

CONTENT WARNING:

Please note that the following paper contains extensive discussion of sexuality, violence, and sexualized violence, as well as instances of extremely offensive language.

Translating Disgust, Titillation, and Shame in Ezekiel 16
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“Translating is about affecting, but it is also about being affected.”¹

Affect and pragmatic impact have been important components of translation theory for a very long time and are engaged and discussed by Bible translators and biblical scholars in various settings but affect theory as such does not seem to be a common element in these discussions. That said, biblical translation has been prone, like most academic disciplines, to a lack of critical self-awareness with regard to emotion, and especially the understanding that emotion is a social practice inscribed into our social networks of meaning.² Here Kaisa Koskinen’s description of the advantage of “affect” as a theoretical category is helpful. “[A]ffect’ allows me to incorporate biological sensations, cognitively felt emotions and social constructions of acceptable emotional responses within one framework and under one bridge concept, without getting lost in the maze of different categorizations.”³

In the case of this paper this consideration of emotion, and of emotion as a social practice, will proceed in three movements. First, I’ll consider the question of the affective dimension of Ezekiel 16 itself. A lot of ink has been spilled on the subject of the misogyny and offensiveness of this chapter, and that research implicitly suggests a great deal about emotion in the passage. Here I’ll try to make the implicit explicit. Second, I’ll consider the question of translation as such, and the translation of some limited parts of this passage into English specifically. This will involve building off of the observations of the preceding section, and considering carefully how certain kinds of feelings can be expressed in vernacular English. Third, and finally, I’ll return to some self-reflection on the affective dimensions of the task of making the biblical text accessible to various kinds of modern readers. This will involve some ironic and interesting parallels with the affective dimensions of the text itself. Following the paper proper I will include in an appendix two English translations of Ezekiel 16, one rather staid and traditional, and the other much more vernacular and, arguably, affectively accurate (please note that the vernacular translation is extraordinarily offensive). The core of my argument is also three-fold: 1. the affective engine of Ezk 16 is found in the interaction between disgust, self-loathing, and titillation; 2.

¹ Kaisa Koskinen, *Translation and Affect: Essays on Sticky Affects and Translational Affective Labour*, vol. 152 of *Benjamins Translation Library*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub. Co., 2020), 71

² Koskinen, *Translation and Affect*, 2 and 5, drawing on Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014). Note that this also fits quite well with my own understanding of language, which has been influenced deeply by Systemic Functional Linguistics, and especially the theoretical notions of linguistic meta-function and language as a social semiotic. See: M. A. K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic : The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1978).

³ Koskinen, *Translation and Affect*, 1-2.

this nexus of affect can only be captured in English using vernacular language that is frankly vile; and 3. the status of Ezekiel as “Bible” involves certain limitations of translation and interpretation in religious contexts that end up ironically underwriting forms of hierarchical misogyny that the text itself seems to deconstruct (or at least problematize).

Disgust, Titillation, and Shame, the Emotional Nexus of Ezekiel 16

While affect as such has not been a focal point in the exegesis of Ezekiel 16, the emotional content of the chapter has obviously been a topic of substantial discussion, and translation decisions have carried affective weight, even if this has been implicit. Before we turn to translation as such, it will be helpful to consider these emotional dimensions of the text and the ways that contemporary interpreters have highlighted the emotional weight and impact of this passage. Three emotional themes recur frequently in modern scholarship on Ezekiel, and I will argue here that these three emotional themes form an interactive affective nexus that will inform a vernacular translation that is sensitive to emotional language and impact. These three themes are disgust, titillation, and shame.

Ezekiel 16 is profoundly disgusting throughout. “Disgust” is a slippery idea, mediated as it is “by ideas that are already implicated in the very impressions we make of others and the way those impressions surface as bodies.”⁴ That said, it is possible with a little care to identify instances of such impressions in this text. Of note is the fact that much (most? all?) of this disgust will be related to the misogynistic nature of the text. Disgust is deeply related to bodies, bodily functions, moral behaviour that relates to bodies and bodily functions, and most particularly, to female bodies and bodily functions.

We begin at the beginning since Ezekiel 16 basically opens with disgust. The metaphorical scene is set in v. 4 with the image of a baby girl lying on the ground covered in blood, her umbilical cord uncut (which must imply that she remains connected to her unmentioned, dead mother?). She is unbathed and impure, discarded to die. The scene causes immediate upset. We may feel heartbroken for the discarded child, but we must also imagine that an ancient reader would feel a sense of disgust at the scene of impurity, which seems to be the implication of the mention of bathing and salting. The implied presence of death also evokes ritual impurity. Similarly, abandonment at the hands of relatives evokes moral disgust. The scene seems designed to evoke shock and outrage by means of these disgusting images.

Immediately after this YHWH enters the scene and rescues the mewling child. But the image shifts in v. 7 to a portrayal of the sexual development of the girl, and v. 8 implies that YHWH’s care and attention are directly related to this sexual development. This provokes disgust in contemporary interpreters. L. Day notes, “[not] interested in the asexual child, no matter how needy she was for attention, he takes note of her again only when she is sexually mature and ready for intercourse.”⁵ Whether or not an ancient reader would find this aspect of the text revolting is difficult to determine.

⁴ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 83

⁵ Linda Day, “Rhetoric and Domestic Violence in Ezekiel 16,” *Biblical Interpretation* 8.3 (2000): 208.

The attention of the deity brings ritual purification (v. 9) and royal adornment (vv. 10-14). This underscores the revulsion of impurity in v. 4, but also sets the stage for images of disgust that will follow later in the passage. So, even the least upsetting image in the passage participates in the development of a sense of disgust. Additionally, this portion of the passage, as positive as it seems, also sets pattern in which the female body is subject to observation and evaluation by the male deity and male readers.⁶ As P. Day puts it, “[this] humiliating exposure of the female body to the unified male gaze replicates visually the verbal rhetoric of the passage by both titillating and disgusting the male viewers and isolating the metaphorical adulteress as the object of blame.”⁷ While Day is primarily referring to the exposure of the female body in the middle portions of the chapter, it is important to note that the body of Israel has been exposed from the outset, and even when it is covered/clothed, as I’ve suggested, the purpose of this description seems to be to make the later exposure more upsetting.

The densest concentration of imagery designed to provoke disgust occurs in vv. 15-35a. There is far too much in this stretch of the passage to explore thoroughly, and some specific terms will be considered in greater detail below, but a few key pieces are worth noting. First there is a very strong concentration of language that relates to illicit sexual and religious activity. Consider the image of Israel making a beautiful bed of pillows in order to have sex with her foreign lovers (v. 16), using idols in order to masturbate (v. 17), offering her physical wealth as ritual sacrifice to idols (v. 19), stripping in the public square (vv. 24-25), taking multiple sexual partners (vv. 27-29), and paying her sexual partners (v. 33). Whatever our contemporary views on sexual or religious morality, from the perspective of an ancient Israelite all of this is not only obviously illicit, but the concentration and intensity of the behaviour is clearly meant to shock and disgust. The male audience is obviously meant to hate and despise the woman depicted in this text.

While the sexual activity in the text is definitely intended to disgust, it also seems likely that it is designed to titillate and arouse. Day noted this intersection of titillation and disgust in passing in the quotation above.⁸ Sloan, in turn, argues that the text is not designed to titillate but to shock.⁹ This distinction is, however, problematic and unhelpful. As Bibb notes in response, the combination of sexual language and violence “titillates and shocks at the same time; these reactions are one and the same.”¹⁰ Even the briefest perusal of human sexual activity (or a casual stop on a website like Pornhub for that matter) is enough to dispel the distinction between shock and titillation. That which offends very often also arouses, and we are often attracted to that which disgusts us.¹¹

⁶ With P. Day (and most interpreters) I assume a primarily male original audience. Peggy Lynne Day, “The Bitch Had It Coming to Her: Rhetoric and Interpretation in Ezekiel 16,” *Biblical Interpretation* 8.3 (2000): 235. The book itself specifically identifies the male elders of the exiled community as the audience for at least some portion of Ezekiel’s prophecies (Ezk 14:1).

⁷ Day, “The Bitch Had It Coming to Her: Rhetoric and Interpretation in Ezekiel 16,” 249-250.

⁸ Day, “The Bitch Had It Coming to Her: Rhetoric and Interpretation in Ezekiel 16,” 235.

⁹ Andrew Sloane, “Aberrant Textuality?: The Case of Ezekiel the (Porno) Prophet,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 59.1 (2008): 72.

¹⁰ Bryan D. Bibb, “There’s No Sex in Your Violence: Patriarchal Translation in Ezekiel 16 and 23,” *Review & Expositor* 111.4 (2014): 343.

¹¹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 84.

Various features of the text suggest at least the plausibility, and perhaps even the likelihood, that titillation is part of the nexus of affect we should seriously consider in Ezekiel 16. The woman Israel is described in detail only as she becomes sexually mature (v. 7), and her nudity is either described or noted on several occasions (vv. 7-8, 16-18, 36-37). Sexual acts are described explicitly and implicitly throughout the passage, as is the extraordinary beauty and desirability of the metaphorical woman Israel. Even if titillation can't be demonstrated conclusively, one can hardly be surprised when interpreters refer to it in this way.

This leads to a further irony in the text: the rather obvious fact that the male audience is meant to identify with the woman Israel. The implied audience of the book of Ezekiel is the exilic community, which has taken on the identity of Israel (Ezekiel refers to his audience as "Israel" throughout the book). Lemos argues that the representation of Israel as a woman is not only part and parcel with the common covenant metaphor of the YHWH/Israel marriage but is also an example of self-emasculatation. She argues that the Israelites held cultural conceptions of being conquered by other nations that were consistent with their various geographical neighbours like Egypt and Babylon, in which being conquered implied cultural emasculatation. In their defeat, the Israelites "were controlled and abused by others and thus lost all claim to masculine honor. By their own standards of masculinity, they were disgraced and emasculated. In the midst of their Babylonian conquerors, they had become 'women.'"¹² This is an instance in which (likely) male authors/readers are taking on a particular kind of critique usually aimed at female bodies. Male authors are writing themselves into a female body through a misogynistic construct that equates conquest with emasculatation. Koller argues that in this sense, the male audience is supposed to identify with the abused female body of Israel.¹³

It is by means of this emasculatation and feminization that we come to the third element in our affective nexus, which is shame. "In shame, I feel myself to be bad, and hence to expel the badness, I have to expel myself from myself (prolonged experience of shame, unsurprisingly, can bring subjects perilously close to suicide)."¹⁴ In a substantial sense this is what the entirety of Ezekiel 1-25 is for; the repeated metaphorical annihilation of the idea of the nation as a parallel to the actual conquering and destruction of the nation, all in response to the shame and trauma of conquest and forced migration. Chapter 16 is an extended metaphorical example of this, and the means of the expulsion is this misogynistic identification with the degraded and sexualized female body. This acceptance of destruction makes the path to restoration possible by making shame temporary.¹⁵

The interaction between and among these emotional dimensions – disgust, titillation, and shame – helps us to understand the meaning and function of Ezekiel 16 for the exilic and post-exilic community that created and maintained this passage. In the wake

¹² T.M. Lemos, "The Emasculatation of Exile: Hypermasculinity and Feminization in the Book of Ezekiel," in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, Ancient Israel and Its Literature 10 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 389.

¹³ Aaron Koller, "Pornography or Theology?: The Legal Background, Psychological Realism, and Theological Import of Ezekiel 16," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 79.3 (2017): 406.

¹⁴ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 104.

¹⁵ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 107-109.

of what is interpreted as colossal religious and cultural failure, the passage becomes a way to process trauma by assigning blame explicitly to the community, and implicitly to the deity. In this text the reading community self-identifies with the shamed and shameful woman, and by means of the misogynistic worldview that both underpins and pervades the text to see itself as the disgusting and shameful object of sexual arousal and conquest. Israel is able to see itself as “the kind of wife it would not be shameful not to mourn.”¹⁶

While I am bringing together various interpretive arguments that are not always combined, and while these various arguments may not expressly explore the question of affect or affective impact, what I’ve argued thus far isn’t particularly original. Interpretations informed by feminist hermeneutics have been a key part of scholarship on Ezekiel 16 for several decades now. Indeed, the question of emotion, while often implicit, has also long been integral to these modes of interpretation and their conclusions about the meaning of the text. Making these implicit arguments explicit is helpful, but it is important to consider how to make them even more explicit by trying to create translations that achieve a kind of affective impact that is at least somewhat analogous to the experience of reading the text in Hebrew. Some discussion about the details of this task comes next.

Is a “Whore” Something Somebody “Plays”?

Bryan Bibb rightly diagnosis a problem that is fairly obvious to people translating Ezekiel 16 and similar texts. “English translation tends to soften and smooth the explicit aspects of the text while still preserving its misogynistic subtext.”¹⁷ Even novices in ancient language work notice that at times Bible translators make puzzling choices, or choices that seem to obscure and not illumine the meaning of a given passage.¹⁸ The primary problem that Bibb identifies with regard to English translations of Ezekiel 16 is closely related to my concern here with the affective dimension of the text. How exactly do English translations “soften and smooth” what is “explicit” in the text? One of the primary ways is by selecting target-language words and phrases that, while accurate in a certain sense, fail to offend and shock the reader in the way the Hebrew text tends to.

The goal in this section isn’t an exhaustive exploration of every tricky word or phrase, but a representative exploration of some well-known and important words and phrases with a specific focus on achieving some level of affective correspondence between the disgust/titillation/shame nexus of the Hebrew text, and the experience of the reader of an English translation.

¹⁶ Corrine L Carvalho, “Sex and the Single Prophet: Marital Status and Gender in Jeremiah and Ezekiel,” in *Prophets Male and Female: Gender and Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta, Ga, 2013), 247.

¹⁷ Bibb, “There’s No Sex in Your Violence: Patriarchal Translation in Ezekiel 16 and 23,” 340.

¹⁸ For a rather publicly amusing (and extreme) example of the outrage new students sometimes feel, see the recent social media posts of feminist English literature scholar Dr. Naomi Wolf as she learns biblical Hebrew and Greek. For example, her recent comments regarding Hebrew and the Gospel of Matthew: <https://x.com/naomirwolf/status/1797246927903338613>.

Before considering these specific questions, however, a brief consideration of translation theory and affect will be helpful. In my experience, biblical scholars tend to speak about translation theory in terms of source and target language biases. Does the translation tend to reflect the grammatical structure and linguistic habits of the original language, or the grammatical structure and linguistic habits of the target language? Kari Koskinen, drawing on the work of Venuti, frames this problem in slightly different terms. She refers to a bias or tendency toward foreignization versus domestication.¹⁹ A foreignization bias, which Koskinen notes is the generally preferred perspective of current translation theorists, tends to emphasize the linguistic and cultural distance between the text and the person reading in translation. This is similar to a source language bias but is perhaps a more helpful framework as it emphasizes the interpretive work of the translator, including the decision to help the reader feel the foreign nature of the translation. A domestication bias is obviously the opposite of this, bringing a text into the world of the target language reader and domesticating the language so that it feels natural in that target context.

The preference for a foreignization bias is understandable. Domesticating a translated text can easily give a reader the impression that they understand in a way they do not and can elide important nuances of the text being translated. Consider, for example, the New Living Translation of Eccl. 12:3, “Remember him before your teeth – your few remaining servants – stop grinding.” In Hebrew Eccl. 12 is a very well-known metaphorical scene of a home that is degrading over time, meant to represent the degradation of the human body through the process of aging. The extreme domestication bias of the NLT has not only translated the metaphor, but it has also interpreted the metaphor and then translated the interpretation.

The book of Ezekiel, and chapter 16 specifically, presents an interesting version of this problem. Even English translations with a strong domestication bias, like the NLT, tend to do just what Bibb has noted, and smooth out the upsetting language of the passage by using language that is, ironically, quite foreign to the context of contemporary English readers. Let’s consider a few specific examples from Ezk 16 in service of this point. Here I’ll consider how we might translate זָנָה, תַּזְנוּת, and גְּדְלֵי בָשָׂר. I am particularly interested here in how these terms and the context in which they are found participate in the affective nexus I’ve described above, and consequently how an English translation might work to capture the emotional impact of the text more effectively.²⁰

The word זָנָה has been discussed extensively by biblical scholars. Baumann has established that the word refers to illicit sexual activity, where licit sexual activity for women is specifically defined through the lens of marriage.²¹ While this does seem to include prostitution (Ezk 16:31), it also seems to include any and all forms of illicit sexual activity, especially when used metaphorically in prophetic texts (e.g., Hos 1-2). Modern English translations tend to render the word with an English word that relates to

¹⁹ Koskinen, *Translation and Affect*, 63.

²⁰ See Koskinen on what she calls the “affective valence of terms”: Koskinen, *Translation and Affect*, 48.

²¹ Gerlinde Baumann, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Pr, 2003), 238.

prostitution. English translations also struggle to capture the fact that זָנָה is a verb. For example in a comparison of different translations of Ezk 16:15 we find: the NIV renders it as “became a prostitute”, the NLT “you gave yourself as a prostitute”, the NRSVUE “prostituted yourself”, the NET “becoming a prostitute”, the CEB “you seduced”, the ESV “lavished your whorings”, the NKJV as “played the harlot”, and the NRSV as “played the whore.” Scholarly translations tend to use similar terms: “prostituted yourself”,²² “prostituted yourself”,²³ “played the harlot”,²⁴ or “your harlotry.”²⁵ In addition to over-identifying זָנָה with prostitution as such and the problem of rendering a verb with a noun, all of these translations fall distinctly flat in an affective sense (with the possible exception of the ESV).

A search for phrases like “play the whore” or “play the harlot” in a contemporary lexical database, in this case the Corpus of Contemporary American English, yields interesting results. COCA is a corpus of over a billion English words that includes up to date examples from eight genres of contemporary American English (spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, academic texts, TV and movie subtitles, blogs, and webpages).²⁶ A search for “play the whore” in this database yields 5 results. Three of these are quotations from English translations of the Bible, one is from a period-piece film about 18th c. prostitutes, and one from a short film from 2003. A search for “play the harlot” returns 3 matches, two of which are quotations from the Bible, and one of which is from a 2014 action movie. The phrase “lavished your whorings” returns no results. Even a broader search for a single term like “harlotry” only yields 18 results about half of which are direct or indirect references to the Bible.

My point is that these common translations for זָנָה tend to use rather archaic terms in English that are specifically associated with the English of the Bible. As Bibb puts it, “[in] modern translations that strive for idiomatic English, it is odd to see the NRSV and ESV update to ‘multiply your whoring.’”²⁷ The question then becomes, does English have a good word or phrase that a) can function verbally, b) captures the sense of illicit sexual behaviour without over-identifying with the exchange of sex for money, c) is sufficiently idiomatic for contemporary readers, and d) captures the affective nexus of disgust/titillation/shame I have argued for above? The answer to this conundrum isn’t actually particularly difficult because English has a very common word that satisfies these criteria. As I’m sure the reader has already guessed that word is “fuck.”²⁸ Using this word the first part of Ezk 16:15 would be translated as: “But you relied on your beauty and fucked around because of your reputation.”

The term זָנָה, which is a nominative cognate of זָנָה, is unique to Ezekiel 16 and 23. It is certainly related in some sense to sexual activity, but also seems to carry connotations

²² Day, “Rhetoric and Domestic Violence in Ezekiel 16,” 210.

²³ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapter 1-24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 486.

²⁴ Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*. Hermeneia (Fortress Press, 1979), 325.

²⁵ Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*. Anchor Yale Bible (Yale University Press, 1983), 280.

²⁶ <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>

²⁷ Bibb, “There’s No Sex in Your Violence: Patriarchal Translation in Ezekiel 16 and 23,” 342.

²⁸ For reference, the word “fuck” returns 89,179 matches in the COCA database.

of moral obscenity (it is translated in the Greek versions with πορνεία).²⁹ Whatever the correct translation, the meaning isn't very difficult to discern in context. It seems to suggest behaviour that is sexually illicit and morally vile. It seems designed to evoke revulsion. The common English translations noted above all essentially treat תַּזְנוּת as a cognate of זָנָה and translate it as “whore” or “prostitution” or something similar. Additionally, as Bibb notes, words that relate to prostitution in English are generally gendered, referring more frequently to women than men. In Hebrew, however, תַּזְנוּת can be indexed to both men and women. In a case like this, a gendered English word is obviously problematic.³⁰ A clean English translation for this term is, in my opinion, more difficult than for זָנָה. One might select something like “sexual obscenities”, though this is a little formal, or perhaps “you poured out your fucks”, though this is a little jarring to the ear and also might be confused with another colloquial use of “fuck” that refers to one's interest or attention (i.e., “I don't give a fuck”). In my vernacular translation (Appendix, below) I have opted for the former but confess some dissatisfaction with this solution.

The phrase גְּדֵלֵי בָשָׂר (v. 26) could be translated strictly as “large of flesh”, but appears to be a euphemism for the erect penises (or possibly the large penises) of Israel's sexual partners. “Large” or “erect penis” would likely satisfy simply in terms of accuracy. The phrase “big penis” returns 37 matches in COCA from a wide variety of text-types. That said, many of those instances are found in mainstream media sources, like network television, which are constrained by strong content rating systems. A search for “big dick” returns 184 matches, most frequently in popular media like movies and TV. In most instances both of these phrases carry sexual connotations. A search for “big cock” returns 61 matches, again drawn in large part from movies and TV, though with a notable bent toward media that is pornographic or adjacent to pornography. It is also interesting that in this case there is a noticeable increase in masculinization (i.e., having a “big cock” is a sign of masculine power or strength). All of these options satisfy our criteria of affective impact and idiomatic accessibility, but it is worth noting that none of them are euphemistic, and so constitute a more substantial departure from the Hebrew text than is ideal. That said, “you had sex with the sons of Egypt, your neighbors with large flesh” is a translation prone to misunderstanding in English. Given this, it seems best to err on the side of affective impact and use one of the idiomatic phrases I've just suggested.

These limited examples should serve to make the point: the use of obscure or highly formal words and phrases in translation are domesticated to the genre “Bible”. While “fuck” and similar offensive terms might seem, upon first observation, to represent a domestication bias, because of the affective status of the Bible (see below), this is actually an example of a foreignizing translation. You can't say “fuck” in the Bible, and consequently using “fuck” to translate זָנָה creates a sharp break in expectation that emphasizes the cultural distance between the source text and the contemporary English reader by means of emotional offense. Additionally, the alternate words and phrases I've suggested here take seriously the affective nexus of disgust/titillation/shame in Ezekiel 16. Given these reasons (and others noted above), a highly offensive vernacular translation of Ezekiel 16

²⁹ In Ezk 16 it is concentrated entirely in vv. 15-36.

³⁰ Bibb, “There's No Sex in Your Violence: Patriarchal Translation in Ezekiel 16 and 23,” 342.

can claim, at the very least, a defensible status as an affectively accurate rendering of a deeply upsetting text.

How I Feel About the Bible

This project began, for me, as an outlet for certain emotions, like confusion, disgust, frustration, and anger related to ongoing work in the book of Ezekiel. The extended reflection provoked through the process of researching and writing this paper suggests to me that, at least in large part, those emotions are the consequence of a set of deeply held personal values that have been brought into conflict through the work of translating Ezekiel 16. As a Christian theologian I have strong feelings about the Bible, including a deep sense of devotion to a set of texts that I consider (in some sense) to be the “word of God.”³¹ Additionally, I am deeply committed to feminist values of equality, and profoundly opposed to the normalization of violence and sexualized violence. In fact, I often ground these moral commitments in my religious faith. The conflict between these value sets when one is reading Ezekiel 16 can be quite destabilizing.³² A consequence of this internal conflict has also been frustration with the realization that this emotional conflict is more or less reserved for (or foisted upon!) those who are able to read the Hebrew text of Ezekiel. This is because contemporary English translations, as upsetting as they might be, obscure the depths of the misogyny and violence of the text, and substantially mute the emotional overtones of the passage.

As Bibb has noted, it is likely that Ezekiel’s very status as Scripture that requires this muting.³³ In this sense the Bible is an object replete with cultural meaning (including affective meaning) that strongly circumscribes the process of translation.³⁴ This object, the Bible, is caught up in complex ways in a network of affect, and lives as an object invested with meaning and value that may or may not be connected to its actual content. Koskinen notes that the Bible, along with other cultural “classics”, are engrained in the cultural consciousness in ways that make them uniquely difficult to translate. Her summary of the conflict at the heart of retranslating classic texts is helpful, and worth quoting in full.

The classics get retranslated when the parental and grandparental wish to ritually pass on the cultural capital vested in them meets with some resistance because of the changed expectations and preferences of the new child readers or because the new visual and textual aesthetics and ideologies of the literary field, including the parents themselves. In such a clash, the classic can be salvaged through what Goffman might call regrounding: a radically altered rationale or motivations in

³¹ One might say that this is an object that has me “in its grip”, to borrow Ahmed’s phrasing. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 84.

³² In fact, that destabilization seems to be at the heart of much of the late 20th century feminist scholarship on the chapter.

³³ Bibb, “There’s No Sex in Your Violence: Patriarchal Translation in Ezekiel 16 and 23,” 342-43.

³⁴ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 6

comparison to the previous translation, that will allow the text to be transformed, downplayed, cut or censored to avoid the unwanted elements.³⁵

But the Bible, because of its religious nature and its status in the social semiotic of religious communities, resists such transformation or censoring.

That said, religious communities also seem to clearly recognize the problematic nature of texts like Ezk 16. For instance, Ezk 16:15-43 is absent from the Revised Common Lectionary (though the rest of the passage is present). These are, obviously, the most offensive and troubling verses, and contain the majority of the images of sexuality, violence, and sexualized violence. In such an instance has disgust toward this portion of the chapter resulted in a kind of practical abjection?³⁶ The text remains in the Scriptures, because there is no mechanism by which it might be removed, but it is simply not included in religious life. Might this form of abjection be a contributing factor to the obscurantist nature of most English translations of Ezk 16? Bibb notes the profoundly problematic nature of the sexually explicit, patriarchal imagery inscribed into the text, and the fact that English translations tend to downplay or obscure this reality, but interestingly he does not suggest alternative translations. This is not to denigrate Bibb's work. It is not at all obvious that anybody really wants an English translation that makes Ezk 16 explicit (perhaps the one I have provided below is ill-advised).

What then, am I to do when translating this passage for a commentary that will be published primarily for religious use? In her discussion of the profession of translation, Koskinen refers to a translation information economy that valorizes certain kinds of dispositions and forms of service, like "neutrality" and "fidelity," and connects them to professional and financial levers.³⁷ Something similar could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of the religious commentary economy. There is a pretense that we value "accurate" translations and relevant commentary, but even though I think I have laid out a strong case for the accuracy and relevancy of my translation of זנה, I don't have much hope that a major evangelical publishing house will let me include the word "fuck" in my commentary. It is likely that I will need to settle for some mediating position that will take seriously the "affective predispositions" of my likely audience,³⁸ while also engaging the vital scholarly work on this passage and making those critiques and challenges at least somewhat accessible to my readers.

Ironically, this internal conflict in terms of translation and commentary reflects the internal conflict of the text itself. Ezekiel 16 is a text in which readers are presented with images that at once arouse and disgust them. We are drawn into sexist portrayals of sexual violence, but then that patriarchy is turned against us in a bizarre act of misogynistic feminization. God appears throughout as enraged and vengeful father/husband, but is thereby also represented as a cuckold, unable to guarantee his daughter/wife's fidelity. Contradictions pervade the text and throw the reader into emotional turmoil. What more should translators expect for themselves?

³⁵ Koskinen, *Translation and Affect*, 67.

³⁶ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 94.

³⁷ Koskinen, *Translation and Affect*, 33.

³⁸ Koskinen, *Translation and Affect*, 63.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that careful consideration of affect is instructive for the interpretation and translation of Ezk 16, as well as for self-reflective consideration of scholarship and translation as it relates to the Bible. An emotional nexus of disgust, titillation, and shame drive meaning in the passage. Effectively translating this affective dimension into English requires careful consideration of the tension between foreignization and domestication as it relates to the communication of emotion, and common English translation of Ezk 16 fall short of fully embodying this affective dimension. Finally, effectively translating and interpreting Ezk 16 is itself an affective task, requiring the translator to navigate the peculiarities of engaging an object with deep affective ties that flow in complex and sometimes contradictory directions. In the appendices that follow I have provided two translations, one more traditional and the other more vernacular. Readers should be warned that while both translations contain violence and sexualized violence, because this is present in the original text, the vernacular translation highlights these aspects of the text and contains extremely offensive language.

1a	The word of YHWH came to me, saying:
2a	Son of Adam, make known Jerusalem, her abominations
3a	And say
3b	thus says the Lord YHWH to Jerusalem
3c	your origins and your relatives [are] from the land of the Canaanites, the fathers of the Amorites, and the fathers of the Hittites.
4a	And your relatives on the day of your birth did not cut your umbilical cord
4b	and you weren't bathed in water for purification
4c	and you most certainly weren't
4d	purified in salt or swaddled
5a	No eye looked on you with compassion
5b	to do for you any of these things
5c	to have compassion upon you
5d	and you were thrown out onto the surface of the field in disdain for your life
5e	on the day you were born
6a	And I passed you by
6b	and I saw you squirming around, covered in your own blood
6d	and I said to you, covered in your own blood
6e	live!
6f	I said to you, covered in your own blood,
6g	live!
7a	I made you numerous like the plants of the field
7b	and increased you
7c	and made you great
7d	and you came into great treasures
7e	your breasts developed
7f	your hair grew in
7g	and you [were] entirely naked
8a	And I passed you by
8b	and I saw you
8c	and in fact your time [was] a time of love (sexual maturity)
8d	and I spread my cloak over you
8e	and covered your nakedness
8f	and I swore a solemn oath to you
8g	and I entered into a covenant with you
8h	Utterance of the Lord YHWH
8i	and you were mine.
9a	I bathed you with water
9b	and rinsed your blood off of you
9c	and oiled you with olive oil

10a	I clothed you in colorful fabric
10b	and fastened upon you beautiful sandals
10c	and wrapped you in linen
10d	and covered you in fine cloth
11a	I adorned you with jewelry
11b	and placed bracelets upon your wrists and a necklace upon your neck
12a	I gave you a ring in your nose, earrings for your ears,
12b	and a diadem of glory upon your head.
13a	you adorned yourself with gold and silver,
13b	and your robes [were] of linen, fine cloth, and colorful fabric
13c	you ate milled flour, honey, and oil
13d	and you became exquisitely beautiful
13e	and became royalty
14a	Your name went out among the peoples regarding your beauty
14b	because it [was] complete by my adornment
14c	which I placed upon you
14d	Utterance of the Lord YHWH
15a	But you relied on your beauty
15b	and whored on account of your name
15c	and poured out your obscenities on every passerby
15d	for whom it might be [i.e., who might be interested]
16a	And you removed your clothes
16b	and made for yourself stacks of pillows
16c	and whored upon them
16d	a thing that should not come about
16e	nor be
17a	You took your beautiful jewelry from my gold and silver
17b	which I gave to you
17c	and you made for yourself male idols
17d	and you pleased yourself with them
18a	You took your colorful fabrics
18b	and covered them
18c	and <i>my</i> oil and <i>my</i> incense you laid before them.
19a	You took
19b	what I gave you
19c	flour oil and honey I fed you!
19d	and you laid it before them as a fragrant offering
19e	and it was utterance of the Lord YHWH
20a	you took your sons and daughters
20b	which you bore to me
20c	and sacrificed them to them [i.e., the idols] to be devoured

20d	were your obscenities a small thing?
21a	you sacrificed my sons
21b	and gave them as offerings to them [i.e., idols]
22a	and all of your abominations and your obscenities
22b	you did not remember the days of your childhood
22c	when you were naked
22d	and you were naked, squirming in your blood
23a	and it was after all of your wickedness, woe, woe to you
23b	utterance of the Lord YHWH
24a	you built yourself a platform
24b	and made yourself an altar in every plaza/open place
25a	you built your altar at the head of every street
25b	you desecrated your beauty
25c	you opened up your legs for every passerby
25d	and multiplied your obscenities.
26a	you had sex with the sons of Egypt
26b	your neighbours [with] swollen/erect penises
26c	you multiplied your obscenities in order to provoke me!
27a	Consequently, I have reached out my hand upon you
27b	and I will cut off your portion
27c	and give you over the desire of the ones who hate you,
27d	the daughters of the Philistines
27e	the ones who are ashamed of your incestuous/lewd way
28a	you had sex with the sons of Ashur without your satisfaction/satiation
28b	you had sex with them
28c	and even so were not satisfied
29a	You multiplied your obscenities with the land of Canaan, the Babylonians
29b	and even with this were not satisfied
30a	Will your heart burn?
30b	utterance of the Lord YHWH
30c	when you do all of this
30d	epitomizing?? a great whoring woman
31a	when you built your platform at the head of every street
31b	and made your altar in every plaza
31c	you were not like a prostitute
31d	in that you refused payment
32a	the wife who commits adultery against her husband
32b	takes strangers
33a	They [men] pay every prostitute
33b	but <i>you</i> give your payment to all of your lovers
33c	and give gifts to those who enter you from the entire neighbourhood, in your obscenities
34a	You were the opposite of [other] women in your

	obscenities
34b	after you, one has not whored (i.e., nobody whores like you)
34c	in that you give gifts
34d	but gifts have not been given to you
34e	so you are the opposite
35a	Therefore, whore, hear the word of YHWH
36a	Thus says the Lord YHWH
36b	because your menstrual blood flowed
36c	and you exposed your genitals by your obscenities to your lovers and to all the idols of your abominations
36d	and like the blood of your sons
36e	whom you gave to them [your lovers]
37a	Therefore <i>I</i> will gather all of your lovers
37b	whom you pleased
37c	and all whom you loved on
37d	[and] all whom you hated
37e	and I will gather them before you, from all around
37f	and I will expose your nakedness to them
37g	so they will see your nakedness
38a	So I will judge you according to your adulteries and the shedding of blood
38b	and I will give you venomous/enraged blood and punishment.
39a	I will give you into their hands,
39b	so they will tear down your platform,
39c	destroy your altars,
39d	strip you of your garments,
39e	take your beautiful jewelry,
39f	and leave you naked and bare.
40a	They will lead up an army against you,
40b	stone you with stones,
40c	and slaughter you with their swords.
41a	they will burn your houses with the fire
41b	and enact judgment against you in the eyes of many women
41c	thus I will stop you from whoring
41d	and also you will no longer give a gift [i.e., pay your lovers
42a	I will spend my rage upon you
42b	and it will turn aside my jealousy from you
42c	so I will calm down
42d	and will no longer be angry.
43a	because of which I have not remembered the days of your youth
43b	but you have enraged me with all of this

43c	and so, actually, I will return your actions upon your head [i.e., give you a taste of your own medicine]
43d	utterance of the Lord YHWH
43e	so you won't execute this aberration on top of all of your abominations.
44a	In fact, [they'll] say [in] all of the parables about you,
44b	Like mother, like daughter
45a	you [are] the daughter of your mother
45b	despising her husband and her children
45c	and you are the sister of your sisters
45d	who despise their husbands and their children
45e	your (pl) mother is a Hittite
45f	and your (pl) father is an Amorite
46a	Your older sister is Samaria
46b	she and her daughters [are] those who dwell to the north of you
46c	and your younger sister from you [is] the one who dwells south of you
46d	Sodom and her daughters
47a	you did not walk in their ways
47b	or enact their abominations in tiny little ways
47c	but you behaved more corruptly than them in all of your ways
48a	As I live, utterance of the Lord YHWH
48b	If Sodom had behaved like you, she and her daughters,
48c	just as you and your daughters behaved,
49a	In fact, this is the sin of Sodom your sister
49b	she and her daughters had pride, abundant food, and
49c	complete ease
49d	but she did not take the hand of the poor and destitute
50a	They were exalted
50b	and committed abomination before me
50c	and I removed them
50d	when I saw
51a	And Samaria did not commit half of your sin
51b	and you multiplied your abominations from theirs
51c	You made your sister seem righteous with all of your abominations
51d	which you committed
52a	What's more, you bear your own insult
52b	which you spoke for your sister in your sin
52c	which you committed abomination against them
52d	they are more righteous than you
52e	Also you, be ashamed and bear your own insult
52f	in your justification of your sister
53a	So I will change their fortune

53b	the fortune of Sodom and her daughters	
53c	and the fortune of Samaria and her daughters	
53d	and the fortune of your captives in her midst (along with them?)	
54a	So you will bear your own insult	
54b	and be humiliated	
54c	because of all that you did when you comforted them	
55a	and your sister Sodom and her daughters will return to their former state	
55b	and Samaria and her daughters will return to their former state	
55c	and you and your daughters will return to your former state but Sodom your sister will not be a rumour in your mouth	
56a	on your proud day	
56b	before your depravity was exposed	
57a	as at the time of the disgrace of the daughters of Aram	
57b	and all of her neighbours	
57c	the daughters of the Philistines who despise you from your incest and abomination – you have born them	all around
	utterance of YHWH	
58a	For thus says the Lord YHWH	
58b	So I will do to you	
59a	just what you have done	
59b	when you despised [the] oath by breaking covenant.	
59c	And I will remember my covenant with you in the days	
59d	of your youth	
60a	and I will setup for you an eternal covenant.	
	and you will remember your ways	
60b	and will be ashamed when you receive your sisters, the	
61a	older and the younger	
61b	and I will give them to you as daughters	
	but not because of your covenant	
61c	So I will set up my covenant with you	
61d	and you will know	
62a	that I [am] YHWH	
62b	because you will remember	
62c	and be ashamed	
63a	and you will never have an open mouth [never open	
63b	your mouth] due to your shame	
63c	when I atone for you	
	for all that you have done	
63d	utterance of the Lord YHWH	
63e		
63f		

Ezekiel 16

¹The word of YHWH came to me, saying:

²Son of Adam, speak about Jerusalem and her abominations

³And say,

This is what the Lord YHWH says to Jerusalem:

your origins and your relatives [are] from the land
of the Canaanites, the ancestors of the Amorites, and the
ancestors of the Hittites.

⁴Your relatives didn't cut your umbilical cord on the day of your birth,
and you weren't bathed in water for purification,
and you most certainly weren't purified in salt or swaddled.

⁵No eye looked on you with compassion to do any of that for you, to have
compassion on you.

You were thrown out onto the surface of the field with total disregard for your life
on the day you were born.

⁶But I passed you by
and I saw you squirming around, covered in your own blood.

I said to you, covered in your own blood,
live!

I said to you, covered in your own blood,
live!

⁷I made you grow like the plants of the field,
and caused you to increase,
and made you great,
and you came into great treasures.

Your breasts developed,
your hair grew in,
you [were] totally naked,

⁸and I passed you by
and I saw you.

In fact, you were becoming sexually mature,
and I spread my cloak over you,
and covered your nakedness.

I swore a solemn oath to you,
and I entered into a covenant with you.

Utterance of the Lord YHWH

You were mine.

⁹I bathed you with water,
rinsed your blood off of you,
and oiled you with olive oil.

¹⁰I clothed you in colorful fabric,
and put beautiful sandals on you.

I wrapped you in linen,
and covered you in fine cloth.

¹¹I decorated you with jewelry,

and put bracelets on your wrists and a necklace
on your neck.

¹²I gave you a ring in your nose, earrings for your ears,
and a crown of glory on your head.

¹³You adorned yourself with gold and silver,
and your robes were linen, beautiful cloth, and colorful fabric.
You ate the best flour, honey, and oil.
You were exquisitely beautiful,
and became royalty.

¹⁴Your name went out to all the nations because of your
beauty, because your beauty was completed by my gifts, which I placed on you.

Utterance of the Lord YHWH

¹⁵But you relied on your beauty,
and fucked around because of your reputation.
You poured out your sexual obscenities on every passerby,
who might be interested.

¹⁶You stripped off your clothes,
and made for yourself stacks of pillows,
and fucked on them,
which you should never have done.
It shouldn't have happened.

¹⁷You took your beautiful jewelry from my gold and
silver (which I gave to you)
and you made for yourself male idols,
and you fucked yourself with them.

¹⁸You took your colorful fabrics,
and covered them,
and *my* oil and *my* incense and offered it to them.

¹⁹You took what I gave you – flour, oil, and honey I fed you! –
and you offered it to them as a fragrant offering.

So it was, utterance of the Lord YHWH

²⁰You took your sons and daughters,
(which you bore to me)
and sacrificed them to your idol fuckboys to be devoured.
Were your obscenities nothing?

²¹You sacrificed my sons,
and gave them as offerings to your idols.

²²In all of your abominations and your obscenities
you did not remember the days of your childhood,
when you were naked.

You were naked, squirming in your blood,

²³and this was after all of your wickedness.

Curse you!

utterance of the Lord YHWH

²⁴You built yourself a stage,
and made yourself an altar in every town plaza.

²⁵You built your altar at the head of every street.
You desecrated your beauty.

You spread your legs for every passerby,
and multiplied your obscenities.

²⁶You fucked the sons of Egypt,
your neighbours with their huge cocks.

You doubled down on your obscenities in order to piss me off!

²⁷So, I'll give you the attention you want.

I'll cut off your support,
and give you over to the lust of the ones who hate you,
the daughters of the Philistines,

the ones who are ashamed of your disgusting behaviour!

²⁸You fucked the sons of Ashur without even coming.

You fucked them,
and even that didn't satisfy you.

²⁹You doubled down on your obscenities with the land of
Canaan, the Babylonians,
and even with this you weren't satisfied.

³⁰Will your heart burn?

utterance of the Lord YHWH
when you did all of this,

you complete fucking whore,

³¹when you built your stage at the head of every street,
and made your altar in every plaza,
you weren't actually like a whore,
because you didn't even ask for money!

³²The wife who commits adultery against her husband takes strangers.

³³Men pay all their whores.

But *you* give your payment to all of your fuckboys.

You give gifts to everyone from the whole neighbourhood who comes inside of
you, in your obscenities.

³⁴You were the opposite of [other] women in your sexual obscenities.

Nobody fucks around like you!

You give gifts instead of getting them, so you're the opposite.

³⁵Therefore, whore, hear the word of YHWH

³⁶Thus says the Lord YHWH

because your menstrual blood flowed
and you showed your pussy in your obscenities to
your fuckboys and to all the idols of your abominations
and like the blood of your sons

whom you gave to them [your lovers].

³⁷Therefore *I* will gather all of your fuckboys

whom you pleased,
everyone you loved on,
everyone you hated,

and I will gather them before you, from all around,

and I will strip you naked in front of them,
so they will see your nakedness.

³⁸So, I'll judge you according to your adulteries,
and the shedding of blood,
and I will give you venomous blood and punishment.

³⁹I will give you into their hands,
so that they will tear down your stage,
destroy your altars,
strip you of your cloths,
take your beautiful jewelry,
and leave you naked and bare.

⁴⁰They will lead up an army against you,
stone you with stones,
and slaughter you with their swords.

⁴¹they will burn your houses with the fire
and enact judgment against you in the eyes of many women.
That's how I will stop you from whoring!
Also, you'll no longer be able to pay them.

⁴²I will spend my rage on you,
and it will turn aside my jealousy from you,
so that I will calm down
and will no longer be angry.

⁴³Because of this I have not remembered the days of
your youth
but you have enraged me with all of this.

And so, actually, I will return your actions upon your
head [i.e., give you a taste of your own medicine]

utterance of the Lord YHWH

so that you won't execute this aberration on top of all of
your abominations.

⁴⁴In fact, [they'll] say [in] all of the parables about you:
"like mother, like daughter."

⁴⁵You [are] the daughter of your mother,
despising her husband and her children,
and you are the sister of your sisters,
who despise their husbands and their children.

Your (pl) mother is a Hittite,
and your (pl) father is an Amorite.

⁴⁶Your older sister is Samaria,
she and her daughters [are] the ones who live north of you,
and your younger sister is the one who lives south of you.

Sodom and her daughters –

⁴⁷you didn't follow their path,
or perform their abominations in tiny little ways –
you behaved even more corruptly than them in all of your
ways.

⁴⁸As I live, utterance of the Lord YHWH.

[Imagine] if Sodom had behaved like you, she and her daughters,
just as you and your daughters behaved.

⁴⁹(In fact, this is the sin of Sodom your sister
she and her daughters had pride, abundant food, and
complete ease, but she didn't take the hand of the poor and destitute.)

⁵⁰They were exalted,
and committed abomination before me,
and I removed them when I saw.

⁵¹And Samaria did not commit half of your sin,
and you multiplied your abominations from theirs.
You made your sister seem righteous with all of your abominations
that you committed.

⁵²What's more, you bear your own insult,
which you spoke for your sister in your sin,
when you committed abomination against them.
They are more righteous than you.

You should be ashamed and bear your own insult,
in your justification of your sister.

⁵³So, I will change their fortune,
the fortune of Sodom and her daughters,
and the fortune of Samaria and her daughters,
and the fortune of your captives in her midst (along
with them?).

⁵⁴So, you will bear your own insult,
and be humiliated,
because of all that you did when you comforted them.

⁵⁵Your sister Sodom and her daughters will return to their former state,
and Samaria and her daughters will return to their former state,
and you and your daughters will return to your former state,

⁵⁶but Sodom your sister will not be a rumour in your mouth on your proud day.

⁵⁷Before your depravity was exposed
as at the time of the disgrace of the daughters of Aram
and all of her neighbours
the daughters of the Philistines who despise you from all around,

⁵⁸your incest and abomination – you have born them.

Utterance of YHWH

⁵⁹For thus says the Lord YHWH:

So, I will do to you
just what you have done,
when you despised [the] oath by breaking covenant.

⁶⁰And I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth,
and I will set up for you an eternal covenant.

⁶¹You will remember your ways,
and will be ashamed when you receive your sisters, the older and the younger,
and I will give them to you as daughters,

but not because of your covenant.
⁶²So, I will set up my covenant with you,
and you will know
that I [am] YHWH
⁶³because you will remember
and be ashamed
and you will never have an open mouth [never open
your mouth] due to your shame
when I atone for you
for all that you have done

Utterance of the Lord YHWH.