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Father-God, Mother-God – and Beyond. Exegetical Constructions and Deconstructions of Hosea 11

Zusammenfassung:

Die Weiterentwicklung der feministischen Exegese zu unterschiedlichen Spielarten der Genderforschung in der Bibelwissenschaft lässt sich für den deutschen Sprachraum gut rekonstruieren am Beispiel des biblisch-theologisch zentralen, aber sprachlich schwierigen Textes Hosea 11,1-11. Dabei sucht der Beitrag die Skizzierung vorliegender Zugänge zu verbinden mit eigenen Impulsen. Zunächst werden die beiden grundlegenden Ansätze von Jörg Jeremias (1983; „klassische“ Position) und Helen Schüngel-Straumann (1986; feministischer Kontrapunkt) vorgestellt und in ihrem Entstehungskontext situiert. Es folgen, diese Ansätze kritisch weiterführend, diverse Lektüreangebote, die jeweils einen Teilaspekt des Textes aufgreifen. So wird etwa nach der „Körpersprache“ in Hosea 11 gefragt, geht es um das Verhältnis von sex und gender in diesem Text und, am Beispiel der Auslegung von Jürgen Ebach (2004), um den Einspruch einer kritischen Männerforschung. Die in Hosea 11 prominente Tiermetaphorik wird genderspezifisch ausgeleuchtet und schließlich das Ende des Hoseabuches auf seine genderspezifischen Implikationen hin befragt.

If one wants to trace the development of feminist biblical studies from the beginnings in the late 1970s until today, chapter 11 of the book of Hosea seems to be an apt vehicle. At least in the German-speaking context, this biblical text was a focal point in traditional biblical theology, then became a key text for feminist revisions, was taken up for critical men's research, and can be read anew from further gender or gendered perspectives.

1. “The personal is political, and the political is personal.” A first contact with Hosea 11

Chapter 11 is the last in a series of speeches in which God accuses, insults, and admonishes the people of the pre-exilic Northern Kingdom of Israel. This speech is conceived and can be read as a culmination of God’s inner thoughts and feelings.

According to the translation in the New Jerusalem Bible, it reads:

- 1 When Israel was a child I loved him,
and I called my son out of Egypt.
- 2 But the more I called, the further they went away from me;
they offered sacrifice to Baal and burnt incense to idols.
- 3 I myself taught Ephraim to walk, I myself took them by the arm,
but they did not know that I was the one caring for them,
- 4 that I was leading them with human ties, with leading-strings of love,
that, with them, I was like someone lifting an infant to his cheek,
and that I bent down to feed him.
- 5 He will not have to go back to Egypt, Assyria will be his king instead!
Since he has refused to come back to me,
- 6 the sword will rage through his cities, destroying the bars of his gates,
devouring them because of their plots.
- 7 My people are bent on disregarding me;
if they are summoned to come up, not one of them makes a move.
- 8 Ephraim, how could I part with you? Israel, how could I give you up?
How could I make you like Admah or treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart within me is overwhelmed, fever grips my inmost being.
- 9 I will not give rein to my fierce anger, I will not destroy Ephraim again,
for I am God, not man,
the Holy One in your midst, and I shall not come to you in anger.
- 10 They will follow YHWH;
he will roar like a lion,
and when he roars, his children will come fluttering from the west,
- 11 fluttering like sparrows from Egypt,

like pigeons from Assyria,
and I shall settle them in their homes—
declares YHWH.

Let me offer some quick remarks regarding the structure of the text; it can be viewed in terms of a classical feminist perception: the personal is political, and the political is personal.

Hosea 11 is one continuous speech whose rhetorical “I” can, given the context of the whole book, be identified with God as speaker. Of course, it is the prophet who uses this divine “I” and identifies his human thoughts with those of God, but, rather than emphasizing this, I want to look at the role the prophet allows for God. God’s speech, perhaps better termed a monologue, has a clear dramatic movement. At the beginning there is a look back to a happy relationship between God and Israel; the Exodus from Egypt is considered an act of love toward a little son. God and Israel are bound by familial ties. But Israel does not respect these ties and turns to other gods. Again, God remembers deeds of caring love toward Ephraim, which is here a synonym for Israel: the little child, the infant, was held in God’s arms and fed with tenderness. But Israel does not understand, and this is why they will experience another slavery, not the one in Egypt, but Assyria’s domination. Thus the first part of this speech, vv. 1-6, looks back at ancient Israel’s historical past and present, and this political (hi)story of a people with their God is conceived as a shattered family relationship: the political is personal.

But this is not the end of God’s speech. In v. 7, Israel’s condition is regarded as stubbornness; there is no hope that they will change their ways. God’s anger about this lost son seems quite understandable. But suddenly a new motion pushes its way through: compassion arises from God’s heart. The reason is given in v. 9: “I am God, not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I shall not come to you in anger.”

The last two verses describe the positive consequences for Israel: There will be a new Exodus from Egypt and Assyria back to the Land, and even from Western countries of the Jewish diaspora. At the end the sons and daughters are brought together into a new family under the shelter of Adonai, Israel’s God.

2. God as merciful father: the traditional view

According to one of the most prominent German-speaking biblical scholars and specialists in prophetic literature, Jörg Jeremias,¹ Hosea 11, in its first part, shows God's love and Israel's ingratitude, and in its second part a turmoil and a revolution within God, more precisely within God's volition. With this Jeremias makes a good point as, indeed, for biblical Hebrew anthropology the heart – which *recoils within me* (cf. NRSV) – is the center not primarily of emotions but of decisions. Israel's turning away provokes God's wrath, but then there is repentance in God, and it is not Israel's turning back but God's conversion, God's turning that puts a stop to Israel's destruction.

Hosea 11:1-4 thus refers to a basic creed of biblical Israel, God's leading the people out of Egypt, and combines it with the image of a little son. Jörg Jeremias wants to highlight this and explains as follows: "It is remarkable that the prophet uses the image of a relationship between father and son."² For Jeremias there is no doubt that the counterpart of the little son is God as father, and he even suggests as headline for the whole chapter "The father's repentance."³ This comes as a surprise, as nowhere in chapter 11 and nowhere else in the book of Hosea is God explicitly designated as father. To put it in even stronger terms: the instances in the Old Testament in which God is called "father" are not very numerous.⁴ How, then, can Jeremias be so sure? One important reason might be the supposed "gender consistency" between Hosea 11 and the beginning of the book, where the relationship between God and Israel is described in terms of God as husband, hence a male role, and Israel as spouse.

Another reason for a Christian scholar interested in biblical theology could be the fascinating parallel between the Old and New Testaments: the loving Father-God of Jesus is mirrored in Hosea 11, with its image of Israel's merciful Father-God.

Again this is a key point if we consider that there is a strong Christian tradition telling us that the loving Father-God of Jesus stands in sharp contrast to its Jewish context and to the Old Testament's message of revenge and the wrath of God. Jörg Jeremias's father, the well-known New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias, was one of the protagonists of this theory of antagonism between Judaism and Christianity, and it can be seen as an act of reparation that his son insists: God's wrath and God's mercy are dramatically bound together in Hosea 11, and it is God as merciful father who has the final say in this remarkable prophetic speech of the Old Testament.

On the other hand, it is not at all compulsory to conceive as father the deity in Hosea 11 who calls Israel her “son.”

3. God as Mother: an early feminist alternative

Jeremias’s commentary on Hosea came out in 1983, when a feminist revision of biblical scholarship had already started in Germany. One of the early women involved was the Swiss Catholic biblical scholar and feminist theologian Helen Schüngel-Straumann. She decided to re-read Hosea 11 with suspicion toward traditional androcentric readings.⁵ Her translation of the texts runs as follows:

- 1 When Israel was young I came to love him; I called my son out of Egypt.
 2 But as I called them, they went away from me;
 they offered sacrifice to the Baal-Gods and burnt incense to idols.
 3 Yet it was I who nursed Ephraim by lifting him up in my arms,
 but they did not comprehend that I was the one caring for them,
 4 I was drawing them with human cords, with bands of love,
 I was with them like those who lift an infant to their breasts;
 I bent down to feed him.
 5 He will have to go back to Egypt, and Assyria will be his king,
 since they had refused to return.
 6 And the sword will rage through his cities, destroying the bars of his gates,
 and they will have to support their own doing.
- 7 Yet my people is determined to turn away from me;
 they call to Baal, but he will never raise them.
 8 Ephraim, how could I hand you over? Israel, how could I give you up?
 How could I hand you over like Admah or treat you like Zeboiim?
 My heart is turned against me; my womb is kindled together.
 9 I cannot execute my burning anger;
 I will not again (turn my mind to) destroy Ephraim,
 for I am God, and not a male,
 the Holy One in your midst, and I shall not come to destroy.
 10 (. . .)⁶
 11 They will come trembling like birds from Egypt,

like a pigeon from Assyria,
and I shall settle them in their homes—
(oracle of YHWH.)

With this translation it is obvious that the one who is speaking here cannot be God as father, but has clear features of a mother. Indeed, Helen Schüngel-Straumann understands Hosea 11 as a text representing God as a mother caring for her infant. Not only the image of nursing, or, more clearly, breastfeeding in vv. 3 and 4 points to this direction, but also the way God's emotions are traced. There is God's conversion of heart, but there is also God's womb burning with pity for the beloved but stubborn child (v. 8), and there is God's emphatic declaration: "For I am God and not a male." For Schüngel-Straumann there can be no doubt that the traditional reading of Hosea 11 suffers from androcentric distortion. Hosea the prophet, who lived in a time of extreme political and religious crisis, found that male images of God had lost their persuasive power. "Only in Yahweh's motherly love did the prophet still see a chance for Israel!"⁷

Trying to describe in gender-theoretical terms how Helen Schüngel-Straumann proceeds, one could say that she inscribes maternal dimensions into the body of God; when she speaks about breasts and womb she leaves no doubt that God's body has female contours. Therefore it is more than consistent for her to hear God's exclamation as "I am not a male" (v. 9) in terms of the female imagery of God developed in Hosea 11. The deity who presents herself as divine mother of Israel, hence as a female, denies her masculinity at the culmination of her speech and restrains her rising anger. Hence the reversal in God has gender-specific connotations: over against a destructive male wrath, God's mercy as mother and female has the final say.

Helen Schüngel-Straumann's reading came out in the mid-1980s, at a time when feminist theologians, for deep theological and spiritual reasons, were searching for female images of God in the Bible: while all the fundamental images and symbols of God in Christianity were male dominated – beginning with the sign of the cross! – the discovery of female God-symbols in the Bible could serve as a crucial argument for revisions of God-talk in theology, liturgy, and pastoral praxis. Women theologians demanded such revisions, as for them talking of God in female metaphors emerged as the test of whether women are considered to be created in God's image, as men are. Or, the other way around, as Mary Daly put it in her famous dictum: "If God is male,

then the male is God.” If a fundamental equality of men and women before God were not granted, women would find no sense in adhering to the Christian faith any longer. Female images of God in the Bible could be a challenge to theology and the doctrine of the church as a way of imaging God that had been denied or forgotten in the Christian tradition was found in Sacred Scripture. The discovery of female images of God in the Bible was witness to the fact that Christianity contained potential for a renewed theology and spirituality.

Against this background of feminist theological discourse Helen Schüngel-Straumann’s explication of Hosea 11 added a new proof of female traces in God as imagined in the Scriptures and was welcomed as a precious contribution to this debate. Yet one may ask whether this chapter of Hosea is indeed characterized as clearly as Helen Schüngel-Straumann sees it by the image of God as mother.

4. Sex, gender, and the “natural” body, or: God as father and mother in one

As readers may have noted, there are considerable differences between Helen Schüngel-Straumann’s translation and the one in the Jerusalem Bible. These are rooted in a difficult, somewhat obscure Hebrew text that forces exegetes to make decisions about the interpretation of grammar, semantics, or textual criticism. Helen Schüngel-Straumann’s working model of textual criticism is one written text at the beginning of the transmission that has to be reconstructed or reconstituted through the variants of the many Hebrew manuscripts and their translations into other ancient languages. In cases where the Hebrew text is very difficult to understand, so-called corruptions can be taken into account and the text may be corrected, even if there is no proof that such a corrected text has ever existed. Schüngel-Straumann proposes two significant corrections: in v. 4, instead of “their cheek” (*lechehem*), she reads “their breasts” (*lecheqam*), and in v. 8 she changes “my inmost being” (*nichumai*) to “my womb” (*rachmi*). This textual-critical procedure of correction (or conjecture) was accepted in historical-critical method until some decades ago. Feminist exegetes who worked with it were on firm methodological grounds, and it confirmed their suspicion that female traits in the biblical tradition could have been lost or intentionally distorted, and that feminist theologians had to retrieve these lost traditions.

Nowadays textual critics tend to admit that the search for the original text (the “Urtext”) might be the wrong procedure, as too much modern speculation comes into

the text when correcting it according to the exegete's intuition. As for Hosea 11, in the extant textual tradition there is neither "breasts" nor "womb," and therefore one ought to caution against taking these textual corrections for granted.

Certainly there can be no doubt that Hosea 11 presents God's caring actions directed to a small child, and such actions, at first glance, point to the milieu of mothers and infants, in our world today but also in the biblical world. The only way to feed babies was to breastfeed them, and this is how Schüngel-Straumann interprets God's action according to vv. 3 and 4; Mother-God holds the baby in her arms and bends down to nurse it.

One problem is that there is no verb in Hosea 11 that could be translated by "breastfeeding," not even the Hebrew form *tirgalti*, which Schüngel-Straumann renders this way. I will come back to this. A second problem is the image in vv. 3-4: where the text speaks about the infant, it is lifted up in a tender gesture, an action that can be done by anyone, not only the mother or a woman, and where the text speaks about feeding, the action is bending down to feed, which has to be done even when the child is already weaned. Hence the text does *not* develop a clear image of a nursing Goddess, a *dea lactans* as we have her in the iconographic tradition of the Ancient Near East and also in the Christian iconography of Mary and the infant Jesus. The biblical text of Hosea 11 is *not* unequivocal in its connections between images, actions, and gender.

It is precisely this unequivocality of the text that is interesting for a type of gender research that doubts the existence and even the possibility of unequivocalities in textual meanings as well as in issues of sex and gender. Can there be sexual unequivocality if we must distinguish between gender identity, social identification of gender, sexual desire, and sexual or gender practices in different public and private fields? And is it desirable to promote unequivocality in sex and gender issues when all these levels interplay? These questions were not asked by feminists or feminist theologians because for them women were clearly identifiable and the center of attention. These questions were not asked at the beginnings of gender research either, as for the time being the dual system of male and female was in a way taken for granted. It is one of the most significant shifts in gender research that today, in a considerable part of the gender discourse, gender and sexual unequivocality are recognized as socially constructed, not naturally given, and there is the deep conviction that any assumption of the naturalness of sex and gender systems can and must be contested, delegitimized, and in this sense deconstructed.

Hosea 11 does not seem eager to inscribe acts of caring for a small child into the female body. God is not determined by corporeal femininity. If one wants to see “God as mother” in Hosea 11, it is a Mother-God not in the sense of a naturally determined sex role according to which women are called to motherhood and find their natural sphere of action within the family, but in the sense of actions that seem to be culturally coded as feminine, hence “gendered.” And even this seems doubtful: the gesture of lifting a baby up tenderly is neither feminine “by nature” nor unequivocally feminine “by culture,” but could also be the gesture of a man or a father.

In Schüngel-Straumann’s translation of v. 4 there is a curious plural rendering that corresponds well to the Hebrew text: “I was with them like those who lift an infant” (see also NRSV, “I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks”). This plural form in the Hebrew text – which might have been used just to avoid specifying the image – opens up the possibility of picturing a parental couple at work, thinking of father and mother, mother and father together. In the world of biblical Israel the notion of a deity as father and mother in one was possible, for example with the Mesopotamian Ishtar.⁸ Indeed, some older German-language commentaries opted for an understanding of Hosea 11 as revealing God’s parental love toward Israel. But could it be that even this very appealing and inclusive icon of God as mother and father in one is still too much in line with a logic of the natural that is not necessarily presupposed by the biblical text?

5. God as nurse and the “womb-ness” of men

While in the Old Testament we find God described as father and compared to a mother, it could be significant that Hosea mentions the little “son” Israel but does not explicitly use the designation of “father” or “mother” for the parent(s). Israel is indeed “son,” but we still do not know how this relational notion works in the text: what are the connotations of “son” in our text? A first possibility would be to think of a mythical relation: Israel is God’s son as begotten or born from God. The song of Moses in the book of Deuteronomy contains a fine example of such a mythical notion: “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth” is a reproach Moses casts into the people’s teeth (Deuteronomy 32:18 NRSV). But Hosea does not make use of such mythical images. Therefore it seems plausible to suppose that our text is not emphasizing generative connotations when

calling Israel a “son.” Israel is God’s son in that God turns to this “son” in love, calls him (vv. 1-2), and feeds him (v. 4). God’s care for Israel actualizes social aspects of parenthood. On the one hand, Israel is not of divine race; on the other hand, Israel experiences divine parenthood that is not rooted in generational ties, and this can be explored further. Indeed, there is a thrilling passage in the book of Ezekiel portraying the beginnings of the city of Jerusalem as those of a newborn girl abandoned by her parents and found and raised by the God of Israel (Ezekiel 16). God acts as foster father or adoptive father here. A similar relation could be imagined for Hosea 11, as this speech insists on God’s caring acts and there is no mention of generative parenthood but, on the other hand, Hosea does use the motif of Israel as found by God in the desert (Hosea 9:10).

Some older historical-critical commentaries suggest a different view: God acts like a nurse when caring tenderly for baby Israel. Indeed, when Israel is called “infant” in v. 4, his feeding can only be realized by nursing even though this action is not explicitly mentioned. Helen Schüngel-Straumann’s intuition to find in Hosea 11 the image of a *dea lactans* is fine, but there is no need to identify her with the divine *mother* of Israel.⁹ Again, the image of God as divine nurse inscribes female traits into the body of God; God is not seen as mother in a generative sense.

There is another turn or twist of the image that again blurs clear notions of sex or gender. In the book of Isaiah the people returning to the city of Jerusalem hear the oracle: “You shall suck the milk of nations, you shall suck the breasts of kings; and you shall know that I, YHWH, am your Savior and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.” (Isaiah 60:16 NRSV). The image of being nursed at the breasts of kings is less about God’s capacity to bring about things that are physically impossible and more about God’s power to provide Israel with abundant, royal food. To have God as divine nurse, as may be intimated in Hosea 11, means for Israel to be cared for in a most privileged way. On the other hand, one has to note that such images of divine blessings start from the material reality of the female body; these images or metaphors of God are rooted in female “corporeality.”

A similar case is God’s “compassion.” In Hosea 11 the Hebrew words *rachamim* (for compassion) or *rechem* (for womb) are not used. But the phrase about God’s “entrails” (11:8) is used in a way reminiscent of the two women before King Solomon in dispute about their babies. When the king decided to cut the living child into two pieces the mother of that child felt compassion kindled in her body

(*nichmeru rachamaeha*; cf 1 Kings 3:26), and she asked for the life of the baby even if it were given to the other woman. This parallel led Helen Schüngel-Straumann to her textual conjecture in Hosea 11. In my opinion the case is more subtle: The Hebrew text in v. 8 (*nichmeru nichumai*) plays with alliteration and paronomasia and must not be changed. Its wording is rather difficult to translate, but its meaning corresponds to what Schüngel-Straumann sees in it: God's compassion has motherly-female connotations.

But again there is no biological or natural restriction of compassion to women in the Bible: When Joseph in Egypt meets his younger brother Benjamin, he cannot stop weeping, for "his compassion was kindled in him" (*nichmeru rachamaw*, Genesis 43:30). *Rechem*, womb, is an inner part of the body and unequivocally female, but *rachamim*, its plural form, designates a feeling or emotion men and women alike are able to express. But also the other way around: When the Hebrew Bible talks about the compassion of a woman, a man, or God, the material reality of the female body is at the root of the metaphor. Such female corporeality of images in God-talk could be further explored in theology.

6. "For I am God, not man/male": Hosea 11 and critical men's research

To this point we have discussed possible female imagery in our text. In Hosea 11:9, however, there is the emphatic clause, again marked by alliteration: "*ki el anochi we'lo ish*." Its first part, "*ki el anochi*," is unequivocal and affirms God's being God. One can easily translate: "For I am God." But its antithetical second part leads us into the center of gender debate. Bible translations (for example, the New Jerusalem Bible) and exegetical commentaries interpret it as pointing to the difference between human beings and God and render it as "and not man" (NRSV: "and no mortal"). Jörg Jeremias combines this translation with a fundamental theological insight: "For Hosea, the true distance between God and human beings is not marked by inaccessible eminence but by his victory over his justified anger, by his decision to save those who are guilty and condemned to death. In face of this divine self-control all analogies of human thinking and acting fail."¹⁰ In contrast, Helen Schüngel-Straumann points to the fact that the Hebrew word "*ish*" usually does not simply signify a man in the sense of a human being but more specifically a male. In German it is linguistically possible to express the difference between "Mensch" and "Mann," as there are two different words for "human being" and "male human being."

Interestingly enough, translators and commentators have made use of this distinction, for example, Martin Buber, the well-known German Jewish philosopher and Bible translator. His rendering of Hosea 11:8-9 is as follows (the German possesses great poetic power):

Wie soll ich drangeben dich, Efrajim, dich überliefern, Jissrael!
 Wie soll ich hingeben dich wie Adma, dich zurichten wie Zboim!
 Mein Herz dreht sich in mir um, mitsammen wallen meine Mitleiden auf.
 Ich will nicht tun nach dem Flammen meines Zorns, ich will nicht kehren,
 Efrajim zu verderben,
 denn Gott bin ich und nicht Mann,
 der Heilige drinnen bei dir, als ein Merzender komme ich nicht.

In Buber's translation, "*ki el anochi we'lo ish*" becomes "denn Gott bin ich und nicht Mann"—"for I am God and not a male."

Buber does not comment on his translation. I assume that, on one hand, he wanted to stick as closely as possible to the Hebrew text, which has *ish* and not *adam*, the more inclusive word for humans, and on the other hand he certainly understood the German word "Mann" as a poetical abbreviation, a *synecdoche* for "human being," and not in the gendered sense of "male." Helen Schüngel-Straumann unmasks this rhetoric as androcentric and takes the word in its literal sense. In her interpretation the negative statements in v. 8 concerning anger and destruction correspond to the negative clause "*lo ish*," "not a male" in v. 9, and the affirmation "I am God" is spelled out in the image of God's compassion rising from the womb. For Schüngel-Straumann, therefore, God's victory over his anger is clearly his victory over a male emotion within himself, while compassion flows forth from God's female or maternal body. The biblical text supports this understanding, but such an interpretation can easily be used or, better, misused to pin men and women down to their alleged "nature": men as aggressive and women as gentle.¹¹ On the other hand, we may reflect on the fact that there is but one single instance in the Hebrew Bible where God is designated "*ish*" in an affirmative manner, and that instance is in the song of Moses (Exodus 15:3): "YHWH is a warrior/a man of war (*ish milchamah*)." Evidently *ish* and *milchamah*, man and war, are closely linked, and it seems quite probable that in Hosea 11, too, war and destruction have male connotations. Indeed, God is not man,

not a human being, but in Hosea 11 this difference is not portrayed as a general anthropological difference; it has more specifically male dimensions.

The German Old Testament scholar Jürgen Ebach took these observations as his starting point and developed a new reading of Hosea 11 from the perspective of critical men's research. Since the 1990s there has been a small but creative branch of such men's studies in theology and biblical studies in the German-speaking countries,¹² showing that the impact of feminist criticism and its new perspectives has been felt beyond the "second sex" (women).

Ebach puts God's convulsion/conversion of the heart, as shown in Hosea 11:9, at the center of his rereading.¹³ Behind these convulsions there is a conflict in God between intention and volition, or the reverse: this conflict within God is depicted in an extremely anthropomorphic way as a conflict of two body-related emotions: on the one hand convulsions of repentance, on the other hand a foaming rage (for Hebrew-speaking readers the "nose" is involved; "nose" and "rage" are expressed by the same word). It seems to be a widespread trait of men/males not to allow a conflict of emotions or a struggle between intention and volition within themselves, because they want to avoid a convulsion/conversion of the heart; they customarily affirm the ideology that there can be only one truth.¹⁴ According to Hosea 11:9, God is different; God allows for mixed emotions. Men might feel the challenge of such an "image of God" and reflect critically on their own behavior. I want to underline that Ebach's approach is not essentialistic in the sense that he knows what a man "is," but that he starts from a very widespread cultural script for men who want to be "real men" or, as Robert/Raewyn Connell puts it, who want to conform their behavior to the norms of hegemonic masculinity.

With Hosea 11 one can even go a step further, as Ebach shows. God as depicted here has the power to destroy Israel. But God in a way curbs this power dynamic; God allows for emotions of repentance; God gains power over the destructive forces of power within God's self. This could be a more biblical notion of omnipotence, as Ebach suggests: omnipotence not as super-power, but as power that is willing to refuse to realize a threat at any cost. Hosea 11:9 now combines this theological notion of God's omnipotence with a statement about God as male, or rather: *not* a male. Again: it seems to be typical of masculine behavior not to withdraw threats, as any confession of repentance or change of mind could be interpreted as sign of weakness. Anybody who tries to affirm his power in such a way becomes a slave of the mechanics of power. This is how God is *not*: such is the message of Hosea 11:9.¹⁵

To gain power over strong forces within oneself: this is “not masculine”; this does not belong to the characteristics of masculinity but instead exceeds common expectations and might challenge men to change their minds. Note that “not masculine” does not mean “feminine.” It is only by insisting on this difference that opens spaces in between that one can avoid imprisoning women, men, and even God in gender stereotypes.

7. YHWH as a lion’s voice; Israel as a fluttering pigeon: Animal metaphors in Hosea 11:10-11

One of the methodological instruments of classical historical criticism is source criticism, which attempts to trace the literary development of a biblical text, to discover the oldest level of a given text, and to focus on the interpretation of this oldest textual stratum. In contemporary Old Testament scholarship there is a clear countermovement: to start with the given form of a biblical book and focus historical questions on the time when the final form of a text could have emerged. Many scholars even leave this historical interest behind and focus on the texture of a text, i.e., on the logic of a given text with its manifold intratextual and intertextual allusions and combinations.

From a source-critical point of view there are good reasons to see Hosea 11:10 as a later addition. While vv. 1-9 and 11 present a monologue pronounced by God as speaker in the grammatical first person, v. 10 switches to the third person and talks *about* God. Another argument is the motif of the “West,” to which the sons and daughters of Israel are expected to return, as this motif does not occur anywhere else in the book of Hosea. Read without v. 10, Hosea 11 is a coherent speech closing with the powerful image of God as the Holy One sitting as if enthroned in the midst of Israel (v. 9), and of Israel returning from Egypt and Assyria (v. 11)

Instead of *deleting* this verse and leaving it without comment, we could open up new dimensions of the text if we just do the opposite and *focus* on v. 10. A first observation, then, might be that the shift from the first person to the third, hence from a divine monologue to a discourse about God, is not limited to v. 10 but leaves a trace also in v. 11. True, there is direct speech in v. 11, as in vv. 1-9, but the very last formula, *ne’um YHWH*, oracle of God, again has the grammatical third person. Therefore it is a good option to translate v. 11 as standing within quotation marks as, for example, Martin Buber does.¹⁶

Second, we may find that two motifs in v. 10 link this verse with the beginning of the monologue and form a sort of inclusion. While Ephraim “went away” from his God (Hosea 11:2), now those who return move in the opposite direction and “go behind” their God, as a literal rendering of v. 10 would read. And God calling the little “son” out of Egypt (11:1) corresponds to the returning “sons” (v. 10). Therefore the two closing verses of chapter 11 can be heard as a kind of response to God’s self-proclamation. If one takes seriously that God is “God and not a human [or: a male],” how is it possible to talk about God in a new way and beyond a purely negative theology? Might it be appropriate to break altogether with metaphors stemming from the world of humans?

Hosea 11:10 compares the God of Israel to a lion, hence switching from the world of humans in favor of theriomorphic images. More precisely, this verse alludes to the lion’s *roaring* and evokes the concept of a powerful *voice*. This undercuts any basis for anthropomorphic images the text might suggest: God has no human shape; God cannot be seen, only heard, and even God’s voice is beyond human dimensions. It is interesting that the final scene of Hosea 11 has theriomorphic images for Israel also; it is compared to migrant birds or messenger birds. This departs from the world of human metaphors, not only for God but for Israel, the “child.” Is it permissible, then, to see an allusion to peace between animals and think of a new relationship between God and Israel without the dichotomies of the sex-gender system? I do not think so; it seems too simple and too smooth. In the biblical world, as in ours, the lion is considered the “king” of the beasts.¹⁷ Certainly the lion’s roaring in Hosea 11:10 has to be connected to the frightening voice of a male lion. Gender analysis sensitive to power relations would add: that lion’s voice evokes powerful, royal maleness. Similarly, the “fluttering” mentioned in the same verse is not the peaceful gliding of birds, but evokes birds as frightened. Intratextual analysis confirms the ambivalent notions of the lion: twice in the book of Hosea, God is compared to a lion waiting for its prey (5:14 and 13:7). Even worse for the pigeon: according to Hosea 7:16, Ephraim is like a pigeon, planless and easily seducible, and evokes the woman God wants to “seduce” to return to him as husband (Hosea 2:16). To sum up: the imagery of relations between God and Israel in Hosea 11:10 is beyond anthropomorphism but not beyond sex-and-gender dynamics and certainly not beyond asymmetrical power structures.

8. Israel as young cattle, and the divine nurse once again: Animal Metaphors in Hosea 11:3-4

The translations of Hosea 11 discussed thus far share the conviction that vv. 3 and 4 talk about a young child or a baby. The “human cords” of v. 4 might then be a kind of leading strings parents use to help their little child with his or her first steps. This is in accordance with the usual interpretation of v. 3: “it was I who taught Ephraim to walk.”

To find a baby in v. 4, however, presupposes a text-critical operation, a changing of the Hebrew text, more precisely a new vocalization against the traditional reading as not *‘ul* (suckling), but *‘ol* (yoke). Of course, the change is minimal and does not concern an early stage of tradition. But on the other hand the reading “yoke” does make sense. The English Authorized Version or even Jörg Jeremias in his commentary on Hosea read in v. 4 something like: “And I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped and fed them.” Ephraim the baby is transformed into Ephraim the worker animal, probably a young cow, a heifer, whose yoke is lifted and who gets her food. Ephraim the heifer is an image found elsewhere in the book of Hosea (cf. Hosea 10:11). The ties Ephraim has to support are not a burden but gentle, thus underlining the owner’s care.

At this point I come back to Helen Schüngel-Straumann’s suggestion concerning v. 3. She does not have God teaching little Ephraim to walk, but she has the divine mother nursing or breastfeeding the baby. The controversy is about a very difficult Hebrew form (*tirgalti*), attested only here. Schüngel-Straumann points to the Arabic form *taraġala* and argues for the meaning “to suckle,” but this form is known only to be used for little animals running after their mother and suckling from time to time. One could combine Schüngel-Straumann’s intuition and the text as it stands, and translate v. 3 “I made Ephraim run with me and took him into my arms.” The overall image in vv. 3 and 4 would be that of a good herdsman who cares for his young cattle.

The Old Testament scholar and Assyriologist Martti Nissinen has pointed to a constellation attested by texts and pictures from the Ancient Near East that might shed new light on Hosea 11:3-4.¹⁸ In Neo-Assyrian times male and especially female prophets of the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar had oracles delivered to the Assyrian king in which Ishtar promised to carry him, to love him, to protect him, and to nurse him. The goddess as nurse is an important figure of royal legitimation within the context of Neo-Assyrian propaganda. In some of these oracles the king is called

“little calf,” which sounds like a pet name but might allude to a tradition in which the goddess and her child are depicted as a cow suckling her calf. Anthropomorphic and theriomorphic imagery for the divine do not exclude one another in the world of the Bible, as we saw in the case of God as lion. But here again theriomorphism is no guarantee for escaping gender stereotypes; on the contrary: the supposed image of cow and calf affirms the nurturing aspects of the female deity.

9. In the garden of paradise: a final utopia

The final verses of Hosea 11, as we have seen, reach into the world of animals; the final passage of the entire book (Hosea 14:5-9) dares another transformation of images. In between there are more scenes of destruction: Ephraim again imagined as a child, now even still in his mother’s womb and unable to leave it, hence the image of the womb as tomb (13:12-13); God depicted as devouring lion and as a raging mother bear going after human beings (13:7-8). Note that these images are not gender-neutral, but are aware of destructive forces and impulses in women and men. But after all this there comes another set of metaphors, the paradise of trees and fragrant flowers, moistened by heavenly dew.

Again Ephraim is transposed into this world, is compared to plants that take root, prosper, and flourish. God compares him- or herself to a greening tree, the fruits of which benefit Ephraim-Israel (14:9). In the context of the book of Hosea this image is a positive counterpart and contrast to the trees mentioned in chapter 4: there they mark sites where Israel is accused of whoring after foreign gods (Hosea 4:11-14). It seems plausible to assume that these trees must be seen in connection with the veneration of a goddess or goddesses in Ancient Israel.¹⁹ While, according to Hosea 4, cults venerating a goddess are rejected, in Hosea 14:9 the symbol of the goddess, a green and fruit-bearing tree, seems to function as a form of manifestation, if not revelation, of the God of Israel. Rather than speaking of disempowerment, I would prefer to see this as a way to integrate the fascination of female deities into a monotheistic concept.

On the other hand, the tree to which God is compared recalls the tree in the center of the Garden of Eden, whose fruits were forbidden (cf. Genesis 2:17). Now it is God who offers these fruits. Could it be that this paradisiacal image intends to go back behind the creation of animals and even behind the creation of humans to sketch a new relation between Israel and its God by using the metaphorical world of plants

and vegetation? Or – perhaps even more probable – does the text go back behind the creation of the two sexes and present, at its very end, God in relation to Ephraim conceived, like the first creature, *adam*, the “earth creature,” as a human being beyond gender or sexual difference?²⁰ And could this mean that ruling structures of sex and gender are of no further significance, either for human beings or for God?²¹

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¹ Jeremias (1983), 138–47, on Hosea 11.

² Jeremias (1983), 140.

³ Jeremias (1983), 138.

⁴ Cf. Deuteronomy 32:6; 2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Isaiah 63:16 (2x); 64:7; Jeremiah 3:4, 19; 31:9; Malachi 1:6; 2:10; 3:17; Psalms 27:10; 68:6; 89:27; 103:13; Proverbs 3:12; Tobit 13:4; Sirach 23:1, 4; 51:10; Wisdom 2:16; 11:10; 14:3.

⁵ Schüngel-Straumann (1986; repr. 2002; English 1987).

⁶ Schüngel-Straumann does not translate this verse because, for source-critical reasons, she does not consider it part of the original text. See below.

⁷ Schüngel-Straumann (1987), 7; cf. (2002), 118.

⁸ Cf. Winfried Jüngling (1991), 91ff.

⁹ In prophetic oracles of the Neo-Assyrian period, for example, the goddess Ishtar declares herself divine nurse of the king. Cf. Häusl (2004) *passim*.

¹⁰ Jeremias (1983), 146.

¹¹ Cf. Kreuzer's critique (1989).

¹² Cf. as introduction Wacker/Rieger-Goertz (2006).

¹³ Ebach (2004).

¹⁴ Cf. Ebach (2004), 230.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ IHM nach werden sie gehen:

wie ein Löwe brüllt er hin.

Wenn er selber hinbrüllt, flattern Söhne vom Westmeer herzu,

flattern von Ägypten herzu wie ein Vogel,

vom Land Assyrien her wie eine Taube:

“In ihre Häuser siedle ich sie ein”

ist SEIN Erlauten.

¹⁷ On animals of the Bible and their symbolism cf. Schroer (2010).

¹⁸ Cf. Nissinen (1991)

¹⁹ Cf. Wacker (1995) and (1996), 263–99.

²⁰ Carden (2006) tries to read the book of Hosea from a queer perspective. I agree that this is an interesting approach, but I disagree with his historical presuppositions: there is no pattern of sacred marriage in Hosea, and it is not a Hellenistic book.

²¹ Should Hosea 14:5-9, then, be considered as an Old Testament counterpart to Galatians 3:28?

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