

omit whatever features look unnatural to him in his own language—and he will almost certainly lose important information clearly contained in the original. Or he can, in the absence of a systematic knowledge of Hebrew discourse, make tentative conclusions about the function of such features and select the equivalent features of his own language to translate them. While we must firmly reject options one and two in translation that is intended to be meaningful, option three is the best we can do for the time being! It is my deep concern that soon translators will have a fourth option at hand: a fuller knowledge of Hebrew discourse structures which will enable them to come to well-founded conclusions about the apparently odd structures of the Hebrew original, and about how to represent these in their own languages.

DAVID J. CLARK

## SEX-RELATED IMAGERY IN THE PROPHETS

Dr. David Clark is a UBS Translation Consultant at present living in India.

The Old Testament contains quite a lot of references to human bodily functions and sexual aspects of life. Attitudes towards sex vary greatly from one language and culture to another, and different peoples have very different views about what can and cannot be said in public. For this reason, the translation of passages which refer to sexual matters can often be a problem.

In this article we shall look at some of the passages in the Old Testament which speak of sex and human relationships in a figurative way. We shall limit the study to the books of the prophets, which for present purposes we will define rather loosely as the books from Isaiah to Malachi. My investigations have been based on the text of the RSV, which as a fairly literal version is likely to preserve the relevant figures of speech.

### **Where sex-related figures are found**

Not all the books examined contain sex-related figures of speech. In some books they are much more frequent than in others. There are some places where it is not certain whether the writer intended a reference to sex or not, and others where it is not certain whether a reference is literal or figurative. There are also a number of places where a longer passage or even a whole chapter is built around some sex-related imagery, and it is hard to say whether one figure is present, or more than one. These factors make it difficult to give exact statistics, but the occurrences of sex-related figures are approximately as follows:

Isaiah	22	Jonah	—
Jeremiah	32	Micah	3
Lamentations	6	Nahum	2
Ezekiel	3	Habakkuk	—
Daniel	—	Zephaniah	—
Hosea	12	Haggai	—
Joel	1	Zechariah	—
Amos	—	Malachi	1
Obadiah	—		—
		<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>
			—

These figures need some comment. The higher numbers are found, as we would expect, in the longer books. The distribution is fairly even throughout Isaiah and Jeremiah, but is very uneven in the other long prophetic book, Ezekiel. There the whole of chapters 16 and 23 are extended sex-related metaphors, but there is only one other such reference in the whole book. In the book of Hosea, almost the whole of chapters 2 and 3 are built around an extended picture, but there are also several other references in the rest of the book.

### The content of the figures of speech

What areas of experience do the figures of speech draw on? Distinctions are sometimes hard to make, and different Biblical scholars may give different divisions. For our purposes, we can make four major divisions:

Childbirth	22 examples
Marriage/adultery	29 examples
Prostitution	12 examples
Other images	29 examples

There are five less important images and these account for 29 examples, as follows:

Nakedness/exposure	15 examples
Widowhood	4 examples
Menstruation	3 examples
Circumcision	2 examples
Comparison with animals	5 examples

These figures do not match the ones given earlier because in this case an attempt has been made to count the individual images in Ezekiel 16 and 23 and in Hosea 2 and 3. The distinction between adultery and prostitution is rather a fine one at times, and we could join these two categories into one without any serious distortion. If we do this, it means that 63 examples out of 92 (about 70%) focus on two images (a) childbirth and (b) marriage/adultery/prostitution.

### The meanings of the figures

We shall now consider what meanings these figures of speech are used to express. In this section I have consulted the text of GNB as well as RSV, because sometimes GNB does much more than RSV to show what it considers the meaning of a figure to be. We shall deal with the minor images first.

- (a) Of the 15 places where nakedness or exposure is used, 12 (Is 3.17, 26; 47.1-3; Jer 13.26; Lam 1.8; 4.21; Ezek 16.37, 39; 23.29; Hos 2.3, 10; Nah 3.5) take it as a symbol of public shame or disgrace, and one as a picture of fear and grief (Is 32.11 GNB). The other two (Jer 13.22, Mic 4.11) speak of the removal of clothing as a prelude to rape.
- (b) Widowhood is three times (Is 47.8-9, 54.4; Joel 1.8) a picture of deprivation and loss, and once (Lam 1.1) of loneliness.
- (c) Menstruation, because it brought ritual defilement, is used as a picture of uncleanness (Is 64.6; Lam 1.9; Ezek 36.17).
- (d) Circumcision is a picture of dedication to God (Jer 4.4; 9.26).
- (e) The comparisons with animals include camels, donkeys, heifers and stallions (Jer 2.23-24; 5.8; 13.27; 50.11; Ezek 23.20). They are perhaps rather unkind to the animals concerned and use them as pictures of wantonness and uncontrolled lust.

Now we move to the major images, childbirth, prostitution, and marriage and adultery.

**Childbirth.** Of 22 examples, eight (Is 13.8; 21.3; Jer 6.24; 30.6; 48.41; 49.22, 24; 50.43) use birth pangs as a symbol of feebleness and fear, and six (Is 26.17; 42.14; Jer 4.31; 13.21; 22.23; Mic 4.9-10) as a symbol of pain or agony. Four (Is 7.14; 9.6; 66.7-13; Mic 5.3) speak of a child being born as a sign of some future event, and the remaining four (Is 23.4; 26.18; 33.11; Hos 13.13) speak of failure to bring forth anything significant. The major usage is therefore of the actual contractions a woman experiences in labour as a picture of fear or pain.

**Prostitution** is normally used as a picture of the Lord's people being unfaithful to him (Is 1.21; Jer 2.20; 3.1-3; Ezek 16; 23; Hos 1.8; 4.10-15; 5.3-4; 6.10; 9.1). In two cases it is applied to other nations, once (Is 23.15-18) to Tyre, where it seems to refer to excessive involvement with trade and commerce, and once to Nineveh (Nah 3.4) where it refers to idolatrous religion.

**Marriage and adultery.** Marriage is six times (Is 54.5-8; 62.4-5; Jer 2.2, 32; 31.32; Hos 2.16-20) used as a picture of completeness, devotion and joy, primarily in the relationship between the Lord and his people. By contrast, adultery, the breaking of that relationship, is a picture of idolatry 17 times (Is 57.3-8; Jer 2.25; 3.6-14, 20; 4.30; 5.7, 11; 13.27; 23.10, 14; 31.22; Ezek 16.32; Hos 2; 3; 5.7; 14.4; Mal 2.11). Once (Hos 7.4) it is a picture of political disloyalty, and five times (Jer 22.22; 30.14; Lam 1.2, 19; Hos 8.9) military allies are referred to as lovers, with the implication that reliance on them involves a breach of the relationship with the Lord.

### Comments

From these figures it is clear that there are two main areas as sources of sex-related imagery. The major one is the marriage relationship itself which is a

picture of the relationship between the Lord and his people—close, exclusive and lifelong. Breaches of this covenant relationship are compared to adultery, and if repeated, to prostitution. This is reinforced by the fact that idolatrous worship often involved actual prostitution as part of fertility rites.

We may note that despite the occurrence of polygamy in Israel, it is a monogamous relationship that seems to be presupposed by the imagery in the OT. There are two possible exceptions to this. In Ezek 23.4 (especially in GNB) the prophet speaks of the Lord as being married to the two sisters, Oholah and Oholibah, symbols for the two parts of the nation. The emphasis in the chapter is on these women's unfaithfulness rather than on the "polygamous" nature of the union.

In Is 62.5 RSV speaks of Zion's sons marrying her. This is a rather absurd image. The problem can be resolved in either of two ways. The Hebrew text as it stands may be translated as "your sons will take possession of you" (Hebrew Old Testament Text Project). If this is done, there is no sexual reference to be seen. Alternatively a small change in the Hebrew text will give the meaning "your builder will marry you." This seems to fit the context better.

The use of marriage as a picture of God's relationship with his people is also carried over into the NT in such passages as Eph 5.21-33, Rev 19.7-9; 21.2, compare Mk 2.19-20, Mt 22.1-10. Adultery is not developed in the NT as a picture of unfaithfulness to God (compare Jas 4.4 and perhaps 1 Cor 10.22), but prostitution is used as a picture of idolatrous worship in Rev 17.

The minor focus is childbirth, and its relative frequency suggests that it was something that could be more easily observed in OT times than in industrial societies today. This also is carried over into the NT though less prominently (Mt 24.8; Mk 13.8; Rev 12.2, compare Gal 4.19).

Of the lesser OT images, only two are easily traced in the NT. Stephen's comment in Acts 7.51 ("uncircumcised in heart and ears") is presumably a reference to the thought of Jer 4.4; 9.26. Rev 17.16 speaks of nakedness as part of the punishment of the great prostitute, and nakedness and shame are also linked in Rev 3.18; 16.15 in a symbolic manner.

### **Social Attitudes**

In any language and culture, some things can be talked about openly, and some cannot. If we were selecting what could be talked about in modern English, some of the topics used as a base for figures in the prophetic books would come up, and some would not. The figure of marriage/adultery/prostitution is quite acceptable, and indeed is a basis for some native figures in English ("he's married to his car", "she's all tarted up"). Perhaps the Biblical emphasis on the relationship and its breakdown could teach us something.

The figure of childbirth is not generally used in current English, probably because these days it is something that goes on mainly behind hospital doors, and is not readily accessible to the public.

Nakedness could be associated with social embarrassment, but probably not with shame in the Biblical way.

Widows' pensions have removed the poverty if not the loneliness from widowhood, and this is not very likely to be used figuratively now.

The comparison of people with animals is also unlikely, probably because there are very few animals around in city life.

Menstruation is a personal matter and today has no social restrictions which make its occurrence obvious. In modern English it sounds simply uncouth in figurative usage, and that language has been rightly toned down in GNB (except in Gk Est C.27, where it sticks out very obviously).

The consideration of the probability of encountering Biblical metaphors in natural modern English leads on to the question of translation problems in other languages.

### **Translation of sex-related imagery**

How do we apply our general translation principles in this area? First of all, we need to look at the situation of the culture of the people we are translating for. We can assume that marriage, adultery and childbirth are universal to all cultures, and prostitution is probably as near universal as makes no difference. These things can generally be talked about; but the nature of marriage, the definition of adultery, and attitudes towards prostitution and childbirth may or may not make them suitable for the rendering of Biblical metaphors. We may hope that in most languages figures of speech in these major areas will be usable, but obviously care is needed to ensure that they really do carry the right meaning, for instance in areas where polygamy is common, where incest is regarded as worse than adultery, and so on.

If all these major figures had to be reduced to plain language, a lot of emotive impact would be lost. With the less frequent Biblical figures obviously less is at stake. Nakedness may not be associated with shame, widows may have a secure position in the community, menstruation may not cause any social restrictions, and circumcision may be unknown, as may the lust, real or imagined, of camels, donkeys, horses and cattle. In some of these cases it may be possible to use other figures, but even if plain language is called for, no great losses are involved.

### **Conclusion**

Sex-related imagery clearly has a strong emotional effect upon readers, because sexual instincts are part of every human being. It is therefore desirable that where such imagery is found in the Bible, it should be retained in translation as much as possible. If it is eliminated or severely reduced, there will be a marked loss of impact.

However, because this area of human experience is such an important and personal one, it is all too easy to give offence to readers by the inappropriate use of sex-related imagery. Translators therefore need not only to study the ways in which the scriptures use such imagery, but also the ways in which the language in question does so. In this area, a special sensitivity is called for if a translation is to maintain both the meaning and the impact of the original text, and at the same time respect the readers' views of what is acceptable language for use in public.