl was deprived of, see Tarja S. Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 95.

[23]The KJV adheres to the MT: 'I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live! I have caused thee to multiply as the bud of the field…' (vv. 6–7). See also Moshe Greenberg's and David Block's translations of verse 7; both highlight the active role of God for the child: 'I made you flourish/I made you myriad'. Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1983), p. 276; and Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 478.

[24]Mary E. Shields, 'Multiple Exposures: Body Rhetoric and Gender Characterization in Ezekiel 16', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14 (1998), p. 8.

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to the girl to live 'in [her] blood' as a rescue of the infant from death, but with no relief from an excluded and liminal situation.[25] The girl remains 'unclean', 'in her blood', and is therefore excluded from full membership in the community. Julia Galambush likewise points out that the girl in the allegory remains in the field, unclothed and unwashed, while YHWH instructs her to survive. Thus, the images 'reinforce the connection between the growing girl and the wild and uncultivated realm'.[26] Christl Maier asserts that the text indicates that YHWH simply orders the infant to sprout like a plant, and, with no actual action of rescue or care, the girl remains in a 'liminal state between the open field and the human realm'.[27]

A firm view regarding the lack of care for the foundling in the narrative is made by Koller, who asserts that the text does not evoke an image of adoption in recounting the outset of YHWH's relationship with the child.[28] Koller opposes the argument made by Malul, who found in the instruction to the girl, בדמיך חיי (v. 6), a formal declaration of adoption. Malul detects the similarity of the phrase to an Akkadian expression, *ina mesu u damesu*, which is used in the context of rescuing a child from a state of emergency by taking them into a new ownership.[29] This resonates with another common adoption formulae in Mesopotamian law, *ana marutim leqûm* (or merely *leqûm*), which is often joined by the verb *rubbûm* 'to raise up'.[30] The terminology echoes the word רבבה in the Ezekiel allegory, emphasising the role of the caregiver for the girl's thriving, רבבה כצמח השדה נתתיך ('I made you multiply as the plant of the field').[31] This evidence by Malul, together with the indication of the role of YHWH in the process of the sprouting of the girl (v. 7), makes it difficult to accept Koller's reservation about the existence of adoption. However, it is also challenging to agree with the opposite view, that the allegory depicts God's intensively caring involvement in the girl's life.[32]

I would argue for a middle way, following Malul: the instruction to the girl to live (בדמיך חיי), followed by a statement of God's contribution to her growth (רבבה כצמח השדה נתתיך), together with the girl's exposure in her birth blood, constitute a declaration of her new possessor. Malul points out that the mentioning of the girl as remaining 'naked and bare' (ערם ועריה, v. 7) serves to refute any third-party claims for legal rights regarding her, including her natural parents. He compellingly concludes that 'the passer-by not only saved the baby the first time he passed over it, but also took it into his possession and raised it as his daughter'.[33]

[25]Benjamin Kedar-Kopfstein, 'dam', *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* III (1978), p. 246.

[26]Julie Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), p. 94.

[27]Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion*, p. 115. The assumption that God did not actually do anything for the infant was also pointed out by Linda Day, 'Rhetoric and Domestic Violence in Ezekiel 16', *Biblical Interpretation* 8 (2000), p. 207. See also David Halperin, who says: 'So little "nurturant" is Ezekiel's God that it does not occur to him so much as to bathe the girl until he is ready to take her to bed (verse 9)'. David J. Halperin, *Seeking Ezekiel: Text and Psychology* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), p. 173.

[28]Koller, 'Pornography or Theology?', p. 410.

[29]Malul, 'Adoption of Foundlings in the Bible and Mesopotamian Documents', pp. 110–11.

[30]Ibid., p. 107.

[31]My translation. See discussion above.

[32]Block asserts that the repeated imperative בדמיך חיי (v. 6) does not merely command the girl to 'live', but urges her to 'enjoy life in all its fullness, good fortune, and the joy of God's presence' (Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, p. 481).

[33]Malul, 'Adoption of Foundlings in the Bible and Mesopotamian Documents', p. 112. Malul's assumption rests also on Mesopotamian legal sources that indicate that adoption of children took place while they

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It is plausible that Ezekiel's targeted audience grasped the relationship depicted in the allegory as stemming from adoption. The role of YHWH as an adopting father lingered in their mind when proceeding to the following scenes and ultimately discovering both the marital relationship and the sexual violence. Consequently, everything that happens to the female Jerusalem in the allegory is understood as happening to an offspring – a girl who was God's daughter before she became his spouse.

From a daughter to a spouse

Prompted by the girl's desperate situation, YHWH takes upon himself a parental role, as he offers a necessary help to safeguard the child (16:6b–7a_1). But the care and compassion towards the neglected child do not remain for long. Soon YHWH updates his intentions regarding the child.

This happens when YHWH recognises the girl's maturing into the 'age for love' (v. 8), when she enters puberty and starts expressing her womanhood: 'You grew up and became tall and arrived at full womanhood; your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare. I passed by you (again) and looked on you; you were at the age for love' (vv. 7a_2–8a_1).[34] Upon observing the girl's female development, YHWH hurries to cover her bareness with his cloak (v. 8a2). Her nudity is no longer that of a newborn, but of an adolescent girl – a potentially seductive nudity. The covering of the girl could be regarded as an expression of parental care, keeping her safe from sexual abuse; but this is not the true meaning of the act, according to the unfolding of the narrative.

Howard Eilberg-Schwartz considers the picture of YHWH's spreading his cloak over the naked girl 'as close as we get to a graphic image of God having sexual intercourse'.[35] This can be supported by the allusion to Ruth's request of Boaz to spread his cloak (Ruth 3:8–9) as a supposed euphemism for sex, as a 'legitimate intercourse' occurring 'under covers' (cf. Hosea 2:11).[36] But here it can also signify the new status enforced by YHWH upon the girl. This idea is indicated by the image of Nebuchadnezzar stretching out his שפרירו (canopy/net, Jer 43:10, 12) over Egypt to apply his dominion over it.[37] Similarly, the covering of the girl's bareness is an act of claiming an enduring ownership: '…and covered your nakedness… and you became mine' (Ezek 16:8).

were still lying in their amniotic fluid and birth blood (Ibid., p. 106). Cf. Stiebert, *Fathers and Daughters*, p. 196.

[34]The NRSVue emends the Hebrew words עדי עדים ('ornaments of ornaments', v. 7) to 'full womanhood', implying the idea of arriving at 'the time of menstruation'.

[35]Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1994), pp. 111, 113.

[36]See Paul A. Kruger, 'The Hem of the Garment in Marriage: The Meaning of the Symbolic Gesture in Ruth 3:9 and Ezek 16:8', *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 12 (1984), p. 86; Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 134. Contrary to Maier, who argues that the covering/spreading the cloak over the girl resonates with the cherubim and eagles spreading their wings for protection (Exod 25:20; 37:9; 1 Kings 8:7; Jer 48:40, 49:22; Job 39:26), and thus not associated with sexual overtones (Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion*, p. 115).

[37]On the role of this motif in Mesopotamian literature and its influence on biblical imagery, see Ronnie Goldstein, 'Casting Nets and Burning Temples: The Babylonian and Persian Background of Jer 43:8–13', *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 9 (2020), pp. 63–76.

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The covering of the girl's body comprises the opposite of uncovering nakedness that designate illicit and shameful relations (e.g. Ezek 16:36–37; cf. Deut 23:1, 27:20; Hosea 2:5–7).[38] Accordingly, the covering of the girl's body implies restrictions and demands for commitment. God's initial care for the girl is replaced with concerns for the girl's decency, as part of the new conjugal relationship. What starts as an act of salvation transforms into that of marital ownership. The daughter becomes a wife, compassion changes to domination, and care develops into concerns about dignity.

Following the covering of the girl's nudity, God rinses the blood off the girl, and anoints her with oil (v. 9). The acts of washing and anointing may be associated with preparations for purity and decency, while providing the girl with luxuries she has never before experienced. These actions, as Block points out, are part of a bride's initiation into her new status.[39] But the sources of the blood that covers the girl are disputed. Scholars point to various layers that it could comprise (hence the word דמים in plural).[40] Koller argues to the existence of three possible meanings: the girl's vaginal blood after a first sexual encounter (cf. Deut 22:13–21),[41] mingled with the menstrual blood of new maturity, and the birth blood 'in which she has been wallowing for more than a decade'.[42]

While the content of דמים ('bloods') is not entirely clear, one could argue that the depiction of God's washing the blood manifests care and protection provided to the girl. It may be this act of bathing, following the initial act of rescue, that led Block to describe God as a 'gracious savior who lavishes his favors on this helpless infant/young woman', while the girl trampling 'underfoot his grace may expect to experience his wrath'.[43] Block represents a voice heard occasionally in pre-feminist biblical scholarship. As shown by Shields, despite the 'almost pornographic nature of the rhetoric and imagery of the allegory',[44] a dominant (masculine) opinion in biblical scholarship regards the role of God in Ezekiel 16 as that of a caregiver, who attends for the child and ensures her survival. Thus, Donald Gowan defines the allegory as 'one of the Bible's strongest statements about unconditional election based solely on the grace of God, [where] God's unmerited favor […] links the beginning and end of the passage'.[45] Harold Fisch provides an even more explicit statement in regard to the supposedly

[38]'the prophetic preoccupation with female nakedness (Ephraim, the male personification of the nation is never uncovered) seems to exhibit an all too common patriarchal need to control women's bodies and women's sexuality … to make clear distinctions between women whose bodies are owned by given men (father, brother, or husband) and those that may be regarded as public property. A woman who does not maintain her nakedness under cover exposes herself to the danger of being undressed in public.' Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible*, pp. 134–5.

[39]Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, p. 484.

[40]See Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel 1* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979–83), p. 340; Malul, 'Adoption of Foundlings in the Bible and Mesopotamian Documents', p. 114; Stiebert, *Fathers and Daughters*, p. 197. For a discussion regarding the various types of feminine bloods see Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible*, pp. 66–7.

[41]See also Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, p. 484.

[42]Koller, 'Pornography or Theology?', p. 411. See also Greenberg, *Ezekiel*, p. 278.

[43]Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, p. 469.

[44]Shields, 'Multiple Exposures', p. 6.

[45]Donald E. Gowan, *Ezekiel* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1985), pp. 66–7. Cf. Aelred Cody, *Ezekiel: With an Excursus on Old Testament Priesthood* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1984), p. 79; Lamar E. Cooper, *Ezekiel* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), p. 179.

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positive interaction in the allegory, calling the text a 'romantic tale of the foundling girl who becomes the beautiful bride of her foster father'.[46]

But the transition of God's role into a husband exhibits no romance (as one might find, for example, in the tale of Ruth and Boaz, or in the images of Song of Songs, which in both the woman has a say in the relationship). The marital relationship of YHWH and the female Jerusalem in the Ezekiel allegory lacks any expression of care and compassion towards the girl. Unlike a romantic tale, the account narrates a relationship between a powerful mature male and a deprived and dependent adolescent daughter. The allegory evokes the concept of father–daughter incest. As we shall see, such a connection was a taboo, but it was not explicitly forbidden by law. The emergence of a divine act with incestuous characteristics leaves an alarming impression upon the addressees and exposes some of their own suppressed fears.

Father–daughter (and divine) incest

The female identity of the child in Ezekiel 16 determines the nature of the relationship with the parental deity. The allegory depicts an adopted young girl who is taken to be the adopter's wife. Despite the peculiar nature of the narrative, it reflects common family norms and social relations, such as the hierarchy between husbands and wives, as well as parental methods and punishments, including a restrictive attitude towards adolescent daughters who are deprived of freedom and independence. It should be asked, accordingly, whether the father–daughter incestuous relationship implied in the allegory also sheds light upon conduct accepted in the era.

A number of episodes in the biblical narratives reveal domestic arrangements which blur familial boundaries and structures. Abraham is married to his half-sister, Sarah (Gen 20:12); Jacob marries Leah and Rachel, two sisters (29:21–23, 28); Judah impregnates his daughter-in-law, Tamar (38:18b); Amram marries his aunt Jochebed (Exod 6:20); Amnon lies with Tamar, his half-sister (2 Sam 13:13–14). In some cases, these connections are portrayed as necessary for the continuation of the tribe or nation, as seen in the search for a wife for Isaac (Gen 24:38–40) and in Jacob's leaving the house for getting married within the family (28:1–5). Interestingly, all these types of connections are listed as prohibited in the priestly laws. Half-sibling sexual contact is forbidden (Lev 18:9, 12), and so is the relationship with two sisters (18:18). Also forbidden are connections with a daughter-in-law (18:5) and an aunt ('the father's sister', 18:12). The narratives mentioned above suggest that the priestly laws were probably not yet known or considered by the protagonists/narrator/authors. But the narratives may also indicate that the legislation itself aimed to restrict existing and common practices that were deemed acceptable.

Strikingly, a prohibition of a father–daughter intercourse is absent from the list of illegal sexual relationships. Supposedly, one could suggest that a prohibition of a father–daughter incest is implied in the opening general condemnation, forbidding a man to approach anyone near of kin 'to uncover nakedness' (איש איש אל כל שאר בשרו לא תקרבו לגלות ערוה, Lev 18:6).[47] But this suggestion is problematic, given that the

[46]Harold Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 44.

[47]For an understanding of the idiom 'שאר בשרו' ('flesh of his flesh') see William K. Gilders, 'Prohibited Bodies in Leviticus 18', in Michael L. Satlow (ed.), *Strength to Strength* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2018), pp. 27–44. Gilders views the prohibitive commandment as setting a general principle in which women are included under the designation of the idiom (pp. 30–2). In this he is in agreement with

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subsequent list of prohibitions is detailed and elaborate regardless of the generic opening law. Moreover, a specific prohibition of a son's incest with his father or mother does exist (Lev 18:7).

The Jewish sages suggested that a prohibition of the father and daughter's incestuous relation is implied in the denunciation of the relations with one's granddaughter (v. 17).[48] Yet, given how detailed the list is, it remains surprising that the father–daughter connection is the only one that is not directly denounced. Some scholars have suggested that the exact prohibition was accidentally omitted from the list of laws.[49] But this is not a satisfying solution either: as Stiebert points out, the father–daughter category would have had to be omitted or forgotten in both detailed lists of incest prohibitions in Lev 18 and 20 (the lists differ, but only in small details[50]), or would have had to elude both the author and the redactor.[51]

I argue that the absence of an explicit prohibition of father–daughter incest reveals ambiguity surrounding this practice, along with the possibility that, at times, this type of relationship was customary or at least tolerated.[52] This idea is supported by the biblical customs and narratives that reflect the patriarchs' authority over their daughters' marital and sexual choices. A father was the one to determine when and to whom his daughter would be married (e.g. Deut 7:3; 2 Sam 13:13; cf. Gen 34:8 in the case of brothers).

Milgrom, who explains that the purpose of the incest laws are 'to indicate *who else* is forbidden by extension from the basic relationships', which is covered by Lev 18:6 (Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New York: Doubleday, 2000], p. 1533). See also Susan Rattray, 'Marriage Rules, Kinship Terms and Family Structure in the Bible', in Kent H. Richards (ed.), *Society of Biblical Literature 1987 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987), p. 542, who refers to Lev 21:2, which lists those family members for whom a priest may contract death uncleanness, as an indication for the idea that female kin are included under the idiom שאר בשרו.

[48] *Tanna de-bei Eliyahu 15:2.* See Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, *Holiness and Transgression: Mothers of the Messiah in the Jewish Myth* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2017), p. 35.

[49] See Karl Elliger, 'Das Gesetz Leviticus 18', *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 67 (1955), p. 22; idem, *Leviticus* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1966), p. 234; Baruch Schwartz, *The Holiness Legislation* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1999), p. 178 [Heb.]; Ephraim Neufeld, *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws: With Special References to General Semitic Laws and Customs* (London: Longmans, Green, 1944), pp. 198–9. See also Eva Levavi-Feinstein, who argues that the omission was accidental, based on a comparison to Hittite and Babylonian laws which include explicit prohibitions of the father–daughter sexual relationships (e.g. law 154 in the Code of Hammurabi states: 'If a man should carnally know his daughter, they shall banish that man from the city'; and Hittite law 189 instructs: 'If a man has sexual relations with his daughter, it is an unpermitted sexual pairing'). Eva Levavi-Feinstein, 'Does the Torah Prohibit Father–Daughter Incest', *TheTorah.com*, https://www.thetorah.com/article/does-the-torah-prohibit-father-daughter-incest.

[50] The list in chapter 20 lacks a mention of the man's granddaughter (cf. Lev 18:10), of a man's half-sister (cf. 18:11), and of a wife and her sister (cf. 18:18).

[51] Stiebert, *Fathers and Daughters*, p. 107.

[52] On the notion of father–daughter incest as acceptable, based on the absence of a specific prohibition, see Guillaume Cardascia, 'Égalité et inégalité des sexes en matière d'atteinte aux moeurs dans le Proche-Orient ancien', *Die Welt des Orients* 11 (1980), pp. 7–16; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, 'Sex and Sexuality', in David N. Freedman et al. (eds), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 1145; Calum Carmichael, 'Incest in the Bible', *Chicago Kent Law Review* 71 (1995), pp. 127–8; Jonathan R. Ziskind, 'The Missing Daughter in Leviticus XVIII', *Vetus Testamentum* 46 (1996), pp. 125–30. A sense of legitimacy of father–daughter incest can also be inferred from the absence of explicit criticism regarding the action of Lot's daughters, who sexually engaged with their unaware, intoxicated father (Gen 19:30–38). While the daughters are presented as naïve ('…Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the world', Gen 19:31), their intention is considered genuine, and the narrative culminates with the outcome of two viable, healthy boys, the ancestors of two significant nations (vv. 37–38).

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A father was permitted to sell his daughter as a slave to another man (Exod 21:7, 9), and, in fact, could even compel her into prostitution (Lev 19:29). Additionally, a father had the right to enquire about his daughter's virginity in situations where the need arose to prove her 'unused condition' prior to her marriage (Deut 22:14–15; notably, the mother is also mentioned).

The father's authority over the daughter was relinquished through dowry exchange (e.g. Gen 34:12; Exod 22:16; 1 Sam 18:25), transferring the daughter's intimate and sexual life to another male and bestowing upon him marital-sexual rights. As fathers maintained ownership over this aspect of their daughters' lives, theoretically, they were also not precluded from engaging in sexual interactions with their daughters, should they choose to do so.[53]

The phenomenon of transforming a parental relationship into a marital one is implied in one of the Greek versions of the book of Esther. Although the MT of Esther 2 narrates Mordecai's adopting Esther to be his daughter (ובמות אביה ואמה לקחה מרדכי לו לבת, Esther 2:7), the Septuagint recounts that 'when her parents were dead, he brought her up for a wife for himself'. It is possible that the Greek translator took the word 'wife' (γυναῖκα) from the Hebrew word בית (house), which looks similar to the word in the MT בת (daughter; cf. בת–בית). This tradition might have been preserved centuries after the Greek translator, as the rabbis suggest: 'Do not read for a daughter [בת], but rather for a home [בית], like a home to him… Mordecai took her for a home [i.e. a wife]' (Bavli, Megillah 13A).

The case alluded to in the Ezekiel allegory functions within these lines, asserting the unlimited authority of the adopting father. As such, YHWH could nominate a husband for his daughter as her new owner, but he could not tolerate the idea of another male dominating her (Ezek 16:15–16). Instead of allowing her to someone else, he forfeits the dowry, and claims full ownership over her intimacy and sexuality. YHWH retains control over the girl and compels her into a spousal relationship with him. In this perverted way, the allegory leads to the same implications found in the vision of Second Isaiah, which emphasises an ongoing, continuing relationship with the nation (Isa 46:4), namely, sustaining it beyond childhood.

Conclusions: the allegory as an intimidating rhetoric

Jonathan Ziskind suggested that the priestly legislator of Leviticus chose neither to condemn nor to permit an incestuous interaction of father and daughter.[54] He claims, however, that despite the lack of explicit prohibition, fathers would 'abide by society's expectations and will not sexually abuse their daughters… mindful of the social and financial advantages of offering to a prospective son-in-law a daughter who was a virgin'.[55] The allegory in Ezekiel 16 deviates from this custom. It reveals that in the divine sphere, the relationship functions within a different set of values and expectations.

[53]See Judith Lewis Herman, *Father–Daughter Incest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 60–1; Lynda E. Boose, 'The Father's House and the Daughter in It: The Structures of Western Culture's Daughter–Father Relationship', in Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers (eds), *Daughters and Fathers* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 19–74.

[54]Ziskind, 'The Missing Daughter in Leviticus XVIII', p. 127. For a detailed study regarding Ziskind's conclusions see Stiebert, *Fathers and Daughters*, pp. 106–19.

[55]Ziskind, 'The Missing Daughter in Leviticus XVIII', p. 130.

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According to the allegory, God can breach what is considered taboo and immoral.[56] Julian Pitt-Rivers has identified such a tendency in the Hebrew Bible, where what he calls 'pure myths' reflect values contradictory to what is considered culturally acceptable.[57] The tendency to apply a distinct moral framework to the deity of the Hebrew Bible is evident, for example, in accounts of God's inexplicable wrath and retaliation (e.g. 1 Sam 6:19–20; 2 Sam 6:6–7), which contrast with the set of unequivocal regulations upheld in human courts (cf. Deut 24:16; Jer 31:29–30). Similarly, God's destructive commandments (Ezek 20:25–26) stand in stark contrast to the expectations for humanity (cf. Exod 13:11–15; Lev 18:5). Thus, unlike the taboo in the human-familial realm, the god portrayed in the Ezekiel allegory assumes the role of an adoptive father coercing his daughter into a marital and sexual relationship with him. Notably, the allegory conveys neither discomfort nor an apologetic tone regarding this incestuous relationship.

The allegory serves as the author's rhetorical tool for delivering harsh messages with the intent of jolting the audience. This approach involves illustrating YHWH's ability to achieve what is prohibited for humans and might be perceived as deviant. By engaging in an incestuous relationship with Jerusalem, YHWH conveys two key convictions regarding his role in the lives of the people: the concept of God's inherent ownership of the nation, and the nation's responsibility for all that befalls them. While the biblical narrative frequently portrays the 'chosen nation' as God's child, depicting the nation as an adulterous wife proves more potent for conveying reproach and admonition. Despite women's limited agency in marriage choices, they are considered as possessing a heightened level of responsibility compared to offspring, making them more culpable when displaying infidelity.[58] The assertion of ownership and authority over the woman intensifies when the connection is ingrained from childhood through a sexual relationship. The prophet employs this imagery to disseminate both social and theological messages.[59]

The allegory indicates a tendency found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible: a lack of empathy or understanding towards the object of reproach. It demonstrates no engagement with, or awareness of, the physical and mental impact caused to the child by a traumatic near-death, experience at the beginning of her life or by the later incestuous relationship with the adopting father. Likewise, it would be too far-fetched to assume that the priestly laws, which prohibit various forms of incest, indicate an understanding of the potentially regressive and destructive impact of sexual behaviours within the family. The laws do not attempt to safeguard the well-being of family members or to warn of the heavy price paid by the victims of incest. Instead, their intent is to curb social disorder and reinforce communal boundaries. Such is the case of the Ezekiel allegory, which does not address the potentially damaging ramifications of an incestuous

[56]Similar to the gods in Greek mythology, where incest is not considered a transgression, unlike among human family members, see Ruth Netzer, 'Myths and Realities: On Incest, Sin and Redemption', *Ma'arag (The Israeli Annual of Psychoanalysis)* 9 (2020), pp. 200, 203 [Heb.].

[57]Julian Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem or the Politics of Sex: Essays in the Anthropology of the Mediterranean* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977), pp. 151–5.

[58]We saw a similar shift in the imagery of Jeremiah 3, wherein the discourse moves to address unfaithfulness by altering the metaphor from one of parenting (Jer 3:19) to the realm of marital relationship (v. 20; cf. vv. 1–3).

[59]The use of incest within theological discourse assumes a bigger role in post-biblical literature, where incestuous origins are attributed to the Davidic lineage of the Messiah (see Kaniel, *Holiness and Transgression*, p. 88).

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relationship, nor does it consider the girl-woman in the narrative as a victim. Nonetheless, it has a shocking impact, being part of a harsh rebuke; it derives from the idea that the relationship with the deity, often abusive and threatening, might violate acceptable and recommended restrictions and boundaries of human society. This is demonstrated by the conduct of sexual intercourse: God may embody the taboo that is banned for humans, and the violation of this taboo is attributed, not unexpectedly, to the targeted object.

YHWH's dual, cognate roles in Jerusalem's existence, as a father and a husband, reflect the pathological nature of their relationship, characterised by constant disappointment and fury towards the people. The latter owe all that they are and possess to their benefactor, compelling them to submit to a new kind of relationship. Unlike the imagery in Jeremiah, which assigns a role to the subject in restoring the relationship (Jer 3:19, cf. vv. 21–22), the Ezekiel allegory portrays YHWH alone as the determinant of the relationship's destiny and trajectory. The nation has no say regarding the conditions of the relationship and remains passive in the attempt to appease YHWH's anger (Ezek 16:42). It is only the severe punishments inflicted upon the girl (v. 41) that quell God's anger and pacify him (v. 42). The girl is left to endure shame and disgrace as YHWH's spouse (v. 54, 61), ultimately falling into complete silence (v. 63). In this manner, YHWH accomplishes what most human fathers would avoid, even if contemplating it with fear or fantasy, whether consciously or unconsciously. By violating a profound social taboo, the allegory remains as captivating and terrifying today as it was in Ezekiel's time.

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