

The Embodied Character of
'Acknowledging God'
*A Contribution to Understanding the
Relationship between Transcendence and
Embodiment on the Basis of Hosea*

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ABSTRACT

In this article I follow Bornemark's approach to clarify the embodied character of religion 'via the text' by turning to the book of Hosea. Hosea is especially suitable for studying the controversy over the body in religion because it has traditionally been interpreted as rejecting a religious cult of bodily fertility as opposed to the true ethical religion of Israel. I investigate different motives of embodiment in the text. Subsequently I deal with the critical question of whether the project of reevaluating the bodily guarantees better understanding of Hosea and (biblical) religion. I explore the body-related notions of 'dependence' and 'discernment' as a more specific alternative, which also sheds light on current difficulties in understanding religion.

KEYWORDS

embodied religion, Hosea, dependence, discernment, Kearney

1. TRANSCENDENCE AND THE BODY

By analysing a primary 13th-century religious text by the Christian mystic Mechtild von Magdeburg, Jonna Bornemark wants to arrive at a different view of the relation between transcendence and the body from the current one. Usually, the body and the self – insofar as it is associated with the body – are seen as things that should be left behind in the transcending relation to God (26). Bornemark wants to combine the good of the phenomenological tradition that is characterized by its thorough attention for the body with the insights from Mechtild's text in which embodiment and sensibility are given a different role with respect to transcending. Thus, she also aims to compensate for the notable lack of positive attention for the body in phenomenological accounts of religion. Her general goal is to arrive at 'a more nuanced understanding of the relation between transcendence and embodiment' (30).

The issue at stake in this session is thus the question: How can paying attention to the embodied character of religion contribute to a better, or 'more nuanced,' understanding of religion? The flipside of embodied religion, i.e. that it may give rise to a critical rethinking of religious notions of freedom and responsibility, and the unique position of the human being based on it will be taken up in later sessions. According to Bornemark, the better understanding of religion that results from analysing an embodied religious perspective consists primarily in the fact that transcendence and the body are not played off against each other. The senses give access to the divine. But it takes effort to comprehend how this is possible. The mainstream understanding of religion has not incorporated this idea of transcendence, not even when it was as attentive to embodiment as phenomenology and existential philosophy are. In spite of the importance of their 'connecting the divine closely to the human capacity for transcendence and its transcendental presuppositions,' these approaches finally led to the 'further narrowing down [of] the understanding of the body and the place of embodiment' (30). Therefore, it is necessary to tap other, non-mainstream, sources of religious reflection outside the philosophical canon, in particular those of female mystics like Mechtild von Magdeburg. They are not part of the official religious canon either. Because of their positive evaluation of the senses in relating to God, they aroused suspicion in the eyes of other mystics (27–28). Bornemark deals with a 'suspicious' text of this kind.

This investigation of embodied religion 'via the text' is not self-evident among current critics of the mainstream spiritual understanding of religion. In the words of Manuel Vásquez, who recently launched a 'materialist theory

of religion' that has met with appreciation, modern hermeneutics has 'despite giving us indispensable insights into the situatedness of the process of interpretation and the materiality of texts, tended to reduce all human activity to the production and transmission of meaning. The result has been a suffocating textualism that approaches religions as essentially systems of symbols, beliefs, narratives, and cosmologies, ignoring other important material dimensions of religious life.'¹ The idealist appropriation of phenomenology and modern hermeneutics are identified as the culprits of this focus. This criticism on the one hand and Bornemark's approach – to which I am very sympathetic – of turning quite self-evidently to a primary religious text on the other induced me to try out another approach in this paper 'via the text.' I will also turn to a primary religious text that is not considered to be a philosophical text as such. My use of this text is occasioned not so much through my dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the phenomenological tradition, but through the fact that I am a theologian shaped by a hermeneutical recognition of the vital role of such texts in understanding religion. In particular, my starting point is the wager found in Paul Ricoeur's early work to nourish reflection on religion by turning to primary religious texts. He suggests that these are closer to religious experience than the speculative ones of philosophy and theology.² In a Western context, the symbols and myths of the ancient Near East and Greece and, in particular the Bible, are primary texts of this kind because they are formative sources of Western reflection.

When looking for a biblical text in which embodiment is somehow prominent, I decided to turn to a text that may also shed light on the question why it has apparently always (Bornemark refers to the Neo-Platonic Tradition) been difficult to think religion and the body together. Bornemark points to the tension between transcendence and the body to understand this difficulty. Religion is concerned with transcendence, the spirit or the soul, and the possibility of going beyond the givenness of the bodily. Especially in

¹ Manuel A. Vásquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford 2011), 12, cf. 15 and chapter 8.

² 'Speculation / speculative' is used by Ricoeur as a technical term that refers to reflection as found in philosophy or theology, as distinct from more literary forms of reflection as found in symbols and myths of evil (*L'homme faillible*, 10–11; *La symbolique du mal*, 168–169 (Paris 1988², first edition 1960)). The philosophical value of pre-philosophical expressions, in the form of the 'pathétique of misery', is something that Ricoeur already recognised in *L'homme faillible* (21–34): philosophical reflection cannot equal it in depth. Nevertheless, reflection is necessary for bringing clarification and coherence to the darkness and complexity of the pre-philosophical expressions. Cf. my chapter on Ricoeur in: Petruschka Schaafsma, *Reconsidering Evil: Confronting Reflections with Confessions* (Leuven 2006).

phenomenology and existential philosophy, this tendency to associate religion entirely with the capacity for bodiless transcendence is massive (26, 29–30). But is this simply to be understood as a one-sidedness, which can be explained at least to a certain extent by the male character of this philosophy (26–27)? I am in complete agreement with the project to investigate marginalised voices like those of female mystics who reveal a different kind of reflection and may thus open up new ways of understanding. But I am also interested in the light these marginalised voices may shed on why the body would cause religion trouble. Does the problem lie in not knowing if we can trust our senses, as emphasised in the criticism of dependence ‘on the senses’ articulated by Meister Eckhardt and Johannes Tauler that Bornemark cites, i.e., their question of how we know if the mystical vision comes ‘from the devil rather than from the divine’ (28)? I want to incorporate this issue of the difficulty with the body in religion³ by turning to the book of Hosea. In this text, the embodied character of religion seems obvious: Hosea has to live the relationship between God and Israel by marrying a prostitute. This book has traditionally been interpreted as dealing with the problematic character of the body for religion in the concrete form of a religious cult of bodily fertility as opposed to the true ethical religion of the Israelite God of the Covenant. Therefore, the text seems to fit the polemical character of the discussion on embodied religion.

2. MOTIVES OF EMBODIED RELIGION IN HOSEA

In what sense do we encounter elements of an embodied religion in Hosea? Obviously, in a quite unusual sense that may immediately confuse the reader: God tells Hosea to marry a prostitute or adulterous wife and have children with her. This divine command has been a stumbling block for exegetes of all ages. How can God ask such an obviously immoral or nonsensical

³ Bornemark hints at this issue when pointing out that, in Mechtild’s text, the love of the worldly is connected to sensibility but sensibility ‘that is not purely her own.’ The way one should love the worldly is not just in ‘a meeting between herself and the thing sensed, rather it is a meeting between herself, the divine and the created’ (41). Also, Mechtild’s thoughts on the ‘prison character’ of the body relate to this topic. Mechtild does not deny this problematic character of the body but she does not seek the solution in transcendence as abandonment of ‘the presuppositions of the sensing body.’ Rather, she seeks it in being more attentive to them (44–45). This means a disciplined holding back of the direct sensing, the ‘apprehensions,’ to arrive at ‘another sensing.’ It does not ‘turn away from the world’ but neither does it ‘lose itself in the world.’ Rather it deepens and intensifies the experience of the world by ‘experiencing the interconnectedness and presuppositions of the world’ (46).

thing from his prophet? As self-evident as this question may be – in our context of discussing embodied religion as well – I do not want to start with it. The supposedly immoral or nonsensical character of the divine command should not outweigh the basic fact that the relationship between God and the people of Israel is presented as bodily: one between husband and wife, an erotic relationship of faithfulness to a partner. This general sense of embodiment is of course immediately accentuated by the issue of adultery, which implies a more specific embodiment related to sexuality and procreation. But the meaning of this unfaithfulness can be interpreted only in relation to the meaning of the embodied relationship as such. I will thus start with the latter.

2.1 THE MARRIAGE

The relationship is introduced immediately at the beginning. The first verse introduces Hosea as the one to whom the 'word of the Lord' came. In the second verse God⁴ tells him to take for himself an 'ēšet z^ēnûmîm (*znh* / זנה), a 'woman of fornications' and *yaldê z^ēnûmîm*, 'children of fornications' (*znh* / זנה).⁵ The reason is revealed in the same verse: 'for fornicating the land fornicates, away from behind the Lord.' The Hebrew root *znh* / זנה is used four times in this verse. *Znh* / זנה means to commit adultery or fornication in the sense of being unfaithful in a marriage, but also in the sense of prostitution or being a harlot. It is often used in the Bible, especially in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, to indicate Israel's apostasy and unfaithfulness.⁶ The

⁴ I will refer to the Tetragrammaton by the word 'God' and not, e.g. by the term LORD or Yahweh because it fits the style of a reflection on embodied religion within the context of philosophy of religion where the focus is on biblical religion.

⁵ I take this translation woman and children of 'fornications' from Alice Keefe's study on Hosea; Koehler/ Baumgartner's *Lexicon* translates 'fornication.' Keefe argues that fornication should be distinguished from prostitution. Prostitution was a 'legal and tolerated activity in ancient Israel.' The fornication of a woman in the sense of a wife, however, implied a rupture of the social order. Although there are also references to 'professional prostitution' in Hosea, the term's translation by 'fornication' emphasises its unique character in the Bible, which indicates that it does not simply refer to a prostitute (Alice A. Keefe, *Woman's Body and the Social Body in Hosea* (Sheffield 2001), especially 19–21, where she refers to Phyllis Bird for this translation). Cf. my remarks the text above.

⁶ On the specific designation in Hos.1:2 of the 'land,' in distinction to Israel, as fornicating, cf. Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, *Imagery in the Prophecy of Hosea, Ägypten und Altes Testament* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1999) 145–146. Nwaoru regards it as 'prolegomena to the husband-wife metaphor in Hosea 2,' where Israel is presented as a 'harlotrous wife and mother.' He distinguishes between the unfaithfulness of Israel as land, wife/mother, and children without indicating the possible distinction in meaning. This corresponds to Kathrin Keita's remark that the wife, children and land in Hos. 1–2 are related in a 'semantischen Beziehungsgeflecht, das kaum zu entwirren ist.' The meaning of the one cannot be de-

combination ‘woman of fornications’ and that of ‘children of fornications’ is found only in Hosea, however. Placed in immediate succession, they form an even more remarkable expression and are not simply the usual designations of prostitution. The terms are not elucidated in the text, however. The text continues by narrating how Hosea obeyed the divine command: he marries Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim. Then God gives further instructions on the naming of the ‘children of fornications’ to which Gomer gives birth. The first is called Jezreel because God will punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel (1:4). The second is called Lo-Ruhamah, which means: God ‘will no longer show love to Israel’ (1:6). The third is called Lo-Ammi, ‘for you are not my people’ (1:9). The names thus reveal God’s reaction to the fornications of Israel: punishment, no compassion, deeming them no longer God’s people. The relationship between God and Israel is declared to be terminated. But the text suddenly continues by painting a different time of salvation that will come in which the situation indicated by the children’s names will be inverted (2:1–3).⁷

While the first chapter of the book indicates the unfaithful behaviour of ‘the land’, God’s reaction of turning away from his people, and the promise of a reversal of this punishment in a general sense, the second chapter specifies these elements and may thus provide more material for understanding the embodied character of the relation between God and Israel. The theme of fornication returns in the later chapters, but it is not directly related to Hosea’s marriage to Gomer and the children born of that union. Therefore, I will concentrate on the second chapter (the passage from verse 4 onwards) and relate it to similar passages in the rest of the book.⁸ The passage starts with a

terminated without referring to the meaning of the other (Katrin Keita, *Gottes Land: Exegetische Studien zur Land-Thematik im Hoseabuch in kanonischer Perspektive* (Hildesheim 2007), 55–56).

⁷ The numbering of the verses of Hos. 2 varies among the translations. I am using the the New International Version but refer to the numbering of the verses used in the Hebrew Bible (Stuttgartensia). In the Hebrew Bible, chapter 2 starts two verses earlier than in the NIV. Chapter 14 starts in the NIV in the last verse of chapter 13 in the Hebrew version.

⁸ Hos. 1–3 are usually distinguished from chapters 4–14, although opinions vary on the question of whether it is a textual unity. For example, according to Jörg Jeremias Hos. 1–3 is a thematic collection, whereas 4–14 is a unity. As a result, the obscure chapters of Hos. 1–3 should be interpreted on the basis of the much more unequivocal chapters 4–14 (Jörg Jeremias, *Der Prophet Hosea* (Göttingen 1983), 7). Gerald Morris investigates verbal repetition in Hosea and concludes that many verbs and combinations found in Hos. 1–3 recur in the rest of the chapters. He argues therefore that Hos. 1–3 ‘act as an introduction to the book. Pattern after pattern is introduced in these chapters, sometimes even temporarily resolved, fore-shadowing the pattern that the word or words will take in the remaining chapters’ (Gerald Morris, *Prophecy, Poetry and Hosea* (Sheffield 1996), 114–115). Hos. 14 serves as a conclusion in which many words from the introduction recur.

divine address opening with the call: 'Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband' (2:4). The mother is summoned to do away with her fornications under threat of harsh reprisals: being stripped naked and dying of thirst like a desert, or a parched land (2:5). The following verses elaborate further on what the fornication consists in. Three main motives can be distinguished that elucidate the relationship between God and Israel.

1. In one of the rare passages in which Gomer, Hosea's wife, is presented as speaking – albeit in the account of God – her unfaithfulness is made specific: 'She said, "I will go after my lovers, who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my olive oil and my drink"' (Hos. 2:7). God will therefore block her path and wall her in, so that she cannot reach her lovers anymore. Then, the unfaithfulness is stated explicitly once more in the same terms, when God says: 'She has not acknowledged that I was the one who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold – which they used for Baal' (Hos. 2:10). The punishment corresponds to the betrayal. God says: 'Therefore I will take away my grain when it ripens, and my new wine when it is ready. I will take back my wool and my linen, intended to cover her naked body' (Hos. 2:9). 'I will ruin her vines and her fig trees, which she said were her pay from her lovers; I will make them a thicket, and wild animals will devour them' (Hos. 2:13). It reminds one of the earlier announcement of God's judgement to make Gomer 'like a desert, turn her into a parched land, and slay her with thirst' (2:5). The unfaithfulness is thus specified as a denial of the true source of the wealth and sustenance a woman experiences in her marriage, especially in the basic, daily form of food, drink, and clothing, which includes a good harvest and agricultural thriving.

In the depiction of the restoration of the marriage one also finds references to this wealth and sustenance bestowed on her. As a result of her being unable to reach her lovers anymore, Gomer will say 'I will go back to my husband as at first, *for then I was better off than now*' (2:9; italics mine). The renewal of the marriage is subsequently painted as resulting from an act of allurements by God who will lead the woman into the desert (2:16), not to punish her (cf. 2:5) but to give her back her vineyards (2:17)⁹ – another act in the

⁹ In Hos. 9,10 and 13,5 the word 'desert' or 'wilderness' (*midbar*/ מִדְבָּר) also occurs, now as the place where Israel is 'found' and 'known/ cared for' by God. According to Keita, 'desert' functions in Hosea as a counterpart to the fertility of the cultivated land. In the days of its living in the desert, Israel

same area of being nourished by God. This continues a few verses later: “In that day I will respond,” declares the LORD – “I will respond to the skies, and they will respond to the earth; and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and the olive oil, and they will respond to Jezreel. I will plant her for myself in the land” (2:23–25a; cf. 2:10). In the rest of the book of Hosea, the situation of the people of Israel at the start of its being called from Egypt, the announcement of God’s punishment for their unfaithfulness, and the renewed relationship are often depicted in terms of agricultural thriving or withering, and Israel being like fruit, or no longer yielding fruit, or flourishing again like the grain and the vine, the blossoming lilies and the cedars with their roots and young shoots (14:5–7).¹⁰ Moreover, even God is seen as part of this natural prosperity: ‘I am like a flourishing juniper; your fruitfulness comes from me’ (14:9b).¹¹

This motif in the depiction of the relationship between God and his people in Hosea reminds some exegetes of the creation stories of Genesis 1–3.¹² I will not go into the different theories here on the age of and dependency relations between Hosea and Genesis 1–3, but it is argued that a common creation tradition underlies both. This tradition brings together many of the elements just mentioned. In the second chapter of Hosea, elements reminiscent of this tradition are the participation of the animals and plants in God’s punishment of Israel and in the renewal of the relationship. Animals can constitute a danger, and vegetation can be sparse in Israel if God decrees that it shall be so. But God also announces the time in which ‘I will make a covenant for them [Israel] with the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the creatures that move along the ground’ (2:20), which is also the time of the flourishing of agriculture and nature in general that was just mentioned.¹³ Simi-

had to rely entirely on the care of God. Similarly, Israel will be led back to the desert (Hos. 2:16; 12:10) to break in on its current craving for the fertile land. Thus, God will also start a new begin in the land (Keita, *Gottes Land*, 242–243).

¹⁰ Other passages in which Israel is depicted as (bearing) fruit are Hos 9:10,16; 10:1,12–13; 14:6–9.

¹¹ For the depiction of the situation of the restored or renewed relationship, the phrase of God as ‘responding’ (*nh/ ַנַּשָּׁבַע*) as used in 2:23–24 returns in 14:9a.

¹² Cf. Keita, *Gottes Land*, 306, who refers to many other exegetes. Stefan Paas (*Creation and Judgement: Creation Texts in Some Eighth Century Prophets* (Leiden 2003)) also goes into the ‘creation texts’ and ‘motifs’ in Hosea but does not focus on the parallels with Gen. 1–3. Rather, he aims at a broader definition of creation, starting from ‘recognised creation texts such as Genesis 1 and 2.’ In relation to Hosea, he goes into the ‘creation texts’ on Israel as ‘forgetting their Maker’ (8:14), and a LXX insertion in 13:4 on ‘God as creator of heavens and earth’ and the ‘creation motifs’ in Hos. 6:2 (revival and restoration) and 11:1 (calling out of Egypt, cf. my main text below).

¹³ M. DeRoche (referring to J.L. Mays) points out that this is ‘a reversal of the oracle of punishment in Hos. 2,14’ (M. Deroche, ‘The Reversal of Creation in Hosea,’ *Vetus Testamentum* 31/4 (1981),

larly, in the garden of Eden, the animals are placed under the dominion of human beings (Gen. 1:28), and all vegetation of the earth is given to them as food (1:29). Moreover, as DeRoche (406) points out, like Hos. 2:14 and 20, Gen. 1:29–30 'deals with the relationship between the food supply of man, and that of the beasts.' In the passage in Genesis, this relationship is harmonious, while in Hos 2:14 animals constitute a danger. The covenant in Hos. 2:20 puts an end to this danger and thus depicts a 'return to the state of harmony that existed between man and the beasts at the time of creation (cf. Isa. 11,6–9)' (DeRoche, 407). After the expulsion from Eden, this harmony is at least partly disturbed: the earth would 'produce thorns and thistles' for them and they would 'eat the plants of the field' (3:18). The combination 'thorns and thistles' is found in the Bible only in the Gen. 3 passage and in Hos. 10:8: 'The high places of wickedness will be destroyed – it is the sin of Israel. Thorns and thistles will grow up and cover their altars. Then they will say to the mountains, "Cover us!" and to the hills, "Fall on us!"'¹⁴ The theme of nakedness and being clothed as expressions of God's taking care of and punishing Adam and Eve and Israel is also found in Gen 2–3 and Hosea.¹⁵ A general correspondence, finally, is that the betrayal of and conflict with God is put in the setting of a husband-wife relationship.¹⁶ One could even perhaps compare Gomer to Eve as the one who bears the most guilt for the betrayal.¹⁷

400–409, 406). Hos. 4:3 contains a counterview to the thriving of the land and the animals, with partly the same phrases as in Hos. 2:20: because there is no acknowledgment of God but only sins – that remind of the Decalogue, i.e., cursing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery – 'the land dries up, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away.' DeRoche (403) argues that Hos. 4:3 is the announcement of the reversal of creation: the order of the words 'the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea' is precisely the reversal of the order in which they are mentioned at creation (Gen 1:20, 24) and being placed under the dominion of human beings (Gen 1:26, 28). They represent the three spheres of the 'animal kingdom' and the prophet thus announces 'a total destruction' (just like the parallel text in Zeph. 1:2–3 where the same verb *jsp* / *שָׁפַד* is used).

¹⁴ Cf. Hos. 9:6 in which the plants also are a danger: 'Their treasures of silver will be taken over by briars [brier roses], and thorns will overrun their tents.' The unique occurrence of 'thorns and thistles' in Genesis and Hosea seems to me the only real textual 'proof' of any relation to the creation stories in Genesis, but Keita does not indicate this.

¹⁵ Hos. 2:5, 11–12. Cf. Keita, *Gottes Land*, 319.

¹⁶ Keita regards the relations between Hos. 1–2 and Gen. 3 as the most substantial and striking ones. Apart from the aspects mentioned so far, Keita lists other points that are, in my view, less obvious (319–320): – punishment in the form of spatial removal from God in Hos. 2:8 and Gen. 3:23–24 as well as the idea of an enclosed garden that cannot be entered; – the use of the verb *grsh* / *גָּרַשׁ*, expel in Hos. 9:15 and Gen 3:24 which also has a parallel meaning: expulsion because of betrayal of God, a meaning that, according to Keita, is not found elsewhere in the Bible (it is only used for the expulsion of Canaanite people in favour of Israel; cf. also p. 328); the 'you will call me "my husband"; you will no longer call

This first interpretive motif, or thematic group of motifs, thus relates the unfaithfulness of the wife to the refusal to acknowledge who it is who provides her with food, drink, and clothing: the Lord, who is like the rains that water the earth, and like dew.¹⁸ Israel turns to other providers, and God therefore punishes them by taking the harvest back, and ‘my wool and linen.’ But Hosea also announces the restoration of the marriage that consists in acknowledging God. This situation is painted as a thriving of the land and a flourishing of nature in which the people of Israel take part. The reminiscence of Gen. 1–3 confirms the idea that the relationship between God and human beings is not unrelated to the flourishing of nature and the produce of the land, and the danger posed by animals. This motif is the most elaborate interpretation of Israel’s fornications, at least in Hos. 1–3, with parallels in the other chapters.

2. Other interpretive motifs of Israel’s unfaithfulness are far less substantial. One finds a few references in the first three chapters to something like a ‘wrong cult.’ We just referred to ‘the silver and gold – which they used for Baal’ (Hos. 2:10), which seems to refer to the making of idols.¹⁹ Another verse specifies the punishment of the wife/mother as stopping her celebrations, festivals, her New Moons, her Sabbath days (Hos. 2:13). This reference to the religious cult is related in the following verse again to the ruining of the ‘vine and fig tree.’ Subsequently, the wife/mother is accused of burning incense to

me “my master” (Hos 2:18) seems to be a revocation of the ruling of the husband over the wife in Gen. 3:16, and a parallel to Gen. 2:23 (The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called “woman,” for she was taken out of man.’ Keita, 305–306 quoting Frey and Hauret). Parallels with Gen. 2 that Keita mentions are: Hos. 2:17, which deals, just like Gen. 2:8,15 with the human beings as being placed by God in a garden/land; Hos. 2:25 as parallel to Gen. 2:7–8 (3:19): the human being as created by God from dust/ground corresponds to God as the sower who sows Israel in the land (Keita, *Gottes Land*, 318). Cf. also Keita, *Gottes Land*, 330–331 on the dating of Gen. 2 before the return from the exile in 525 BCE.

¹⁷ This may seem a very tentative conclusion that is based on the (Christian) reception history of the Genesis story as viewing the woman as the source of evil. However, as Yvonne Sherwood points out, a possible underpinning for this connection may be seen in a 13th century Bible manuscript in which Hosea and Gomer are depicted holding each other’s arms. Gomer is decorated with a garland ending in a snake’s head (Yvonne Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea’s Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective* (Sheffield 1996), 67–69).

¹⁸ Cf. Hos. 6:3: ‘Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.’ and Hos. 14,5: ‘I will be like the dew to Israel’; cf. also Hos. 10:12b: ‘for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers his righteousness on you.’

¹⁹ Cf. Hos. 8:4: ‘With their silver and gold they make idols for themselves to their own destruction.’ and Hos. 13: 2: ‘Now they sin more and more; they make idols for themselves from their silver, cleverly fashioned images, all of them the work of craftsmen.’

the Baals, decking herself with rings and jewellery, pursuing her lovers, and forgetting her God (2:15). Another verse announces that God 'will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked' (2:19). I will come back to the meaning of these Baals and a possible Baal cult below.

3. A third motif in the specification of Israel's infidelity contains references to war, justice, and 'international politics.' In the depiction of the restored marriage the making of a covenant with the animals is followed by the announcement: 'Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety. I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in/with righteousness and justice, in/with love and compassion. I will betroth you in/with faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD' (2:20b-22). More explicit references to war and politics are found in the later chapters.²⁰ Israel, or Ephraim, is accused of seeking an alliance with Assyria and Egypt (5:13; 7:8-9, 11; 12:2; less prominent in 8:9; 9:3), which will lead to its fall.²¹ It is obvious that this turning to the superpowers implies infidelity toward God who led Israel out of Egypt. Israel is reminded explicitly of its exodus tradition (2:15; 11:1; 12:9, 13; 13:4) and is warned about a 'return to Egypt' (8:13; 9:3, (6); 11:5).

Thus, we may identify at least three lines or motifs of interpretation of Israel's fornications. The first one is most extensive and therefore difficult to indicate via a single term. It has to do with the fault of failing to acknowledge God as the true source of everyday sustenance, and agricultural thriving and flourishing of nature. The second relates Israel's unfaithfulness to cultic practices, and the third to Israel's defeat in wars and its seeking alliances with the foreign superpowers Assyria and Egypt. The link with Gen 1-3 adds to the idea that the setting in which the conflict between the believers and God is placed is meaningful, i.e., the setting of a relationship between man and woman marked by infidelity.

²⁰ The second and third motif may go together, as in Hos. 14:3, where Israel is urged to say to God: 'Assyria cannot save us; we will not mount warhorses. We will never again say "Our gods" to what our own hands have made, for in you the fatherless find compassion.'

²¹ Keefe (*Woman's Body*, 16-17, 211) notes that many of the atrocities of war that will befall Israel are depicted in terms of maternal bereavement, loss of female fertility, and death of mothers and children (4:5; 9:11-12, 14; 10:14; 14:1). She concludes: 'Clearly there is some resonance between these images of bereaved maternity, sterility and illegitimate children on one hand, and the metaphoric complex of the wayward mother and her rejected children of Hos. 1-2 on the other' (17).

2.2 THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

The husband-wife relationship, however, is not the only setting for describing Israel's disloyalty. The well-known passage of Hos. 11 depicts the relationship between God and Israel as a parent-child relationship.²² When reading it after our analysis starting from chapter 2, however, this setting seems to show many similarities to the husband-wife (and children) setting. Yet the tone of the opening passage, which is resumed at the end of the chapter, differs: it reflects a warm, personal relationship of love.²³ God says: 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.' (11:1).²⁴ Many exegetes point to the central role of 'love' (*ḥb* / אהב) in this chapter. It is presented first of all as lying at the foundation of the relationship between God and the people, and thus also of their identity as a people 'called out of Egypt.' In the following verses, the 'upbringing' of Israel is depicted in phrases of affectionate, bodily love of a parent for its child:²⁵ God teaches Israel to walk 'taking him by the arms' (11:3) and leads him with 'cords of human kindness,' with 'ties of love' (11:4a). 'To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek' (11:4b). The love also meant that God 'bent down to

²² This does not mean that the 'parental model' is the only one present in this chapter, as Eidevall argues, against the 'consensus view' (Göran Eidevall, *Grapes in the Desert: Metaphors, Models, and Themes in Hosea 4-14* (Stockholm 1996). On the other hand, Eidevall's conclusion (183) that the complementarity of the different models present in Hos. 11 underscores the view that the central theological significance of this passage consists in relativising all models for the divine and the deity-people relationship lacks foundations in this text, in which the parental relationship is obviously most important.

²³ This love for Israel is also mentioned in Hos. 3:1, but then in the context of the husband-wife relationship: 'The LORD said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes."

²⁴ Hos. 2:1 announces that the Israelites (*b^ene-jisrael*) will be called children of the living God/El (*b^ene el-chi*), which is contrasted to 'not my people,' *Lo-Ammi*, the name of Gomer's third child. The fact that the children are already mentioned together with the mother in chapter 1 as embodying Israel indicates that the marriage relation is more often than only in Hosea 11 linked to the parental relation, which is why it seems better to speak not just of a 'marriage' image but of a family image. Cf. Keefe, *Woman's Body*, e.g., 12, 15.

²⁵ Several exegetes point out the human character of the depiction of the parental love: it is not some kind of divine family that is presented here (cf. Brigitte Seifert, *Metaphorisches Reden von Gott im Hoseabuch* (Göttingen 1996), 212-213; Nwaoru, *Imagery in the Prophecy of Hosea*, 108-109.) It is disputed among exegetes if the self-evident interpretation of the parent in Hos. 11 as a father is correct, as the expression may seem quite maternal (cf. Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 17, n.16; Seifert, *Metaphorisches Reden*, 198-201; Eidevall, *Grapes in the Desert*, 167). This discussion seems to be inspired more by current conceptions of father and mother roles than by the Hosea text, and the conclusion seems correct that this was not Hosea's problem (Seifert, *Metaphorisches Reden*, 201). At most, one may note that Hosea's depiction of the parental love is not gendered, while this could easily have been done (Seifert, *Metaphorisches Reden*, 200).

feed them' (11:4b), which recalls the depiction of God as the provider of daily needs in the second chapter. This reminiscence is also found in the account of Israel's rejective response to God's love. This response shows a threefold distinction similar to the three motifs indicated above: (1) not acknowledging (*jd'* / עדי) who 'healed them' (11:3); (2) cultic betrayal (sacrificing to the Baals and burning incense to images, 11:2); (3) political adultery ('Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?' 11:5).²⁶ In what follows God first announces his wrath, but then resists expressing it because of compassion, repentance, or self-control (11:8b),²⁷ 'For I am God, and not a man – the Holy One among you' (11:9). Then Israel's return from Egypt and Assyria – 'trembling like sparrows' – is foretold; God 'will settle them in their homes' (11:11). Thus, the emphasis in this passage is on God's love for Israel in spite of Israel's going away. It is expressed in a very personal, loving relationship that is unbreakable ('How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over Israel?' 11:8a). Again, Israel's fault is that it does not acknowledge their God – who has called them out of Egypt, gave them loving support, healed and fed them – but turns to other gods (Baals) and other powers (Assyria and Egypt).

2.3 ACKNOWLEDGING GOD

In the whole of Hosea the element of not 'acknowledging' God returns as a kind of summary of Israel's fornication.²⁸ The Hebrew root *jd'* / עדי indi-

²⁶ Seifert (*Metaphorisches Reden*, 212) also arrives at this threefold characterisation of Israel's reaction in Hos. 11, which she, moreover, relates to other chapters of Hosea. She summarises the central problem of Israel's behaviour as presented here as 'Liebe die ins Leere geht,' which recalls the tenor of Hos. 2:4ff and 3:1, although anger prevails in these verses, while grief is dominant in Hos. 11 (Seifert, *Metaphorisches Reden*, 215).

²⁷ According to Jeremias (*Der Prophet Hosea*, 145) the verb *hpk* / הפך 'overthrow' should not be interpreted as 'Reue,' and in particular not as 'Mitleid' because this conceals that what is at stake here is a 'Willenswandel ... die Rücknahme einer zuvor gehegten Absicht,' i.e. of God's justified wrath. The verse is about 'Selbstbeherrschung,' which is grounded only in God, not in Israel's behaviour. Note the contrast between the human depiction of the love (cf. note 26 above) and this emphasis on 'being God, not a man.'

²⁸ Several exegetes note the central role of this term in Hosea. Jeremias regards it as 'eines der zentrale Stichworte der Theologie Hoseas, das besonders in Kap. 4 eine tragende Rolle spielt' (*Der Prophet Hosea*, 44). The object of this knowledge is, according to Jeremias, 'wesenhaft die Geschichte Gottes mit Israel und der Wille Gottes.' According to W. Schottroff, it is a 'Schlüsselbegriff der prophetischen Verkündigung' in Hosea and Jeremiah (lemma *jd'* / erkennen, in: Jenni and Westermann, *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, (Munich/Zurich 1984), 682–701, in particular 695–697). Schottroff suggests, primarily on the basis of Hos. 4:6 (and parallel texts in Jer. 2,8; 28,9 and others), that it may refer to 'das priesterliche Berufswissen ... dass ... als gegenwärtiges Wissen jah-

cates knowing, understanding, acknowledging, realizing, noticing, and here mostly has as its object God (2:6.18; 4:1; 5:4; 6:3.6; 8:2; 11:3; 13:4). The first line of interpretation indicated above, in which the word also appears for the first time in Hosea, is illuminating as to the meaning of this ‘acknowledging’ of God. It specifies it as acknowledging God as the giver of grain, new wine and oil, silver and gold (2:6), as the one who comes like the winter and spring rains (6:3), and who heals his child Israel (11:3). The other uses of the word are less specific. Knowing God is placed in parallel with faithfulness and love (4:1) and contrasted with ‘burnt offerings’ (6:6). Not knowing God is placed alongside ‘prostitution in the heart’ (5:4) and ‘rejecting what is good’ (8:3). It is related two times to reminding Israel of its being led out of Egypt (11:3; 13:4). Finally, knowledge is also mentioned without an object, as something that is lacking to Israel (4:6), and as something to which they are summoned (14:9, the final verse). Thus, the recurrence of the root *jd’* / ידע as a summary of the right relationship with God, confirms the importance of the first line or motif of interpretation.

2.4 CONCLUSIONS

What has our examination of the embodied relationship of Hosea and Gomer yielded regarding the bodily character of the relationship between God and Israel? One may distinguish between 1) the relationship in its ideal form, i.e. as it should be, and as it is announced it will be when God restores the marriage, 2) Israel’s view of the relation to the divine, which is attacked by Hosea, and 3) God’s punishment as consequence of Israel’s unfaithfulness in their relationship.

- The bodily character of the ideal relationship, which revolves around acknowledging God as the provider of daily sustenance, may be specified in three ways. They overlap or merge into one another in becoming more and more specific:
 - a. The relationship between God and Israel is first of all one in which God should be acknowledged as the one who provides Israel’s necessities: food, drink, and clothing. This includes God’s taking care of the thriving of the land and the harvest: ‘Your fruitfulness comes from me’ (14:9). These aspects can be regarded as ‘embodied’ in the sense that basic bodily needs are taken utterly seriously.

wegemässes Verhalten überhaupt erst ermöglicht.’ On the possible sexual connotation of ‘knowing’ as associated with God in Hos. 2:20 cf. Keefe, *Woman’s Body*, 47, n. 11.

These are the first and foremost things in which the relationship with God is found. God's maintenance is directed at this basic level first of all. This language is prominent also in the imagery used to depict Israel's situation and even God.

- b. God's maintenance should also be acknowledged in a more specifically human sense. God heals Israel, raises them from childhood onwards. These elements also clearly have a bodily character, as was clear from the warm expressions of human, bodily love in Hos. 11.
 - c. In line with this remembrance of their being taken care of in their 'childhood,' Israel should acknowledge God as the one who called and led them out of Egypt, took care of them, and fed them in the 'land of burning heat' (13:5). This aspect has to do with Israel's relationship with God as a people. The foundation of this relationship is depicted in bodily terms, in the sense that God put an end to their physical presence in Egypt and warns against their returning to it, and provided for their physical needs during their exodus.
- Such is the relationship with God in which Israel finds itself. But they do not acknowledge it. They turn to other gods for their daily sustenance which is imagined as a bodily act of fornication. This fornication implies bringing sacrifices to the gods, building altars and adorning sacred stones, holding festivals, and making idols. The cult expands when the land prospers (10:1). Moreover, Israel turns to the superpower from which God had liberated them: Egypt. Israel asks Egypt and Assyria for help. In sum, they have 'depended on their own strength' (10:13b).²⁹ Israel does not want the 'embodied relationship' with God to which God has called them. They prefer a different kind of religion and politics and view of the source of their daily sustenance.
 - The punishment that is announced is also put in bodily terms: it is portrayed as a reversal of the relationship as it should be: no more fruitfulness, no personal love, no longer being God's people etc. The

²⁹ The NIV translates the noun *Derek* / דֶּרֶךְ by 'strength.' The basic meaning of the word is 'way' or 'road'; Koehler-Baumgartner's *Lexicon* translates the word in this verse as 'way' in the sense of 'condition' and parallels it to 'determining one's own destiny.' In combination with the verb *bth* / בָּטַח, 'trust,' the translation 'way' seems possible as well, which the NIV apparently rephrases as 'depending on one's own strength.'

bodily character is obvious in a penetrating sense, especially in the foretelling of the atrocities of the war that Israel has called down on itself.

Thus, the ideal relationship with God, Israel's different idea of the relationship to the divine, and the announcement of God's punishment may all be called bodily. Reading the book of Hosea with an eye to embodiment certainly yields something. The positive relationship between the living body and the divine, for which Bornemark is searching, is found in particular in the elaboration of the acknowledgement of God as the giver of daily, bodily sustenance. But the depiction in itself of the personal, loving relationship with God as a husband-wife or parent-child relationship also contradicts any easy narrowing down of religion to a purely spiritual understanding.

3. A LITERAL KIND OF EMBODIED RELIGION IN HOSEA

Our search for embodied religion in Hosea started quite broadly or open with an investigation into the bodily way the relationship between God and the people of Israel is presented: as that between husband and wife. But at the outset of this broad analysis, I already indicated that the immoral or non-sensical character of the divine command to take a woman and children of fornications may attract much more attention than this bodily character of the relationship as such, especially when searching for embodied religion. In line with this peculiarity of embodiment in Hosea, many interpreters have focused on a quite literal sense of embodiment in Hosea: the reality of practices of fornication in a sacred setting, i.e. some kind of temple prostitution as part of a fertility cult. This illustrates the fact that a 'search for embodiment' may still be a rather unspecific search, which may yield quite divergent results. A brief outline of these interpretations may illustrate the rather unspecific character of the category of 'embodiment.' I will do this from the perspective of a recent study of Hosea by the Old Testament scholar Alice Keefe.³⁰ She is sympathetic to Bornemark's project of revaluing the body in our reflection on religion with special attention to the female perspective. But she also points out that the revaluation of the bodily as such may not yet lead to getting beyond the dualistic opposition of spirit and matter or soul and body in relation to religion, i.e. to a more embodied understanding of (the capacity for) transcendence.

³⁰ Cf. note 5 above.

Keefe starts her analysis of Hosea by pointing out the 'long-standing scholarly consensus' (5) that regards Hosea as prophesying against Israel's participation in a Canaanite or syncretistic 'fertility religion.' As we have seen, there are references in Hosea to apostate cultic practices: mention is made of Baal worship (2:15, 17; 11:2, 13:1), calf idols (8:5-6; 10:5; 13:2), feasts and festivals (2:13; 5:7), sinning priests (4:7-9; 6:9; 10:5), altars and sacred stones (8:11,13; 10:2; 12:12). This idea of a Baal cult is further specified by combining it with the references in Hosea to prostitution and adultery.³¹ The 'fertility religion' is outlined as worshipping the rain god Baal, perhaps together with goddesses of sex and fecundity. Natural procreation and regeneration are sanctified in these gods.³² It is suggested that participation in this fertility religion includes practising sexual rituals of temple prostitution or even participating in wild orgies. If this fertility cult is actually what Hosea's prophesies against, then the reason why Hosea needs to *live* the relation of the people to God via the scandal of marrying a woman of fornications is clear: the adultery 'represents the apostasy of Israel both figuratively and literally. The marriage metaphor is more moving than a mere allegory, because "Gomer's misconduct is not just *like* the sin of Israel that infuriates God and breaks his heart; it is that sin."³³ Hosea embodies religion to attack 'embodied religion.'

The tenor of this traditional interpretation is explained by Keefe as the product of a dualistic way of opposing spirit and body. The dominance of this dualistic view has been denounced by feminist exegetes in particular, who revealed its relationship with patriarchy, and the evaluation of the feminine – and the female body and sexuality in particular – as the other and as sinful. Hosea is indicted as one of the earliest sources that advanced this view. Some of these exegetes argue that Hosea's polemics against the fertility religion implies that such a religion actually existed and that Gomer was a woman who practised it or represents those women.³⁴ This cult granted them the opportunity to explore their own feminine sexuality and fertility, by conceiving a partner of their choice. Investigating this cult may therefore contribute

³¹ Especially Hos. 4:13b-14: "Therefore your daughters turn to prostitution and your daughters-in-law to adultery. I will not punish your daughters when they turn to prostitution, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery, because the men themselves consort with harlots and sacrifice with shrine prostitutes – a people without understanding will come to ruin!"

³² Cf. Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 43 n.8 for a list of mainstream commentaries with such a version of Canaanite religion, including 'great names' like Von Rad and Ringgren.

³³ Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 47, quoting Francis I. Andersen & David Noel Freedman.

³⁴ Keefe, *Woman's Body* (62-64, 148-150) refers to Helgard Balz-Cochois, Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, and T. Drorah Setel.

to reconstructing and reappropriating a kind of embodied religion that has remained out of sight in the dominant views of religion as purely spiritual. After analysing this criticism of traditional Hosea interpretation and the plea for a revaluation of the body in religion, Keefe asks if they really go beyond the opposition of spirit and body. She concludes that the traditional and the feminist interpretations are each other's counterparts: whereas the one focuses on the problematic character of the bodily in relation to religion, the other regards the body as a primary source of religious experience and relating to the divine. But they remain heirs to the same dualist separation of spirit and body. This exegetical debate may thus illustrate the drawbacks of the plea to pay more attention to the embodied character of religion: the spirit-body opposition remains intact, and the focus is on quite extreme kinds of embodiment (prostitution, orgies etc.).

In order to undermine the dominance and authority of the dualistic interpretation, Keefe tries a different interpretation, without claiming to arrive at the only 'correct' reading of Hosea.³⁵ She aims to examine Hosea in its own context by taking into account historical and archaeological findings and by means of an intertextual reading of similar texts in the Bible. Such a reading reveals a relation between acts of sexual transgression on the one hand and social disintegration and violence in the land on the other. That Hosea faced a situation of social disintegration can be confirmed from what we know about Hosea's time: it was a time of bloodshed by the king, internal war, and the threat of Assyrian occupation. But more important for Keefe's interpretation is the socio-economic and political transitions that took place in that time. Israel changed, according to Keefe, from a locally organised, tribe- and kinship-based society of small farmers to a centralized market economy of cash cropping and international trading under monarchical control.³⁶ In this

³⁵ Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 13, 221. Other interpretations that show resemblances to Keefe's approach are the studies by Keita and Sherwood mentioned above. Keefe also refers to Sherwood as to the question of claiming the 'correct' reading. Sherwood characterises her approach as a 'metacommentary': this does not follow the traditional strategy of criticising and displacing the criticism of one's predecessors before introducing a new improved account (38). Her aim is not to reveal the 'truth' or 'error' of specific interpretations, but the dominance of certain interpretations and their claiming of 'objectivity.' She does not claim to introduce a reading that is free from ideology but wants to bring 'different ideological interests into play and relativise the dominant (apparently natural) descriptions of Hos. 1,2 by introducing an alternative, more marginal perspective' (39).

³⁶ These processes are called 'latifundialization.' Keefe bases this interpretation on many studies of Israel and Judah in this period from a socio-scientific perspective (cf. Keefe, *Woman's Body*, e.g., 27-29, where she refers especially to Devadasan N. Premnath, Bernhard Lang, Marvin Chaney, and John Andrew Dearman).

new situation, the traditional importance of the local family and the interdependence of different families in a tribe for their survival diminished. A new class of wealthy rulers came into existence who exploited farmers for the sake of larger interests. Moreover, the class of rulers also tried to control the religious cult and thus reinforce the centralized, monarchical power. It is to this situation that female fornication refers in Hosea: an Israel that is out for profit and is prepared to be unfaithful for the sake of that aim. Thus, Israel eventually puts its own continuity as a people on the line. In the Israelite patrilineally organised society, family is the essential social unit and sacral locus, based upon paternal legitimacy. In this setting the 'imagery of a fornicating wife and her illegitimate children signifies the disintegration and end of that society.' (206) Keefe summarises her interpretation by concluding that 'at stake in Hosea's discourse is the loss of the sacred as it was manifest in the relationship of people to the land, its produce, and to each other, that is, in their relationships to the materiality of their existence' (221).

Keefe thus finds the embodied character of religion not so much in the extreme forms of a fertility religion with matching sexual practices but in the general idea of 'religion as a mode of orientation to the material and corporeal bases of human existence' (12). The interpretation of this orientation in Hosea contributes, according to Keefe, to a better understanding of religion.³⁷ This seems a sensible correction of an important tendency in interpreting the place of the body in religion. But the correction also shows that the project of revaluating the material or bodily as such is not a guarantee for arriving at a broader and thus better understanding of religion. For it cannot be denied that the feminist interpretation of religion takes the body seriously. And, in a precisely opposite sense, the traditional interpretation of Hosea did not deny the possible bodily character of religion, although it vehemently rejected it. How can the rather unspecific character of the search for a more embodied view of religion be overcome while still taking the problem of the spirit-body dualism seriously? In my view, my analysis of Hosea may itself indicate a different approach.

³⁷ Keefe does not elaborate systematically on this contribution and thus does not go beyond her exegetical confines. A few general suggestions are found however, that indicates that this role of her study interests her. (Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 12-14, 73-78, 111, 220-221).

4. DEPENDENCE AND DISCERNMENT

One of the central points to which my analysis of the relationship between God and Israel led was the acknowledgement to be in a relationship with God who cares as the giver of daily sustenance. This was contrasted with securing one's needs by turning to other gods in sacrificial rituals as well as in trusting one's own strength in battle and turning to international superpowers for help. I would like to dub the point of this difference in attitude between acknowledging and not acknowledging 'dependence.' Dependence on God to whose care one may commend oneself is clearly understood in Hosea as a bodily thing. This is contrasted with experiencing the body as a source of disquiet and concern that is to be safeguarded by human effort. This contrast could be easily interpreted in line with a classical criticism of religion, i.e., that it makes people passive and hinders them from having control over themselves. But the difficulty Hosea addresses seems to be that this 'control' needs orientation. The body as such cannot provide this orientation, as undeniable and strong as its need for food, drink, clothing and shelter may be. Israel should find its orientation in being taken care of as a people called out of Egypt by God. Acknowledging this God is paralleled with faithfulness and love and contrasted with 'cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery,' and bloodshed (4:2). It is a dependence that is not to be conceived as a 'spiritual kind of thing' but as one in which the bodily is fully incorporated. It is the reciprocal dependence of a partner-relationship or a parent-child one. This love is one that asks for an answer, an active participation. If it is not or no longer answered, the grief is deep, but the relationship not simply annulled. One remains related, albeit in a very different way.

The thrust, however, of 'this dependence in love' in Hosea is not simply whether Israel participates in it or not but also whether the relationship with God as such is acknowledged as a 'loving' one or not. Hosea confronts Israel not only with their own unfaithful behaviour but also with their hopes and fears concerning how God will respond to this behaviour. Does their being dependent on God mean that God will destroy them, or that God cannot give them up and will renew the loving relationship with them? At times, the Hosea text seems to oscillate between these views of God. But in the end, the announcement of the restoration of the relationship is strongest, as is depicted expressively in God's 'change of heart' in Hos. 11:8. Precisely against the penetrating depictions of the possible punishments, the loving character of the relationship stands out. Nevertheless, the unrest concerning how God will respond, and thus about who God is, is intensely present in Hosea. By

emphasising the centrality of this struggle to understand or 'acknowledge' God, I do not mean to waive the bodily character again. Rather the moment of understanding, or acknowledging God as the loving, the moment of faith, contains a primordial bodily moment.

This may be illuminated by referring to Richard Kearney's notion of 'discernment.' Discernment is one of the components of Kearney's 'atheist wager.' With this phrase, he indicates the invitation to revisit in the current situation – i.e. 'in the wake of our letting go of God' (5) – what might be termed a 'primary scene of religion,' in order to get beyond the opposites of theism and atheism. This is the primary scene of 'the encounter with a radical Stranger who we choose, or don't choose, to call God,' a choice between faith or nonfaith (7).³⁸ This moment of choice is further explained in terms of discernment. Discernment is present in an exemplary way in the lives of the prophets, saints, and mystics, but it is also common in the sense that a discernment is always to be made where faith is concerned. Kearney emphasises the carnal character of this discernment. The 'choice' is made in a moment and, as such, is pre-reflective, before it becomes 'a matter of reflective cognitive evaluation' (46). But in spite of its pre-reflectiveness it is choice or interpretation; it is actively responding 'in the moment' to the visiting Stranger, to say 'yes' or 'no.'³⁹ Discernment is difficult, but never completely impossible. It is possible to discern between 'the other who kills, and the other who brings life' (45).⁴⁰ Moreover, it is a risky affair:⁴¹ many invoke the voice of God to

³⁸ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York 2010). Kearney does not mean that the 'event of the Stranger' is the only 'primary scene of religion' (7). Others are creation, salvation, miracle, sovereignty, and judgement. But it is at the core of the atheist wager, which Kearney regards as the viable option in a current analysis of religion. He indicates five main components of the atheist wager: imagination, humour, commitment, discernment and hospitality. They should not be regarded as 'sequential moments' but rather as 'equiprimordial aspects of a single hermeneutic arc' (40).

³⁹ By emphasising the choosing, interpretative character of the primary moment of meeting the divine Stranger, Kearney opposes the view of Jean-Luc Marion who understands the moment of 'saturation' as a being overwhelmed completely. Discernment comes only afterwards, according to Marion. Cf. Kearney, *Anatheism*, note 6, 197–199.

⁴⁰ Kearney opposes this view to that of Derrida who says, in Kearney's words, 'we have no way of knowing the difference between one kind of other and another' (Kearney, *Anatheism*, 45 and note 5, 196–197).

⁴¹ The risky character of faith that lies in its being first of all an act of 'pre- or hyper-linguistic response' is also central to the thinking of Ricoeur by whom Kearney is profoundly influenced (e.g., Paul Ricoeur, 'Philosophy and Religious Language,' in: *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, transl. by David A. Pellauer, ed. by Mark Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1995), 35–47, 46–47; cf. Kearney, *Anatheism*, 44–45).

commit atrocities. Kearney emphasises this chance of being mistaken, but argues that the risk is not ‘groundless’: ‘Love – as compassion and justice – is the watermark.’ (47) These are the difficulties and the risk of the ‘drama of discernment.’

This drama is experienced by the prophet Hosea who must decide on the voice he hears. And it is the situation of the reader of the book Hosea, who becomes confronted with the God to whom Israel has to respond, the God on whom they depend and who is first experienced as the one who may punish them or restore their relationship. The book of Hosea also shows that the difficulty and risk of this discernment is never something that can be left behind after having said ‘yes’ or having converted to the faith. Rather, the ‘yes’ is ‘in the moment.’ This difficulty or tension is part of religion, but it is not ‘groundless.’ It comes down to not only the question whether I relate to God or not but also that of whether I want to be dependent on a *loving* God. The momentary character of the answer to this question relates to its embodiedness: it is a response, by the body, ‘the ear and eye’ (46), by ‘emotion and affect, before any theoretical reflection’ (40). As such it is already interpretation. It may be rethought and reinterpreted in a more cognitive sense endlessly, as we do in reinterpreting the discernment present in Hosea.

Is this discernment an entirely personal thing, something between God and the individual believer? Kearney points out that ‘great saints and mystics ... scrupulously insisted upon disciplined criteria of discernment, chief among them being the distinction between the divine visitor who brings compassion and counterfeits who bring confusion’ (47). This idea of ‘disciplined criteria’ presupposes some kind of discerning community who reflects on them, supports them and passes them on. Moreover, responding to the divine Other is very much a question of being and acting in the world, of ethics. It is about ‘giving a cup of cold water to a thirsting stranger’ (153). Therefore, Kearney concludes his book with a reference to the lives of three exemplary figures who respond to the stranger in a life of ‘sacramental action’: Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, and Gandhi. The disciplined approach of discernment and the ethical practices of discernment in everyday life underscore the bodily character of the discernment. Thus, the concept of the discernment character of faith as going back to a level of primordial, pre-reflective, carnal response allows for thinking spirit and body together. It is more specific than the concept of ‘embodied religion’ and as such gives a more specific contribution to the understanding of religion. Moreover, it sheds light on the issue indicated in the introduction of a religious ‘difficulty with the body.’

5. DIFFICULTY WITH THE BODY OR WITH DISCERNMENT?

The search for a more embodied view of religion is presented as a way to gain a better understanding of religion. But there is also a critical side to it insofar as it implies that from time immemorial there has been a reluctance to recognize the bodily character of religion. This should be overcome by turning to the body explicitly and consciously. If we confine ourselves to the current, post-secular Western context, is it the body that stands between ourselves and religion, that hinders our understanding of religion? Or is it rather a specifically religious idea of embodiment, with its moment of fundamental dependence and responsive discernment? In my view, our current difficulty with the bodily in relation to religion is not Eckhardt's or Tauler's, i.e., the untrustworthiness of the senses, which cannot discriminate between a vision of the devil or God. What they indicated sounds very much like the difficulty of discernment. They emphasised that this difficulty cannot be solved by turning to the body or the senses. In comparison, the current issue is first of all that of arriving at, becoming sensitive to this moment of discernment. A focus on the difficulty of making sense of the embodied character of religion may fail to recognise that our search for a better understanding of religion presupposes a being at a loss at a more primary level of, for example, the primary religious scene of discernment. In my view, the idea that we are in a fundamental sense dependent on God is one of the most difficult to relate to in our times of autonomous choice and control – not just over 'wine, grain, and oil' but also over being a family or not, our health, or international politics. But it is important to reappropriate what this dependence may mean and not reject it beforehand because of an assumed one-sided emphasis on passivity, resignation, or humility. Kearney's notion of discernment unravels the active moment in this dependence: the moment of saying 'yes' or 'no.' In my view, this is also what is at stake in Hosea's struggle for the acknowledgment of God as the giver of daily sustenance.

Understanding oneself in the face of a text, like that of Mechtild von Magdeburg or that Hosea, thus does not mean that important material dimensions of religious life are ignored, as Vásquez and other hard core materialist theorists of religion argue. It does point out the interpretative moment inherent in the response of faith, which may not come to light if one focuses on the apparent obviousness of the body, as if it were a phenomenon without interpretation. Interpretation is a very bodily thing. Because texts intend a

world, as Paul Ricoeur puts it, they ‘call forth on our part a way of dwelling there.... Understanding oneself in front of the text is not something that just happens in one’s head or in language.... [T]o understand the world and to change it are fundamentally the same thing.’⁴² This idea of interpretation as a both active and bodily responding, dependent upon an ‘initiative that always precedes me,’ supports, I hope, Bornemark’s search for ‘a more nuanced understanding of the relation between transcendence and embodiment.’

⁴² Paul Ricoeur, ‘Naming God’, in: *Figuring the Sacred*, 217–235, 234.