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THE FIGURATIVE USE OF TERMS FOR "ADULTERY" AND "PROSTITUTION" IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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In this article I want to examine the use of two verbs in the Hebrew Old Testament: they are ***na'af*** (often translated "commit adultery" in the RSV) and ***zanah*** (often translated "play the harlot" in RSV); and I want to focus on their use especially in figurative contexts. I will first discuss and compare the meaning of both terms. Then I will follow this with a brief analysis of all occurrences of these terms with suggestions for translation.

Most often as a figure these terms picture the LORD's people being unfaithful to him. Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether the terms are being used literally or figuratively, especially in contexts where the idea of ritual prostitution is in view. Some scholars believe the literal and figurative uses merge in such contexts.

My interest has been drawn to these terms because they are translated in a wide variety of ways by the Good News Bible (GNB). For example, these are some of the ways in which GNB renders *zanah* and its derivatives:

"common whore" (Gen 34.31)
"lead them to be unfaithful to me and to worship [their pagan gods]" (Exo 34.16)
"you will turn to other gods" (Lev 19.29)
"prostitute" (Lev 21.7)
"unfaithfulness" (Num 14.33)
"you will not turn away from me" (Num 15.39),
"abandoned God and went [there] to worship [the idol]" (Jdg 8.27)
"idolatry" (2 Kgs 9.22)
"deserted him to worship [the gods of the nations]" (1 Chr 5.25)
"led ... to sin against the LORD" (2 Chr 21.11)
"immorality" (Ezek 23.14)
"worshiping other gods" (Ezek 43.7)
"have left me and become unfaithful" (Hos 1.2)
"to follow other gods" (Hos 4.10)

I recognize that the rendering of *zanah* has to be adjusted to fit the context, but I question the number of times its sexual imagery has been omitted by GNB. Why is it maintained in Isaiah 1.21, for instance, where GNB has "The city ... is becoming like a whore," but it is dropped in the similar context of Psalm 106.39, where it is rendered "They ... were unfaithful to God"? Even RSV, which almost always renders *zanah* with some form of "harlot," can switch from figurative to nonfigurative for no apparent reason; for example, "harlotry" is used in Ezekiel 43.7, but then in 43.9 it switches to "idolatry."

The meaning of the Hebrew terms

The verb ***na'af*** ("commit adultery") and the two nouns derived from it occur 34 times in the Old Testament. In its literal sense it refers to unlawful sexual activity between a man and a woman who is either married (Lev 20.10) or betrothed (understood from Deut 22.23-27); so it is often rendered "adultery" in English versions. The woman's status defines whether it is adultery. It is viewed as a crime against a married man. The penalty for the crime was death for both parties (Lev 20.10; Deut 22.22-24). An exception was made if the betrothed woman was a slave; then neither party was executed (Lev 19.20). Another exception was made for the rape of a betrothed woman in the open countryside; then only the man was killed (Deut 22.25-27). If a woman was accused falsely by her husband of adultery, she had to prove her innocence by drinking the "water of bitterness" (Num 5.11-31). Overall, married men in ancient Israel had greater sexual freedom than married women, since they could have sex with unpledged virgins (Deut 22.28-29) and prostitutes (Judges 16.1) with a penalty less than death applied.

In about one-third of its occurrences *na'af* is used figuratively for unfaithfulness to God, especially with regard to idolatry (see, for example, Isa 57.3; Jer 23.10). In the Old Testament God's people are pictured as being married to him because of the covenant relationship (Ezek 16.8). He is the husband and they are the wife, so when they break that relationship it is appropriately labeled as adultery. Some of the figurative uses of *na'af* may also be literal, since ritual prostitution was a part of Israel's idolatrous practices. One example is Hosea 4.13-14.

The verb ***zanah*** ("play the harlot") and the three nouns derived from it occur 135 times in the Old Testament. In its literal sense it refers to any unlawful sex between a man and a woman (except maybe for Judges 19.2, where RSV has "became angry with"), so it is broader in meaning than *na'af*. It can include sex before marriage (Deut 22.21), adultery (Hos 3.3), and prostitution (Josh 2.1). As a participle in nonfigurative contexts, it always refers to female prostitutes who engage in sex for profit (Pro 6.26). If the unlawful sex before marriage or in prostitution violated the relationship with a male (either a husband or a father), the penalty for the woman was death as with *na'af* (Gen 38.24; Lev 21.9; Deut 22.21). Prostitution was allowed, but heavily censored. Priests were not allowed to marry prostitutes (Lev 21.7, 14), nor were they to encourage their daughters to become prostitutes (Lev 19.29). The book of Proverbs warns against association with prostitutes (23.27; 29.3).

About two-thirds of the occurrences of *zanah* in its various forms are figurative in the sense of unfaithfulness to God. Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles Briggs in their Hebrew lexicon list three ways in which this covenant unfaithfulness can be manifested when *zanah* is used:

1) improper intercourse with other gods (Lev 17.7; Deut 31.16; Jdg 2.17),
2) improper intercourse with foreign nations (Ezek 16.26, 28), and
3) moral failure in general (Psa 73.27; Isa 1.21; 1907:275-276).

In a passage like Ezekiel 23, where *zanah* is used extensively as a metaphor, the line between unfaithfulness in a religious sense and political alliances is blurred, since Israel's foreign alliances brought about the worship of other gods. As with *na'af*, the term *zanah* is an appropriate metaphor to describe unfaithfulness within the picture of God's marriage to his people, since it can refer to any kind of unlawful sex, including adultery. So it can be found in parallelism with *na'af* (Jer 3.8; 5.7; 13.27; Hos 2.2; 4.13-14).

Zanah is the preferred image in the Old Testament for breaking the covenant (marriage) with God, even though *na'af* would be more precise. Daniel Block lists five reasons for this preference (*The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*, pages 465–466):

1) *Zanah* suggests violating the covenant habitually with the idea of prostitution.
2) It also ties in well with the idea of personal gain, which the Israelites sought through idolatry and political alliances (Hos 2.5).
3) It allows for multiple partners with the gods and the nations.
4) *Zanah* is used almost exclusively with feminine subjects, whereas *na'af* can occur with either feminine or masculine subjects. So *zanah* would be the natural choice with Israel as the promiscuous wife.
5) *Zanah* is a more forceful rhetorical tool to denounce the unfaithfulness of Israel.

Another reason for the choice of *zanah* over *na'af* may be the practice of ritual prostitution as part of Israel's idolatry. Jackie Naudé explains ritual prostitution as follows:

> "Many considered that the processes of nature were controlled by the relations between gods and goddesses. By engaging in sexual intercourse with devotees of the shrine they believed they would encourage the gods and goddesses to do likewise, with the result that a person's desire for increase in herds and fields, as well as in his own family, could be realized" (Article on *qadesh*, in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, volume 3, page 886).

Ritual prostitution was a form of sympathetic magic to induce a god like Baal and a goddess like Asherah to engage in sex, so that fertility on earth would result. However, a number of scholars today are disputing the evidence for ritual prostitution in Israel and its neighbors, since there is so little of it. Often they do allow for unlawful sex during Israelite religious festivals, but take the view that it did not have religious significance. Friedrich Hauck and Siegfried Schulz believe both sacred and secular prostitution were present in the idolatrous practices of Israel (Article on "*pornē*" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, volume 6, pages 585–586).

Translating the terms

Even though GNB often translates *na'af* and *zanah* in a nonfigurative way, translators should try to keep the strong negative sexual imagery. GNB often renders these terms as "unfaithful" (see, for example, Lev 17.7; Num 14.33; 2 Chr 21.13), but this lacks the emotive force of these metaphors. Nelly Stienstra notes that all metaphors are "culture dependent," but she strongly advocates that widely used metaphors like *na'af* and *zanah* be maintained. For her these metaphors deal with experiences that are "universal" or "culture-exceeding." Every culture has experience with promiscuous relationships, so these images should convey an approximation of the correct meaning even though they may be somewhat strange. She states:

> "The solution to the problem of the cultural gap, and consequently the differences in metaphorical concepts between biblical days and our times seems to lie in a sound knowledge of biblical culture rather than in replacing the metaphors, the latter being just no solution at all" (*YHWH is the Husband of His People: Analysis of a Biblical Metaphor with Special Reference to Translation*, page 190).

I find this last statement a bit too strong, but she has a point. Instead of dropping the sexual imagery of *na'af* and *zanah* for nonfigurative language, translators should try to maintain it by providing a footnote if the cultural gap is too great. Occasionally the GNB Study Bible does this; for example, it provides the following note on "adultery" in Ezekiel 16.17: "Because Jerusalem belonged to God as a wife to her husband (23.4)."

Some cultures do not have professional prostitutes who are paid, so the image of prostitution is hard to maintain. Having worked with the Bassa people of Liberia, I know this to be true for them. It is only recently, with the civil war there, that paid prostitutes have become part of society. However, Bassa does have a term for promiscuous women (*bgàdàùn-màà*) that fits the image of prostitution well. In fact it may be a better rendering for *zanah* than "prostitution" in English, since it covers any type of unlawful sex by women of loose morals.

Not only should translators maintain the imagery of *na'af* and *zanah* because of its emotive impact, but also because it may speak of reality. Real prostitution, whether sacred, secular, or both, is evident behind the imagery in a passage like Hosea 4.13-14. In such a context a footnote would help to explain that real sexual promiscuity is in view also. The GNB Study Bible provides such a note on Isaiah 57.3 for "adulterers and prostitutes" by saying, "The terms are figures of speech to indicate the people's departure from God, yet real sexual immorality underlies their use." In the introduction to Ezekiel 16 the GNB Study Bible notes that the "worship of pagan gods is inseparable from sexual immorality of the kind practiced at pagan shrines, known as ritual PROSTITUTION. The sexual language is thus to be taken both literally and as a sign of Jerusalem's deeper disloyalty to God." The word "PROSTITUTION" is capitalized to indicate that it occurs in the word list at the end of the Study Bible.

Some feminist theologians object to the negative sexual imagery of *na'af* and *zanah* since they feel it does violence to women by putting them in a bad light. Richtsje Abma disagrees with this single-minded assessment, since metaphors should be viewed as open-ended (*Bonds of Love: Methodic Studies of Prophetic Texts with Marriage Imagery*, pages 28–29). Block provides such an alternative interpretation by viewing these images as an attempt by God to depict Israel's misbehavior in the most extreme and radical terms possible to show that his judgment is justified. The metaphors are not used in order to be anti-feminist, but to indicate that Israel's unfaithfulness was serious (pages 467–470).

In his article "Sex-Related Imagery in the Prophets" (*The Bible Translator*, October 1982, pages 409–413) David Clark adds an important caution when translating *na'af* and *zanah* as figures. He recommends that the imagery should be kept for the emotive impact, but it should not give offense when read in public. For example, GNB does well to use the strong term "whore" for *zanah* in Ezekiel 16.35, but using "bitch" in this context would be inappropriate for many English readers.

Brief analysis of the terms in their figurative contexts

In this part of the paper I will list every use of *na'af* and *zanah* where they occur as figures; and I will give translation suggestions. The list will also include those passages where there is ambiguity between sacred and secular prostitution for *zanah*.

The following texts with *na'af* are excluded since they refer clearly to adultery: Exo 20.14; Lev 20.10; Deut 5.18; Job 24.15; Psa 50.18; Pro 6.32; 30.20; Jer 7.9; 29.23; Hos 3.1; 4.2; Mal 3.5.

The following texts with *zanah* are excluded since they refer only to unlawful sex apart from ritual prostitution: Gen 38.15, 24; Deut 22.21; Josh 2.1; 6.17, 22, 25; Judges 11.1; 16.1; 19.2; 1 Kgs 3.16; 22.38; Pro 6.26; 7.10; 23.27; 29.3; Isa 23.15-16; Hos 3.3; Joel 3.3; Amos 7.17.

Na'af and *zanah* are mostly used as figurative references to **idolatry**, one particular form of unfaithfulness to God. They occur in this sense in the following passages: Exo 34.16b; Lev 17.7; 20.5-6; 29.29b; Deut 31.16; Judges 2.17; 8.27,33; 2 Kgs 9.22; 1 Chr 5.25; 2 Chr 21.11; Psa 106.39; Isa 57.3; Jer 2.20; 3.1-2, 6, 8-9; 5.7; 13.27; 23.14 (could be literal adultery in this verse); Ezek 6.9; 16.15-17, 20-22, 35-36, 41; 20.30; 23.29-30, 35, 37, 45b; 43.7, 9; Hos 1.2b; 2.2, 4-5; 4.10, 12-15; 5.3-4; 9.1; Micah 1.7a. In most of these passages there is also the idea of ritual prostitution in the background, so the sexual element needs to be retained. In fact, ritual prostitution is highlighted as an idolatrous practice in Jer 2.20; 3.1-2, 6; Hos 4.10, 13-14; 9.1; Micah 1.7a.

Judges 8.33 can be taken as an example on how to deal with the sexual language in these passages. RSV has "As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and **played the harlot** after the Baals, and made Baal-berith their god," and GNB "After Gideon's death the people of Israel **were again unfaithful to God and worshiped** the Baals. They made Baal-of-the-Covenant their god." (Emphasis marks the translation

of *na'af* and *zanah*.) RSV here uses old-fashioned language in English for its translation of *zanah*, whereas GNB undercuts the sexual language and misses a possible reference to ritual prostitution. A better translation for this verse in English is: "After Gideon died the Israelites again rejected God and worshiped idols of Baal through sex. They made Baal-of-the-Covenant their god."

At times *zanah* is used to focus on **ritual prostitution with idolatry in the background**. The clearest examples of this are Exo 34.15-16a; Lev 19.29a; 21.7, 9, 14; Num 25.1; Deut 23.18; Hos 1.2a; 4.18; Micah 1.7b. In Exodus 34.15 RSV has "lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they play the harlot after their gods and one invites you, you eat of his sacrifice," while GNB has "Do not make any treaties with the people of the country, because when **they worship** their pagan gods and sacrifice to them, they will invite you to join them, and you will be tempted to eat the food they offer to their gods." Unfaithfulness to God cannot be in view here since this passage refers to the pagan neighbors of Israel. Stienstra argues that the idea of ritual prostitution is uppermost in this context of pagans alone, against Elaine Goodfriend who argues for secular prostitution (Article on "Prostitution," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, volume 5, pages 505–510). GNB drops the idea of ritual prostitution completely. Alternative renderings that maintain it without the old-fashioned language of RSV are "they worship their pagan gods through sexual immorality" and "they have sex to worship their fertility gods."

Na'af and *zanah* can also refer to **political alliances**, another form of unfaithfulness to God.

Passages with this figurative meaning are found only in Ezekiel (16.25-26, 28-36, 41; 23.3, 5, 7-8, 11, 14, 17-19, 27, 29-30, 35, 43-45). Note that some of these passages are also listed as figurative references for idolatry: this happens because political alliances would lead to idolatry, so the two are intertwined. Ezekiel 16 and 23 are allegories that picture God's people as a prostitute because of their religious and political unfaithfulness to the LORD. Graphic sexual language is used to shock the people of Israel. Since they give an extended picture of God's people as sexually promiscuous in their relation to the LORD, the one they are married to, it should be possible to keep this element in translation. For example, in Ezekiel 23.3 GNB has "When they were young, living in Egypt, they lost their virginity and **became prostitutes**." It would be helpful to provide a footnote to indicate that the prostitution here represents political alliances. The NIV Study Bible gives the following note on prostitution for Ezekiel 23: "Here [prostitution] represents political alliances with pagan powers—not idolatry as in ch. 16 ... The graphic language of the chapter underscores God's and Ezekiel's disgust with Israel for playing the worldly game of international politics rather than relying on the Lord for her security ..."

In a few passages *na'af* and *zanah* refer broadly to any unfaithfulness to God. They refer to **sin of any kind**, including idolatry. The texts in view are Num 14.33; 15.39; 2 Chr 21.13; Psa 73.27; Isa 1.21; Jer 9.2;

23.10; Hos 6.10. Consider Numbers 14.33; RSV has "And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and shall suffer for your **faithlessness**, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness," while for this same passage GNB has "Your children will wander in the wilderness for forty years, suffering for your **unfaithfulness**, until the last one of you dies." Both RSV and GNB drop the sexual imagery of *zanah* in this passage and translate directly. It can be maintained with a simile, however, as follows: "they will suffer because you have been unfaithful to me like a wife who runs after other men."

In Isaiah 23.17 and Nahum 3.4 *zanah* is used figuratively to refer to **deceitful trade**. It cannot refer to unfaithfulness to God, since these passages concern peoples other than God's own. The NIV Study Bible has the following note on Isaiah 23.17: "A 'prostitute' nation was one that sought to make the highest profits, regardless of the means. Self-gratification was the key." Unfortunately GNB drops the figurative language by translating "When the seventy years are over, the LORD will let Tyre go back to her old trade, and **she will hire herself out** to all the kingdoms of the world." CEV is able to retain it as a simile: "The city will be like a woman who sells her body to everyone ..."

In Hosea 7.4 *na'af* most likely is an image for **political treachery** (Francis Andersen and David Freedman, *Anchor Bible* commentary, page 455). GNB translates nonfiguratively: "They are all **treacherous and disloyal**. Their hatred smolders like the fire in an oven, which is not stirred by the baker until the dough is ready to bake." To keep the image translators could say, for example, "They all are treacherous and disloyal like men cheating on their wives ..."

In several passages *na'af* and *zanah* are within a simile to compare people to an adulteress or a prostitute. For example, Genesis 34.31 in RSV is rendered "But they said, 'Should he treat our sister as **a harlot**?' " GNB translates well here: "But they answered, 'We cannot let our sister be treated like **a common whore**.' " The expression "common whore" expresses better than "harlot" the negative feelings felt by Jacob's sons on how their sister was treated. The other passages that use *na'af* and *zanah* within a simile are Jer 3.3; Ezek 16.38; 23.45a.

Sometimes *na'af* and *zanah* are used in the same passage, often in parallelism. This occurs in Isa 57.3; Jer 3.8-9; 5.7; 13.27; Ezek 23.43; Hos 2.2, 4-5; 4.13-14. For example, the last two lines of Jeremiah 5.7 in RSV say, "**they committed adultery** and trooped to the houses of **harlots**." Some languages may find it difficult to switch back and forth between "adultery" and "prostitution." The Bassa language of Liberia prefers to maintain one image in such a context, the image of the "promiscuous woman," so it translates "You began to have loose sex. You lined up at the doors of promiscuous women."

Conclusion

In its comments on Exodus 34.15, the Exodus *Handbook* says, "Translators may use the figure of 'prostitution' if it will be natural in the receptor language. Otherwise it will be better to follow the idea of

'worshiping other gods' " (Osborn and Hatton, page 809). The Leviticus *Handbook* makes the same type of comment on "play the harlot" in Leviticus 17.7, where it states, "In many languages it will probably be better to drop the image and translate the meaning directly – something like 'be unfaithful' or 'deny your love' " (Péter-Contesse and Ellington, page 265). However, translators would be better advised to retain the strong negative sexual imagery of *na'af* and *zanah*, if at all possible. Using direct language should be a last resort. This sexual imagery is needed for its emotive impact and possible reference to real unlawful sex. Its widespread use in connection with the marriage metaphor for the relationship between God and his people also argues for its inclusion. If the imagery sounds a bit strange, often a footnote will help to bridge the cultural gap. The gap should not really be very great since promiscuous relationships are common to all cultures.

FOCUS ON TRANSLATORS

[The following notes have been supplied by Jan Sterk, a UBS Consultant based in Nairobi. What he describes here is an example of what can be done in a particular language following the information and advice referred to in the recent article by John Ellington, "A Calendar Table" (Practical Papers for The Bible Translator, *April 2000, pages 208–213). – Editor]*

Months and seasons

In the new Nuer Bible, recently launched in Mading, Southern Sudan, and in the Sudanese capital Khartoum, there is, towards the end, a reader's help of a type not generally found in other Bibles. It is a table that compares the biblical months and seasons with those of the traditional Nuer culture. I reproduce the table below, after translating most terms into English. Those terms that appear in English in the Nuer table are printed in italics. As for the Nuer words: my apologies to the speakers and writers of this language, because I have adapted the orthography, taking away the special characters. This does not affect the general impression of the model, it was only done to make printing easier.

To use a table like this in another language, it would have to be adapted, of course, to the local climatic conditions in the area where the language is spoken. It will give readers a clear idea, for example, as to what the terms "summer" (Proverbs 6.8, for instance; altogether 26 times) and "winter" (Song of Songs 2.11, for instance; altogether 18 times) stand for in the Bible. Or it will explain what "the first month" (Numbers 9.1, for instance) or "the fifth month" (Jeremiah 1.3, for instance) means – not the same as our January and May!

The slight overlap of solar months as compared to biblical months (the first month in the Bible corresponds to the solar months March/April) is not represented in the table.