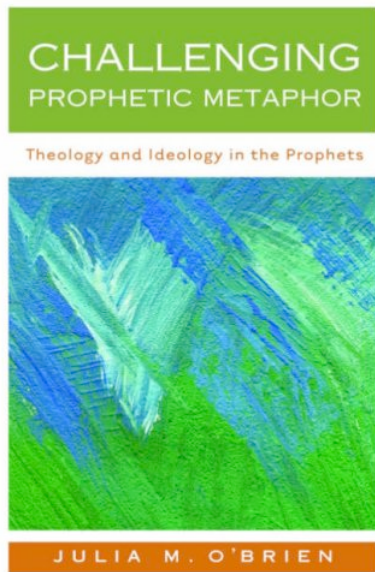


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O'Brien, Julia M.

Challenging Prophetic Metaphor: Theology and Ideology in the Prophets

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Julia O'Brien, Professor of Old Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary, has written a provocative work on interpreting familial metaphors in Israelite prophetic literature. The title of the book, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor*, carries a double entendre. By "challenging," O'Brien acknowledges the difficulties these metaphors pose to Jews and Christians who consider these texts as sacred literature. "Challenging" also functions as an active participle communicating her posture toward these texts. She believes that these metaphors, as well as modern readers, possess ideologies that ought to be appreciated, critiqued, and in some cases rejected. O'Brien addresses the impasse between theology and ideological criticism and asks, "Is it possible to take seriously the sexism and violence of the Prophetic Books and still find value in them, to refuse to pit appreciation against critique? Is there a way to do theology after critique, to let critique inform theological reflection rather than stand as its opponent?" (xiii). The book is an attempt at a post-(ideological) critical theology.

Challenging Prophetic Metaphor is a mixture of Old Testament scholarship, feminist criticism, cultural analysis, and stories of the author's life as teacher and parent. It is not a technical work but rather is intended to educate teachers and preachers for ministry in the church. O'Brien's goal is to aid women by unmasking damaging ideologies both ancient

and modern that may be supported by prophetic texts. In the introduction she reveals her working assumptions and commitments. Rather than attempt to reconstruct the lives of individual prophets, she interprets the prophetic books as literature intended to persuade. She considers herself a feminist with a particular interest in gender theory who holds to a post-Holocaust theology that challenges “any description of God that trivializes human pain or offers simplistic solutions to trauma” (xx). For her, the prophets are canonical literature that function as a literary classic to be engaged rather than simply obeyed.

The first three chapters provide a succinct overview of O’Brien’s interpretive context, concerns, and commitments. Chapter 1 is a historical survey of the interpretation of prophetic books from the author of Daniel to Brueggemann. For her, biblical interpretation reflects the reigning worldviews of the day resulting in the current impasse in conflicting approaches to the prophets. She believes this problem is the result of interpretations by men in power. Of these men, Eichrodt, von Rad, and Brueggemann have been the most influential, as she will repeatedly reference them in her book.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of feminist criticism of prophetic literature with particular attention to the interpretation of Hosea. Clearly its challenge is felt as O’Brien observes, “Feminist critique, if taken seriously, makes traditional ways of doing theology with the Prophets extremely difficult, if not impossible” (29). For feminist critics, not only does Hosea assume patriarchy, but it perpetuates misogyny, as evidenced by the domestic violence enacted by Yahweh and the “pornoprophetics” of Hos 2. They highlight the disjunction between prophetic rhetoric and the reality of God. Since objectivity is an illusion, they unapologetically engage in interpretations of advocacy. Rather than issues that have more typically dominated Old Testament theological reflection such as unity and diversity, O’Brien sees a “more formidable impasse: one between (a) approaches that understand prophetic texts, when read properly, as faithfully witnessing to God; and (b) those that underscore the danger of prophetic texts and the need to develop alternative understandings of God” (40). This current stalemate is exemplified in interpretations of Hosea. Readers either deny its problematic ideology regarding women in order to appreciate its theological value or abandon the book altogether in order to do responsible theology.

In chapter 3 O’Brien shares honestly about her struggles to read the prophetic literature both appreciatively and critically. She finds notions of the “authority of the Bible” unhelpful and instead advocates reading the Bible as a literary classic. Doing so will help readers become aware of ideologies within the text as well as within their own thinking. So rather than search prophetic metaphors for claims about God or reality, O’Brien hopes readers “will encounter moments of insight into their lives, into the society in which they live, and into the way that they think about—even the way they experience—God” (61).

Chapters 4–8 are each devoted to a prophetic metaphor oftentimes accompanied by a close analysis of a key text. O’Brien critiques the metaphors of God as (abusing) husband, God as (authoritarian) father, God as (angry) warrior, Jerusalem as (defenseless) daughter, and Edom as (selfish) brother. In chapter 4 she returns to the discussion of Hos 1–2 and acknowledges that patriarchy is at the very core of the metaphor of God as husband to Israel. O’Brien points out that oftentimes the appropriation of this metaphor in Hosea is selective, resulting in a sentimental and romanticized portrait of God. The danger of such a reading results in justifying the objectionable elements of patriarchy such as domestic violence. Feminist critics reveal the patriarchal assumptions in both the text and modern readers. By employing the contribution of feminist critique rather than denying it, O’Brien believes this prophetic metaphor functions in a constructive manner by challenging Christians to take responsibility for all facets of their God speech. In addition, this metaphor forces Christians to accept both God’s love and power and allows for the possibility of God’s purposes to take place through suffering.

In chapter 5 O’Brien shares her own experience and philosophy of parenting, surveys and evaluates three models of parenting in the United States, and critiques the metaphor of God as disciplining father in Malachi. Once again she believes a morally objectionable patriarchal metaphor is employed to describe Yahweh’s relationship with Israel. Her solution to this dilemma is for the reader to stand outside the dysfunctional relationship between father and son and to expose the inadequacies of this metaphor as an adult child might be able to do with her or his own parents. Chapter 6 is devoted to the divine warrior motif in the prophetic literature, particularly as it relates to women. In several passages Yahweh threatens judgment against nations through images of soldiers physically and sexually violating women. Yahweh threatens to “lift up your skirts,” lay bare “secret parts,” such that the “gates,” which may be a wordplay on “opening” or “vagina,” of women will be ravaged. In her examination of this metaphor in Nahum, O’Brien observes that commentators will either interpret this metaphor as a means of highlighting the unjust acts of Assyria or reject the text because of its sexism. She believes that Nahum speaks of a God who is both angry (1:2) and good (1:6) and uses the metaphor as an opportunity to reevaluate modern and ancient notions of anger and justice.

Chapters 7 and 8 address familial metaphors used to describe not God but the city Zion as daughter and the nation Edom as brother. O’Brien finds that the metaphor of daughter seemingly evokes pathos for suffering. But since it operates within a patriarchal framework, it can potentially perpetuate social roles in which women are constantly dependent on men. Such metaphors constrain thinking, and in the case of Judah they may discourage the people to take defensive action and acknowledge their culpability in their demise. Similarly, the designation of Edom as brother in Obadiah, while seemingly an egalitarian designation, may actually function in a coercive manner. O’Brien believes

the charges of Edom's sins against his brother following the fall of Jerusalem may have been created to justify Israel's expansion of Judean territory.

Challenging Prophetic Metaphor represents an honest attempt by a Christian scholar to reconcile two conflicting interpretations of the Bible. O'Brien is to be commended for her commitment to the biblical text as well as contemporary ethical concerns. She has succeeded in introducing the formidable challenges posed by feminist critics. Some readers may be dissatisfied with O'Brien's attempt both to appreciate the prophetic texts and to critique them. Christian theologians may be left wanting more. The book is not a comparison between traditional methods and interpretations with feminist ones. Her characterization of biblical "authority" and the "rule of faith" as the belief that all texts ought to be simply obeyed is overly simplistic. O'Brien embraces feminist criticism and in doing so rejects certain theological claims regarding the Bible and employs what some will consider limited tools for the theological task. Christian tradition has long wrestled with difficult material in the Old Testament, yet she appeals only to cultural criticism, feminist criticism, and Old Testament scholarship.

Still others may accuse O'Brien of compromising feminist hermeneutics in her reading of biblical texts. In nearly all the chapters devoted to a prophetic metaphor, she provides cultural commentary on how women today are oppressed by various patriarchal attitudes. O'Brien critiques modern examples of abusive husbands, authoritarian fathers, and defenseless daughters. Yet, surprisingly, when she treats what I consider the most disturbing of all the patriarchal metaphors, God as a warrior who sexually humiliates women, she breaks from this pattern and chooses instead to deconstruct contemporary, Western conceptions of anger and injustice. Here I imagined O'Brien would critique contemporary acts of sexual violence against women, such as the use of rape in warfare today.

Rarely discussed in the book is how these metaphors functioned to describe God's dealings not with individual women but with a nation. When O'Brien does so, as evidenced in her treatment of Hosea and Obadiah, I found these explanations to be the most satisfying interpretations. Before examining how these metaphors operate in a modern context, it would have been helpful to examine how such metaphors, used primarily to describe religious and political infidelity, may have been perceived in ancient contexts. Certainly a naïve reading of these metaphors ought to be abandoned because of its destructive potential, so feminist criticism is warranted. Yet abusers of texts ought not to disqualify responsible readers from appreciating the value of the prophetic literature who acknowledge the limitations of Scripture.