Readers of Keefe’s study on Hosea have to cope with a rather critical book: a book that contradicts on the one hand the “male-stream” of biblical scholarship concerning the marriage metaphor in Hos 1–2, and a book that on the other hand deals just as critically with feminist analysis, that is to say, with approaches that for their part have always criticized that “male-stream” interpretation. In both areas Keefe explicitly wants to disturb the respective reading strategy rooted in a worldview that defines both the dominant interpretation as well as the reaction of many feminist scholars to that well-established consensus.

But criticism is not the main aim of the book. With her critical introduction Keefe tries only to expose the determinants and assumptions that, if taken for granted, prevent alternative understandings of Hosea’s metaphors. Indeed, such an alternative comprehension is what she wants to offer. For this undertaking she has adopted an inception-oriented approach by distancing herself from approaches, particular of feminist circles, that focus on the reception of biblical texts. For, according to Keefe, when confronted with the prophet’s dark language concerning female sexuality, one has to distinguish between merely being personally disgusted and trying to determine the function of that provocative language within structures of thought very different from
one’s own. The first reaction can involve a text-negating or counterreading, whereas the second stands for a text-affirming interpretation. Keefe pleads for a text-affirming approach, which indeed can only be realized by viewing the data inside and outside the Bible in a new way, thus unveiling the historical and literary defaults that nurtured Hosea’s concern as well as his female sexual imagery as an integral part of that concern.

Keefe’s study exclusively deals with the metaphor of female fornication as it comes across in Hos 1–2. The singling out of these two chapters is simply explained by relying on the interpreter’s hermeneutical liberty: a decision that goes well with Keefe’s thesis that meaning always emerges from the current regard to lines of influence and boundary. And that regard at any time is motivated by particular interest, in Keefe primarily in the symbolic relations between woman, body, and society. She focuses on the connection between sexual transgression and social violence in some biblical texts and from there makes the case that in Hos 1–2 woman’s body is taken as a symbol for Israel’s social body.

Before elucidating the historical and sociocultural context of Hosea’s language, Keefe identifies the two main features that constitute the worldview of most Western scholars, whether male or female. She exposes first a structurally dualistic mode of seeing reality, and, second, a basically Protestant theological paradigm excluding any materiality from the domain of true religion. The combination of these two features has led to the dominant reading of Hos 1–2 in the Western religious traditions. It meets widespread acceptance that the prophet’s metaphor of female adultery stands for Israel’s apostasy from Yahweh and its breaking of the covenant by turning to the Canaanite gods. While gendering the spiritual and material spheres of human experience as male and female respectively, God and nature, mind and body, reason and emotion have been split up into separate fields. The result of that segregation and assignment is the association of women not only with sex and sin but also with apostate religious activities as orgiastic practices and sacred prostitution. Thus, by drawing on Hosea’s female sexual imagery, biblical scholarship has first equated fertility religion with feminine religion; later on, in the 1980s, several feminist readers adopted that ideological complex, turned the tables, and favorably equated fertility religion with feminist religion—unfortunately without discerning the always androcentric imagination on which the fertility-cult thesis was based.

Keefe goes on with her argumentation at two levels. On the one hand, she ascertains that, when examined more closely, the long-postulated dichotomy between matter and spirit, nature and history regarding the Israelite and Canaanite religion, respectively, is no longer maintainable. In Iron Age Israel as throughout Syria-Palestine the sacred power of fertility as well as female religious imagery were indigenous to the culture of the...
highland farmers. On the other hand, Keefe stresses the fact that Hosea’s language about Yahweh is really steeped in sexual allusions being in part unique in the Hebrew Bible. Both observations imply a line of attack quite different from the prevailing assessment of the prophet’s concern.

The reason for Hosea’s polemic can be found when considering the historical and economic situation in eighth-century Israel, more precisely, the social crisis resulting from the intensification and commercialization of agriculture by the ruling powers being endorsed by the national cult. By these political practices, labeled Baalism, Israel’s identity was at risk. Just like his contemporaries, Amos, Isaiah, and Micah, Hosea also worries about the ethos and welfare of Israel’s traditional social organization, hitherto being defined by kinship network, household, and village.

In that traditional, agrarian Hebraic culture two elements were of prominent value: female fertility and the patrimonial land. They met with high approval and special protection and were both potentially the object of avaricious powers in the state (2 Sam 11; 1 Kgs 21). In this context Keefe points out the fact that the so-called marriage metaphor in Hos 1–2 actually is a family metaphor and that Gomer’s portrayal is the portrayal of a mother symbolizing social reproduction and continuity across the generations. That this continuity—concretely it is the patriarchal line—had to be controlled and kept pure is obvious. But what has seriously to be taken into account is the danger that sexual transgression constituted for the entire community.

Sources for information on this topic primarily are the biblical narratives of rape and adultery. As well in 2 Sam 13, Gen 34 and Judg 19, Keefe states a close connection between violence against women and social violence, for each of these narratives finally results in war. Sexual transgression thus appears as a literary motif that serves as a symbol for a threat to social order. Israel figures itself as a woman being violated (Gen 34) and herewith indicates that transgressive sexual activity clearly has social meanings; the female body as the source of community can also stand as a symbol for the community. Going a step further, Keefe is carried away by speculating about old gynomorphic figurations of corporate identity in Hosea’s metaphor, figurations that were indigenous to the prophet’s world (i.e., long before Ezek 16; 23) but now are overlapped by patriarchal world figurations.

The last chapter reemphasizes the positive religious character of Hosea’s imagery, which points to the most essential values of the prophet’s world—the female body and the fertile land—and therefore concludes that depicting them as being seriously threatened must have been deeply disturbing.
Keefe draws on a lot of ideas and theories from scholars mainly of the Anglo-American field of research (that she ignores the 1996 monograph on Hos 1–3 of Marie-Theres Wacker is inexcusable), which are abundantly quoted, but which, without being verified in the mentioned works, cannot actually be checked. Large parts of the book read like an anthology of quotations combined and harnessed in favor of the author’s own thesis. She argues comparatively seldom with the biblical text itself, though perhaps it is not her task, being a scholar of religious and not of biblical studies. The argumentation is executed in a repetitive style that suggests that by multiple mentioning of the touched topics in some measure they are being proved.

Nevertheless, the attempt to qualify the conventional, theologically oriented reading of Hosea that is replicated also by modern commentators “with enervating monotony” is meritorious! The advantage of Keefe’s study cannot be assessed until her ideas are related to an exegetical-theological study of at least Hos 1–3. And in the reviewer’s eyes it is also necessary to seek to debate with Wacker’s rating of Hosea’s “Figurationen des Weiblichen” in every case as “beschädigt.”