

Ezekiel's Awkward God: Atheism, Idolatry and the *Via Negativa*

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Abstract

Can a biblical text be idolatrous? Ezekiel's God has always been theologically awkward and difficult to handle. For early Jewish and Christian readers of the book the most troublesome (and indeed dangerous) parts of the text were the prophet's initial vision of the divine glory and its subsequent reappearances. Voltaire was perplexed and revolted by God's command that Ezekiel eat bread cooked with dung.¹ For some twentieth-century Protestant commentators, Ezekiel's God is altogether too concerned with ritual at the expense of ethics.² But for contemporary readers it is the unrelenting harshness, violence and especially masculinity of Ezekiel's YHWH which proves most problematic. My aim in this article is to examine some of the theological implications of this divine awkwardness. In what follows I will attempt three things. First, I will offer a brief examination of the problems Ezekiel's God poses and a few recent Christian responses. Second, I will outline Roland Boer's proposal that Ezekiel 20 (along with 16 and 23) tends towards a kind of 'anti-Yahwism' or 'protest atheism': a vision of God so appalling as to be impossible to accept. Finally, I will explore the value for theological interpretation of taking seriously such an apparently unpromising conclusion, and suggest that the apophatic tradition may provide resources for embracing such radical negativity within scripture.

Keywords: apophatic, Ezekiel, idolatry, protest atheism, Roland Boer, *Via Negativa*.

YHWH as a Problem in Ezekiel

Ezekiel's God has not had a very good press in recent years, principally because of the prophet's use of shocking and violent sexual metaphor.³

¹ Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1964), pp. 184–7.

² So e.g. R. H. Kennett, *Old Testament Essays* (Cambridge: CUP, 1928), p. 57; H. Wheeler Robinson, *Two Hebrew Prophets: Studies in Hosea and Ezekiel* (London: Lutterworth, 1948), p. 102.

³ A selection of some of the most important treatments would include Julie Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife*, SBLDS 130 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1992); Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, 'Ezekiel's Justifications of God: Teaching Troubling Texts', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 55 (1992), pp. 97–117; Linda M. Day,

The city of Jerusalem is consistently represented in female terms, and most disturbingly in chapters 16 and 23, where the prophet uses the metaphor of betrayed husband and faithless wife to reflect the disaster of Babylonian exile.⁴ Although by no means unique in scripture, Ezekiel's use of the marriage metaphor is both harsher and more explicit than Hosea's or Jeremiah's. Judah's sins of idolatry and mistaken alliances are graphically displayed as the woman's sexual licence, while images of sexual violence and mutilation represent the trauma of invasion, military defeat and deportation. The whole process is overseen by the unmistakably male figure of YHWH, first wronged and then avenging.

Ezekiel 16 and 23 do not tell exactly the same story. In 16 Jerusalem appears as an infant, abandoned by Amorite and Hittite parents. YHWH finds and adopts her, and at the 'age of love' marries her, but Jerusalem's response to this divine generosity is to offer herself to all comers. The narrative interweaves graphic sexual description with religious and political concerns. Initially Jerusalem uses YHWH's gifts in the service of 'adulterous' idolatry: she builds high places and male images which she clothes and feeds. She even goes so far as to sacrifice her children to these idols. A second set of crimes is more political in nature: Jerusalem plays the whore with Judah's powerful neighbours – Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians. The combination of sexual and ritual language, especially, reveals the working assumption that female sexuality is deviant, defiling and in need of male control. That control is terrifyingly executed in the second half of the story, where YHWH's punishment is assured and horrific: Jerusalem will be judged 'as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged' (16:38). YHWH will assemble her lovers, who will then break down her high place, strip her, stone her and cut her into pieces. Finally YHWH's anger will be assuaged: 'so

'Rhetoric and Domestic Violence in Ezekiel 16', *Biblical Interpretation* 8 (2000), pp. 231–54; J. Cheryl Exum, 'The Ethics of Biblical Violence against Women', in John W. Rogerson et al. (eds), *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium*, JSOTSup 202 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995); Exum, *Plotted, Shot and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, JSOTSup 215 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), pp. 101–28; S. Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel*, OTM (Oxford: OUP, 2008); C. L. Patton, "'Should Our Sister be Treated Like a Whore?': A Response to Feminist Critiques of Ezekiel 23", in M. S. Odell and J. T. Strong (eds), *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, SBLSS 9 (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2000), pp. 221–38; Mary E. Shields, 'Multiple Exposures: Body Rhetoric and Gender Characterization in Ezekiel 16', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14 (1998), pp. 5–18; Fokkeli van Dijk Hemmes, 'The Metaphorization of Woman in Prophetic Speech', *Vetus Testamentum* 43 (1993), pp. 162–70; Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

⁴ See esp. Galambush, *Jerusalem*.

I will satisfy my fury on you, and my jealousy shall turn away from you; I will be calm, and will be angry no longer' (16:42). Jerusalem's ways are compared unfavourably with those of her sisters Samaria and Sodom, but along with them she will be restored to her former state. This reconciliation with her divine husband is, however, more an occasion for shame than for rejoicing: 'I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord, in order that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I have purged you of all that you have done, says the Lord God' (16:62–3).⁵

Chapter 23, while retaining much of the same tone and imagery as chapter 16, tells a slightly different story, where Israel is represented by two sisters, Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem). In some ways, chapter 23 is even more unsettling than 16. Again, the prophet stresses dubious origins, as the two sisters play the whore as early as their time in Egypt. The description of the women's youth in Egypt, where 'their breasts were caressed and their virgin bosoms fondled' (23:3), has been condemned as a 'misnaming' of female sexual experience.⁶ As the story continues first Oholah (23:5–10), then Oholibah (23:11–34) are caught up in a cycle of uncontrollable promiscuity, defiling themselves with foreign lovers and being drawn into idolatry and child sacrifice. Sharon Moughtin-Mumby develops the analogy with abuse, arguing that the narrative 'plays with the idea that Oholah and Oholibah, so deeply marked by their abusive sexual experiences in Egypt, have an underlying desire for their abuse to continue at the hands of others'.⁷ And their punishment, when it comes, is no less humiliating than Jerusalem's in chapter 16: stripping, mutilation and death. Unlike chapter 16, there is no hope at the end of chapter 23, but rather what appears to be a threat to real women: 'Thus will I put an end to lewdness in the land, so that all women may take warning and not commit lewdness as you have done' (23:48).

Both chapters seem calculated to shock, with their vulgar language and graphic imagery. They work by putting Ezekiel's contemporaries – the Jerusalem leadership – in the position of the sinful and shameful female figure: Judah's overwhelmingly male elite deserve their punishment just as the women in the oracles deserve theirs. And while the marriage metaphor is used to represent the religious and political failures of male

⁵ NRSV translates the final line 'when I forgive you', but the Hebrew term כָּפַר is rather more associated with ritual purgation or cleansing; cf. Baruch Schwartz, 'Ezekiel's Dim View of Israel's Restoration', in Odell and Strong, *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, pp. 48–9.

⁶ Van Dijk Hemmes, 'Metaphorization', pp. 164–8.

⁷ Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors*, p. 198.

Judaeans, the fact that this punishment for adultery, however shocking, is deserved reveals the underlying assumption that the relationship between the sexes is one of hierarchy, possession, and legitimate abuse: 'the divine husband's superiority over his nation-wife, in turn, lends legitimacy to the human husband's superiority over his wife, who, following this model, is subservient to him and totally dependent on him'.⁸ And, it has been pointed out, the contrast between righteous husband and blameworthy wife might easily lead male readers to identify with YHWH rather than with Jerusalem.⁹

What are Christian readers to make of these texts and their God? YHWH's character hardly emerges from this feminist criticism in a very positive light: it is certainly hard to square with cherished notions of the God of love and mercy. An easy option, of course, is to ignore them, and with them the problems that they raise. It may seem trivial, but it is in fact the traditional solution of lectionaries, which goes all the way back to the rabbinical prohibition of reading Ezekiel 16 as a *haftarah* (m. *Meq.* 4.10). In my own Anglican context neither the Sunday nor the daily lectionaries feature Ezekiel 16 or 23, and this practice goes as far back as the 1549 Book of Common Prayer. Such a course of action may suit liturgists but is not, I think, open to the Christian biblical scholar. The texts and their critique raise important questions both about how biblical images affect human communities and about how biblical images reflect divine reality, and a serious response is required.

A first serious response is to reject the feminist critique of the chapters and argue that their portrayal of God is fully consonant with traditional Christianity. The biblical image neither intends misogyny nor misrepresents God. We see this, for example, in Daniel Block's commentary, where he argues that feminist readings disregard the fact that the prophet uses shocking sexual imagery to represent YHWH's legitimate response to sin: 'far from Yahweh acting as an oppressive and powerful male who takes advantage of a weak and vulnerable female, Ezekiel 16 presents Yahweh as a gracious saviour who lavishes his favours on this helpless infant/young woman. But she who trampled underfoot his grace may expect to experience his wrath.'¹⁰ Block

⁸ Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, p. 113.

⁹ Van Dijk Hemmes, 'Metaphorization', p. 169; Shields, 'Multiple Exposures', p. 15. While it is possible that Ezekiel is attempting to shame his own audience of fellow exiles (cf. Patton, 'Should Our Sister', pp. 232–3), it is worth remembering the degree to which the book emphasises the contrast between the exiles and those who remained in Jerusalem (cf. esp. 11:14–21; 33: 23–9).

¹⁰ Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 469.

goes on to suggest that those who are repelled by Ezekiel's image of God share the hubris of the King of Tyre in chapter 28. They fail to let God be God on his own terms and to accept his authority over us as subjects.¹¹ In a similar vein, Raymond Ortlund finds that, while some elements of the metaphor are incidental and can be ignored, at its heart it offers a true picture of the Christian God: 'The harlot metaphor is an apt figure for the sin it points to. I affirm this because I believe that in actual reality God is a perfect "husband" to his people, our sins really are a betrayal of him, and thus a moral category exists for which the category of the harlot is a reasonable fit.'¹²

While these readings may be more in tune than feminist ones with the historical aim of persuading Ezekiel's community that they were responsible for their exile, they seem to me unsatisfactory in two respects. First, even if the intention of such an uncompromisingly male image of YHWH in the text is not misogynistic (and in the light of 23:48 some would challenge that),¹³ there is no question that the text can be, and has been, used to justify male power over women.¹⁴ Second, and perhaps more importantly in theological perspective, Block and Ortlund seem to move too easily from the YHWH of the text to the reality of God. If the metaphor is capable of so misrepresenting the human world, it may well also misrepresent the divine world.

Mary Shields represents a second possibility – to reject the YHWH of the texts as in any way an adequate representation of God. The metaphor is 'just too dangerous', too easily applied to human relationships. 'By highlighting God's grace or compassion, and not critiquing the violence of God's actions, readers endorse violence against women.'¹⁵ In her article 'Multiple Exposures' she is mainly interested in the problem of God's character in the text because of its practical effects on human relationships. But in a postscript to her earlier article, she emphasises the theological side more: 'the character of Yahweh here needs to be deconstructed because of the multiple problems that character poses for divine-human relationships as well as for male-female human relationships. Rather than being swept under the rug, I believe this text needs to be exposed as the theologically

¹¹ Ibid., p. 470.

¹² Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *Whoredom: God's Unfaithful Wife in Biblical Theology*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, 2 (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), pp. 182–3.

¹³ Cf. Darr, 'Ezekiel's Justifications', p. 115; van Dijk Hemmes, 'Metaphorization', p. 169.

¹⁴ For one historical example see the discussion of Calvin in my article 'Ezekiel's Women in Christian Interpretation: The Case of Ezekiel 16', in P. M. Joyce and A. Mein (eds), *After Ezekiel: Essays on the Reception History of a Difficult Prophet*, LHBOTS 535 (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), pp. 169–74.

¹⁵ Shields, 'Multiple Exposures', p. 18.

problematic text it is.¹⁶ I find myself broadly in sympathy with Shields here, not least because of her insistence on the theological problem. However, such a conclusion raises a problem for theological interpretation. If the texts fail so overwhelmingly to represent God and instead threaten to disrupt human relationships, why read them at all? Perhaps the lectionary had it right all along!

A third option is to recognise the damage of which the text is capable, but find some way of redeeming it. Thus, for example, Renita Weems is anxious about the way in which texts like these can make ‘rape, mutilation, and sexual humiliation defensible forms of retaliating against wives accused of sexual infidelity’.¹⁷ However, she also sees in the marriage metaphor the possibility of grace and forgiveness, of reconciliation after separation.¹⁸ Her approach to the text’s moral and theological difficulty is very much one of ‘both . . . and . . .’: when it comes to the analysis of God, she argues that to imagine YHWH as husband was an effective way that Israel’s prophets made sense of the God they experienced as not only loving and committed, but also abusive and unpredictable. ‘To modern audiences the God of the marriage metaphor may be much too violent to endure. But to Israel it was a portrait that was too honest and consistent with reality as they knew it to deny.’¹⁹ Walter Brueggemann makes a very similar move when he suggests that YHWH’s passion and fury belong together: ‘This is one who goes wholly overboard in passion, to Israel’s great gain and to Israel’s greatest loss. I have no wish to justify or tone down this violent love, which “always hurts the one it loves”’.²⁰ Unlike Block and Ortlund, these authors recognise the destructive potential of the metaphor, but to my mind they too come rather close to claiming that the abusive YHWH is in fact the real God.

Theological reflection on Ezekiel 16 and 23 finds it hard to escape what Julia O’Brien has called a ‘love it or hate it’ approach to prophetic theology.²¹ O’Brien laments the impasse between interpreters who minimise the significance of feminist criticism and those for whom the unmasking of patriarchal ideology leaves the prophetic text bereft of theological value.

¹⁶ Mary E. Shields, ‘Self Response to “Multiple Exposures”’, in *Prophets and Daniel: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 2nd series, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), p. 155.

¹⁷ Weems, *Battered Love*, p. 109.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), p. 384.

²¹ Julia M. O’Brien, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor: Theology and Ideology in the Prophets* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), pp. 40–4.

Even those like Weems and Brueggemann, who recognise some of the dangers the text poses, seem ultimately to capitulate to the power of an authoritative scripture. Ezekiel's awkward God, it would seem, challenges us to find different ways of negotiating the relationship between ideological critique and theological reflection.

Anti-Yahwism in Ezekiel? Roland Boer and Ernst Bloch

Roland Boer is another reader who has looked hard at Ezekiel's image of God and found it wanting, but in ways that I believe are potentially fruitful for theological interpretation. In his book *Marxist Criticism of the Bible*, Boer picks up the discomfort that contemporary feminists and others feel about Ezekiel's God. He argues that such critics do not go far enough in what they deny, that their critique of the figure of God contains an implicit atheism which is not allowed to surface. More than this, he suggests that such implicit atheism, in the biblical context better termed 'anti-Yahwism', is already present within the biblical text itself.²²

This is, on the face of it, an extraordinary claim, and a little context is necessary to make sense of Boer's argument. Boer derives his concept of anti-Yahwism from the work of the Marxist thinker Ernst Bloch, and especially from his remarkable work *Atheism in Christianity*.²³ Bloch is best known for his immense three-volume *Principle of Hope*, and Boer describes his deep concern with human hope in all its forms: 'Bloch's continual and irrepressible desire was to read all he came upon as in some way marked by a utopian desire, a repressed wish for another, better world.'²⁴ Bloch's thought displays a dialectic movement between utopia and dystopia: he is prepared both to be suspicious of the utopian, and to find hints of hope even within the most unpromising material. Rather like Paul Ricoeur, his work is animated by a movement between suspicion and recovery. Unlike Ricoeur, he privileges the collective over the individual, and he is resolutely atheistic.²⁵

Bloch is noteworthy amongst Marxist theorists for both his interest in the Bible and his awareness of biblical scholarship (in its mid-twentieth century Germanic forms). In keeping with his desire to reclaim utopian insights from unpromising sources, Bloch's aim in *Atheism in Christianity* was 'to make an apology for the Bible over against the Marxist rejection of it

²² Roland Boer, *Marxist Criticism of the Bible* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), pp. 133–57.

²³ Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*, trans. J. T. Swann (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972).

²⁴ Boer, *Marxist Criticism*, p. 136; Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. N. Plaice, S. Plaice, and P. Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

²⁵ Boer, *Marxist Criticism*, p. 139.

along with theistic belief'.²⁶ In this work he reads the Bible as fundamentally concerned with class conflict. He is concerned, as we might expect, to show the presence in the Bible of ruling class ideologies, which reveal themselves in the transcendent and authoritarian God of kings and priests. However, his real passion is for uncovering a subversive counter-tradition, which represents the voice of the oppressed. Here he relates the obviously emancipatory episodes like the Exodus and the prophetic critique of cult, but he also discovers revolutionary potential in accounts of resistance to the YHWH of the rulers. His biblical heroes are failed rebels like the murmuring Israelites in the desert, the serpent in Genesis, or the builders of the Tower of Babel: people who stand up to authority and are often hammered by it.

The upshot of Bloch's emphasis on the human and rebellious in the Bible is that he sees it as having an ultimate logic which tends away from transcendence and towards the human. Boer describes Bloch's central theological argument as follows:

If human beings are to realise their full potential, bring about a fundamental change in human nature, both collectively and individually, to end exploitation, then that involves not so much removing the ruling class, while replacing it with another, but rejecting the gods who form part of the ideological structure. Atheism is then the outcome of this internal biblical process; or, the religious logic of the Bible, namely a utopian longing to human transcendence, is towards atheism.²⁷

Returning to Ezekiel, Boer suggests that studies which are critical of the prophet's picture of gender relations have lacked Bloch's theological suspicion. Because of this they have shied away from drawing conclusions about the reality of the figure at the centre of the text 'the "God" to whom Yahweh points'.²⁸ To explore the question further Boer focuses not on the marriage metaphor itself, but on Ezekiel 20, the third substantial retelling of Israel's history in the book.²⁹ He argues that this text shows the same logic of critique that is present in feminist studies of the 'pornoprophetic' chapters, the logic of Bloch's protest atheism.

As a retelling of Israel's history, Ezekiel 20 lacks the graphic imagery of 16 and 23, but shares a very similar tone and purpose. It begins with the familiar biblical logic of divine action and command, sin and punishment. It tells the story of Israel from Egypt to the wilderness in four cycles

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²⁹ Darr's earlier article 'Ezekiel's Justifications' also treats all three texts together.

(20:5–8a, 8b–13a, 13b–21a, 21b–26). As the cycles proceed the impression of overwhelming negativity builds up, and with this a sharp tension between statements about sparing Israel (20:8b–9, 13b–14, 21b–22) and increasingly severe punishments (20:15, 23). Ezekiel 20 reaches its startling climax in vv. 25–6:

Moreover, I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live. I defiled them through their very gifts, in the offering up all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the Lord.

Ezekiel 20:25–6 serves as a rather self-fulfilling prophecy of judgement, and it is hardly surprising that when the people finally reach the Promised Land they continue to indulge their idolatrous behaviour and to deserve judgement (20:27–32). With 20:33, the focus suddenly shifts to the exiles and to a promise of restoration modelled on the original Exodus. YHWH will bring Israel into the 'wilderness of the peoples', where he will enter into judgement with them and purge out rebels. Finally, he will return obedient Israel to his holy mountain, where they will worship him. The oracle ends with a flourish which is familiar from the end of chapter 16 and elsewhere in the book:

there you shall remember your ways and all the deeds by which you have polluted yourself; and you shall loathe yourselves for all the evils that you have committed. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I deal with you for my name's sake, not according to your evil ways, or corrupt deeds, O house of Israel, says the Lord God. (20:44)³⁰

How does Boer find and extract an 'anti-Yahwist' agenda from the chapter? His reading begins fairly conventionally. He comments on the centrality of YHWH's name, rather than any concern for Israel, as the motivating force of the chapter. He highlights Ezekiel's intensification of the pattern of command, disobedience and punishment. He notes the increasing negativity and breakdown of relationship as Israel approaches the land. And unsurprisingly it is with 20:25–6 that the chapter's 'bent, twisted and strained logic comes to a complete collapse'.³¹ The bad laws act as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of Ezekiel's theology: 'The breathtaking theological leap – that the people so consistently disobey as if a following alternative law – collapses the whole structure of what has gone before. YHWH has them surrounded, so that any

³⁰ It is hard to escape Baruch Schwartz's conclusion that 'from the very outset Yhwh's resolve to return the Israelites to their land is not a reprieve but part of the punishment'.

³¹ Boer, *Marxist Criticism*, p. 152.

leeway they might have had for their own initiative has been snatched away from them.³²

The strained logic of the oracle continues into the restoration section, where Boer emphasises the absolute removal of human initiative. The presence of ‘bad laws’ means that the people have no possibility of choosing the right path themselves: the solution is that Yahweh himself will force them to do his will. ‘The people had no option but to sin, now they have no option but to return, worship and serve Yahweh faithfully.’³³ At this point, Boer brings together the logic of Ezekiel 20 and Bloch’s protest atheism:

The radical move of vv, 25 and 26 makes Yahweh an impossible God to serve, one who forces people to ‘sin,’ to do precisely what is forbidden so that the whole notion of sin and rebellion no longer makes any sense. It is, put in Bloch’s terms, the ultimate desire of the ruling classes, to co-opt and anticipate any move that people might make so that they are completely subservient. The extreme monotheism implicit in this chapter not only makes Yahweh responsible for good and evil commandments, but also entirely arbitrary. In doing so, it shows the impossibility of such monotheism itself, at least in terms of any viable anthropology, of any notion that allows human beings to realise their utopian potential. The forced return of the last verses, where the people simply do what Yahweh says – return, serve, worship, accept and know that he is Yahweh – makes a mockery of any sense of worship or serving in response to God.³⁴

How successful is this interpretation of Ezekiel 20? In the first place it should be said that despite its negative conclusions and tone it is not far from that of most commentators. In some ways it is remarkably like that of the far more theologically conservative Daniel Block. If Boer emphasises the pitilessness and egocentricity of the character of YHWH, Block writes: ‘far from capitulating to last-minute sentimentality or pity towards his people, or of a sudden realisation of their deep-seated need for forgiveness, Yahweh’s unexpected withdrawal rests entirely on personal concerns: he must act for the honour of his name.’³⁵ If Boer stresses the relentlessness of Ezekiel’s negativity towards Israel, so does Block: ‘This conviction of his people’s absolute incorrigibility accounts for Ezekiel’s pathological impulse to justify God at any cost, with the most shocking

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 154.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 154–5.

³⁵ Block, *Book of Ezekiel*, p. 629.

rhetorical strategies.³⁶ When it comes to vv. 25–26, Block summarises approvingly Ellen Davis's view in terms very close to Boer's 'collapse of logic': 'The "bad laws" represent an "anti-gift" that renders the very notion of obedience inoperative and carries to an illogical extreme Ezekiel's constant theme: Yahweh's indisputable authority "to determine and interpret the course of human history".'³⁷ Finally, Block would agree with Boer that Ezekiel 20 systematically excludes human initiative: 'Ezekiel affirms again that one's subjective perceptions may be totally divorced from reality. In the end it will not matter how we told our story, but only how God sees it.'³⁸

To find 'anti-Yahwism' in Ezekiel may be to read against the grain, but not very far against it. The rhetoric of Ezekiel 20 tests Ezekiel's 'radical theocentricity' to breaking point,³⁹ straining the logic of the divine–human relationship to such an extreme that it becomes hard to comprehend. Both Block and Boer find illogicality and paradox in the text, but they respond to it rather differently. Block chooses to read with the grain and to be compliant: he is able to see in the text's extreme theocentricity a genuine reflection of the God he worships. Boer, on the other hand, resists what he sees as the text's authoritarian, dehumanising and ultimately inconceivable deity.⁴⁰ This is, of course, a provocative interpretation of Ezekiel's God, but it does seem to me to recognise something fundamentally important about the way in which Ezekiel's theological language almost 'cracks' under the weight of its own theological assumptions.

From Protest Atheism to Negative Theology

If we do allow for the possibility of anti-Yahwism, even implicit atheism, in Ezekiel's depiction of God, what might that offer Christian theological reflection on these texts? First, to consider the possibility of anti-Yahwism is to place the question of God firmly at the centre of the agenda, if in a rather paradoxical way. Despite Boer's negative conclusions, this is one of

³⁶ Ibid., p. 630.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 639; cf. Ellen F. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll: Textuality and the Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel's Prophecy*, JSOTSup 78 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), pp. 114–16.

³⁸ Block, *Book of Ezekiel*, p. 658.

³⁹ On Ezekiel's theocentricity see Paul M. Joyce, *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel*, JSOTSup 51 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).

⁴⁰ The often repeated comment that atheisms are normally the reflex of some particular kind of theism is probably relevant here. Boer is quite candid about his rejection of a Calvinist upbringing (Boer, *Marxist Criticism*, p. 146). Block, for his part, might well agree with Boer that the logical outcome of a thoroughgoing feminist critique is atheism!

the more genuinely theological treatments of Ezekiel's troubling texts that I have come across. He is not just interested in the impact a difficult text might have on its readers, but the fundamental question of reference: what is the relationship between the character YHWH and any possible God? To discover anti-Yahwism within the biblical texts is to destabilise any notion that the literary images of God which we find in the Bible straightforwardly represent a divine reality. Put more bluntly, it encourages us to think that Ezekiel's God is an idol. As Danna Fewell and David Gunn put it in their discussion of the God of Genesis-Kings: 'The notion that the figure God in the biblical text is actually the God who is worshiped by Jewish and Christian believers seems to us to be, ironically, a form of idolatry such as biblical voices constantly warn against.'⁴¹ Of course such a judgement is anachronistic, since the biblical tradition registers very little concern about the danger of such 'textual idolatry'. From a modern perspective, at least, the sharp distinction between graven images and literary images is one of the enduring paradoxes of the biblical tradition. It is a distinction never fully explained, and as Robert Carroll has suggested, theological discomfort about one tends towards theological discomfort about the other: 'if images necessarily betray the idea of God by articulating the unarticulable, by limiting the limitless, by making visible the invisible, is it not also the case that metaphors and figures of speech do precisely that! The biblical writers may not have seen the inevitability of this, but their prohibition of images was the first step in the right direction.'⁴² The biblical condemnation of idolatry, then, may offer a resource for the critique of its own images and metaphors.

And here it strikes me that Boer may not have taken his 'anti-Yahwism' far enough into the text of Ezekiel. He appears to find it only in chapter 20, and is careful to distinguish the implicit atheism present in resistant readings of Ezekiel 16 and 23 from the logic of the texts themselves. I believe he might have gone further in this direction, at least in the case of chapter 16. As we have seen, YHWH is very clearly presented as male in this oracle, even if his body is not on display in the same way as the woman's.⁴³ Nevertheless, his maleness is apparent in general terms through his role as jealous husband, and more specifically through the sexual imagery of 'spreading his cloak' (16:8) and through the children Jerusalem bears him (16:20–1). As we have also seen, the initial sin for which Jerusalem is condemned is idolatry. And

⁴¹ Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993), p. 18.

⁴² Robert P. Carroll, 'The Aniconic God and the Cult of Images', *Studia Theologica* 31 (1977), pp. 59–60.

⁴³ Shields, 'Multiple Exposures', p. 15.

what shape does this idolatry take? It is not just any old idol worship, but quite specifically the construction of זָלָמִי זָכָר 'male images'.⁴⁴ There is a deep irony within this oracle: what Jerusalem does with gold and silver, the prophet does with words. The very maleness of Ezekiel's image of YHWH is its theological undoing even within the oracle's own terms. Ultimately the prophet's literary idol is no different from Jerusalem's graven idol. Here is another point at which Ezekiel's theological logic stretches to breaking point, and here too, I believe, it is possible to see a kind of 'anti-Yahwism' within the text itself.

So it seems that Boer's atheism may be of help to theological interpretation, not least because Christians and atheists often have common cause in doing away with idols. It is worth remembering in this context the friendship between Ernst Bloch and Jürgen Moltmann, who were colleagues in Tübingen in the 1960s and 1970s. Bloch's motto for *Atheism in Christianity* was initially 'only an atheist can be a good Christian', to which Moltmann replied that 'only a Christian can be a good atheist'.⁴⁵ Moltmann's serious point here is that 'atheism is a relative term . . . refuting not God, but always a particular *concept* of God, and in this case, a hierarchical guarantor of the status quo, who is not at all congruent with the God of the exodus and the resurrection'.⁴⁶ The chapters of Ezekiel we have been examining establish a fundamentally hierarchical world in which YHWH's superiority to Israel is modelled on human social relationships. The marriage metaphor represents a gendered hierarchy: God is superior to humanity as a husband is superior to his wife. The story of Ezekiel 20 represents a more political hierarchy: God is superior to humanity as a ruler is to his subjects.⁴⁷ In Bloch's terms, the texts encode 'the world of Nimrods' and their God.⁴⁸ Hierarchy is not in itself 'anti-Yahwist', but the illogicality of 'bad laws' and forced obedience questions the feasibility of the one who commands them, and at the same time condemnation of idolatrous male images opens up the possibility that

⁴⁴ There is some debate as to whether the expression might refer more specifically to phallic images. I have argued elsewhere that the general sense of 'male' is to be preferred, not least because Jerusalem is said to feed and clothe the idols: Andrew Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p. 116.

⁴⁵ G. Clarke Chapman, Jr., 'Jürgen Moltmann and the Christian Dialogue with Marxism', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28 (1981), p. 439; Bloch's assent to this is evident from the fact that both catchphrases appear together on the cover of the English translation of the work!

⁴⁶ Chapman, 'Jürgen Moltmann', p. 438.

⁴⁷ It is noteworthy that only here in Ezekiel does YHWH explicitly assert his kingship.

⁴⁸ Bloch, *Atheism*, p. 83.

this image of a male God is itself idolatrous. In each case, the logic of the metaphor is pushed to breaking point, and as the logic of divine hierarchy collapses we discover within the biblical text the resources for a critique of biblical idolatry.

Ernst Bloch's conviction is that the Bible is of more value than other literature because of the presence within it of a counter-tradition which can provide resources to critique the dominant hierarchies of religion and society. In this respect he has something in common with those who espouse a 'prophetic principle' as the basis of their critique of patriarchy and hierarchy within the Bible.⁴⁹ The Bible clearly offers alternative pictures of a God who resists and overturns authority, who acts on the side of the oppressed to foster human initiative and human community. But it is important to recognise that Bloch and Boer go further than this in their thoroughgoing negativity. It is not just that Ezekiel's God fails to live up to a better, more just and compassionate conception of the divine: 'the point I want to make is that in Ezekiel we have not a undesirable representation of God, one among many that falls short of his true nature. Rather it is a text that shows the radical impossibility of a figure like this.'⁵⁰ The paradox of bad laws and, I would argue, 'male images', pushes Ezekiel's god into the realm of the unspeakable.

Yet this too is of value for theological interpretation. When Boer's protest atheism finds Ezekiel's language about God stretched to the point of incomprehensibility, I am not sure that Christian readers should necessarily find this disheartening. Indeed, in some ways it comes surprisingly close to the classical tradition of negative or apophatic theology, prominent in mystical theologians like Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross, for whom God's transcendence defies expression in ordinary human language. This *via negativa* emphasises darkness, silence and 'unknowability', and often works by pointing out where language about God fails. It certainly offers a resource to critique over-confident religious language, and Rosemary Radford Ruether rightly claims that 'this tradition corrects the tendency to take verbal images literally; God is like but also unlike any verbal analogy'.⁵¹ Moreover, as Denys Turner points out in a discussion of the relationship between Marxist atheism and liberation theology:

To assert that no God as a being superior to the human is conceivable is at once to reject those idolatrous theisms for which God is all too conceivably top-being – a *super human* – and those atheisms which all too

⁴⁹ Most notably as presented in Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1983).

⁵⁰ Boer, *Marxist Criticism*, p. 155.

⁵¹ Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk*, p. 67.

conceivably negate them. Taken strictly for what it says, therefore, this is a proposition with which any good Christian theologian should heartily agree, for no Christian who has absorbed the lessons of negative theology has any business affirming a conceivable God superior to human beings.⁵²

It may be, then, that the tradition of the *via negativa* has something to offer Christian readers of biblical texts as awkward as these. In the first place, the Christian apophatic tradition can be just as radical as Boer and Bloch in its denial of God, equally relentless in its insistence that human language about God cannot adequately describe God.⁵³ If Boer argues that the YHWH of Ezekiel 20 is an impossibility, the Christian should not have much difficulty in agreeing with him. And, like Boer, this is not because we are saying that we can provide a 'better' God than Ezekiel has, but because we recognise that ultimately all of our language about God will fail. This is not an entirely comfortable conclusion, of course, because it implies that biblical texts are not just sometimes or accidentally idolatrous, but perhaps inevitably idolatrous. Uncomfortable as it is, it ought at the very least to act as a corrective to the easy identification of the character of YHWH within the text with the reality of God.

Second, the apophatic tradition does not necessarily take refuge in silence. If the denial that our language adequately describes God means that we should stop reading and writing about God we might expect the writings of apophatic mystical theologians to be cursory to the point of non-existence. In fact precisely the opposite is the case. They are regularly characterised by a superabundance of theological affirmation and an extravagant wordiness. Turner suggests that for the apophatic tradition: 'It is in and through that very excess, the proliferation of discourse about God that we discover its failure as a whole.'⁵⁴ Now, if any of the biblical prophets can be accused of an excess of language, it is Ezekiel. This excess is probably most marked in Ezekiel's opening vision, which combines detailed, repetitive description with an exaggerated reticence about what exactly the prophet is seeing. It is a vision which conceals as much as it reveals, and it is interesting to note the important part Ezekiel's own apophaticism played in the patristic

⁵² Denys Turner, 'Marxism and Liberation Theology', in Christopher Rowland (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), p. 212.

⁵³ Denys Turner, 'Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason', in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (eds), *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), pp. 12–14.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

assertion of divine incomprehensibility.⁵⁵ To return more directly to the apophatic mystical tradition, Turner goes on to suggest that, for Pseudo-Dionysius, 'since all language has an intrinsic creaturely reference, the more obviously inappropriate our language about God is, the less likely it is to seduce us into supposing its adequacy'.⁵⁶ If this is the case, then the statement 'God is an abuser' is more likely to encourage us to question the nature of religious language than the statement 'God is kind', although at one level both are equally false or inadequate. Is it possible that something similar is at work in Ezekiel? As we encounter the awkward God of Ezekiel 16, 20 and 23, we see the prophet's language at its most illogical, grotesque and offensive, and in this we are reminded of the failure of all human language to describe God. And here too may be a crucial difference between Boer's protest atheism and negative theology, since for Boer's Marxism 'anti-Yahwism' ultimately collapses into economics, whereas for the apophatic mystical tradition, Ezekiel's excess of language has at least the capacity to collapse into awe and wonder.

Concluding Remarks

I have for a long time been troubled by texts like Ezekiel 16, 20 and 23. Despite Christians' best efforts to defuse them they are, and will remain, difficult to handle. But however uncomfortable they are to read, I should like to persevere in reading them. They raise fundamental questions not only about how the biblical text might damage human relationships, but also about how (if at all) the biblical text refers to God. Where most Christian readers hold back, Roland Boer pushes the question of God as far as it will go in arguing for an implicit anti-Yahwism in Ezekiel. Perhaps surprisingly, his atheistic conclusion does not close down the possibility of Christian theological reading, not least because in its radical negativity it points us towards the classical tradition of apophatic theology. And Christians have in the *via negativa* a resource which is every bit as radical as Boer's protest atheism, and just as capable of unmasking idolatry in our images of God. Turner defends the truism that atheism should be considered a vital dimension of Christian faith:

⁵⁵ Ezekiel 1 was one of the key texts used by pro-Nicene authors such as the Cappadocians, John Chrysostom and Theodoret to counter the Neo-Arian doctrine that Christians are able to comprehend God in his essence: see Angela Russell Christman, "'What did Ezekiel See?" Patristic Exegesis of Ezekiel 1 and Debates about God's Incomprehensibility', *Pro Ecclesia* 8 (1999), pp. 338–63.

⁵⁶ Turner, 'Apophaticism', p. 17.

It is the requirement that at the heart of any authentic spirituality is the means of its own self-critique, an apophatic putting into question of every possibility of knowing who God is, even the God we pray to. In the heart of every Christian faith and prayer there is, as it were, a desolation, a sense of bewilderment and deprivation, even panic, at the loss of every familiar sign of God, at the requirement to 'unknow' God – as the Meister Eckhart put it, for the sake of the 'God beyond God'.⁵⁷

To read Ezekiel's 'texts of terror' is to enter into such a desolation, in which cherished notions of God are thrown into disarray and theological logic stretched to breaking point. For Boer the logic of this paradoxical self-critique is atheism. I would suggest that it is an atheism from which the theological interpretation of scripture may have something to learn.

⁵⁷ Turner, 'Marxism and Liberation Theology', p. 216.