

## NOTES

### The perils of pictures

If translators use editions of the Bible which contain illustrations, it is very easy for their understanding to be unconsciously influenced by the pictures rather than the text. Since illustrations do not always represent the text accurately, this may result in mistranslation. Even the line drawings in the GNB, though vivid and lively, are not always free from problems.

A good example is found in the picture which accompanies Zechariah 5.7, with the caption, "There in the basket sat a woman!" This picture can be misleading in four different ways, concerning:

- (1) the material of which the container was made
- (2) the shape of container
- (3) the position in which the woman sat
- (4) the lifting of the lid.

We shall consider each in turn.



*There in the basket sat a woman! (5.7)*

#### (1) *The material of which the container was made*

The Hebrew word used is 'ēphāh, transliterated as "ephah" in RSV. The ephah was a measure of volume for dry materials like grain or flour. By an extension of meaning, it came to stand also for a vessel holding that amount. The exact amount is no longer known for certain, but it is usually estimated at between 23 litres (5 gallons) and 36 litres (8 gallons). We may note in passing that a vessel this size would not be large enough to contain an adult human being. Probably therefore the word "ephah" is used in this context in the generalized sense of "a large container".

The GNB illustration shows the container as made of wicker or cane, and this is an accurate representation of its rendering "basket". However, as already stated, the ephah was a measure for dry substances, and so it is unlikely that a typical ephah vessel would be made of basket work, because grain or flour could escape through the gaps between the strands. It seems much more likely that such a vessel would be made of earthenware or wood, and that the translation "barrel" would be more appropriate, as in Moffat and NEB.

(2) *The shape of the container*

The GNB illustration shows the container as oblong like a coffin. However, if "ephah" is translated "barrel" as suggested above, this gives the implication that it was round in shape. In fact, the Hebrew word *kikkar* used to describe its "lid" (GNB) or "cover" (RSV), usually does refer to something round (compare RV footnote "round piece"), and this supports the view that the container should be drawn as round rather than oblong. Consequently, the lid would probably have lifted right off like a saucepan lid, rather than being hinged as in the GNB illustration.

(3) *The position in which the woman sat*

The drawing shows the woman sitting up with legs stretched out in front of her. If the container was indeed a barrel, and round in shape, she could not possibly have sat in this position. Instead she would have been forced to sit either cross-legged, or else with her knees drawn up in front of her. The woman's position may affect the choice of vocabulary in the translation, but it is less important in an illustration. If she was sitting in a barrel, only her head would be seen anyway!

(4) *The lifting of the lid*

The GNB picture shows the woman with her right arm raised, strongly suggesting that she herself has lifted the lid of the container. In 5.7 the Hebrew uses a passive form to say that the lid "was lifted" (RSV) or "was raised" (GNB) without saying who did it. In 5.8 the lid was firmly replaced by the angel who spoke with the prophet, and this prevented the woman from escaping. The lid was made of lead (5.7), which was certainly not the normal practice. It seems clear that the lid was very heavy in order that the woman would not be able to lift it. The illustration is therefore misleading in suggesting that she did. Since the angel closed the lid, it is reasonable to suppose that it was he who had opened it. The illustration should therefore either show someone else's hand raising the lid, or else simply show it as open without any indication of who opened it.

Enough has been said to show that one simple picture may contain several problems if taken at face value. Translators should be alert to the possibility that pictures may not be entirely accurate, and should always check the pictures against what the Bible text actually says.

DAVID J. CLARK