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Prophetic Shockvertising: Methods and Ethics of Shock Effects in Amos 3, Isaiah 20, and Ezekiel 23

Abstract: The prophetic literature in the Bible often employs shock as a means of effectively conveying its messages. This paper explores shock as a negative variant of surprise and investigates three instances of “prophetic shockvertising” that utilize violence (Amos 3:3–15), nudity (Isaiah 20), and sex (Ezekiel 23:1–11) to galvanize their audience. Methodologically, this study analyses speech acts and pragmatics, comparing the findings with recent research on contemporary shockvertising in commercial and non-profit contexts. The aim is to determine the function, effects, limits, and ethics of prophetic shockvertising.

1 Shock — the Negative Aspect of Surprise

The biblical literature is replete with texts that utilize shock as an emotional tool to effectively convey their respective messages. The prophetic literature, in particular, provides ample evidence for the application of this strategy. In the psychological literature on emotion research however, there is hardly any discussion of shock. This article considers shock as a negative variant of the broader surprise family, distinct from its positive variants such as those found in humour.¹

While surprise is generally considered one of the “standard”,² “primary”,³ or “basic emotions”,⁴ it remains understudied in the field of emotion research. For instance, in the “Handbook of Emotions,” a seminal work that provides a comprehensive overview of emotion research from various scholarly and scientific perspectives, surprise is occasionally discussed alongside other basic emotions but

1 The concept of emotion families and variants draws on Ekman 1992, 172–174.

2 James 1884, 189.

3 Plutchik 2001, 349.

4 Ekman 1992; Ekman and Cordaro 2011, 365.

does not receive its own dedicated chapter.⁵ Other interdisciplinary handbooks mention shock merely in the context of disgust⁶ or television.⁷

2 Shockvertising

However, one specific area of research that extensively examines the utilization of shock effects is marketing and advertising research. Since the early 2000s, scholars have conducted numerous studies on provocative advertising and have even introduced a specific term for this marketing strategy: “shockvertising”. The findings and analyses of these studies can contribute to our discourse on the biblical prophets.

“Shockvertising” is a method employed by companies, governments, and NGOs to cut “through the clutter”⁸ and capture people’s attention. NGOs utilize shockvertising as a tool to modify behaviour and drive political, social, or environmental change. A recent illustration of this is the Greenpeace campaign “Don’t Suck The Life From Our Oceans,” which portrayed turtles, birds, and fish with plastic straws protruding from their mouths.⁹

3 The Benetton Shockvertising Campaigns

Shockvertising is not only used by NGOs, but also by commercial companies that want to establish their brand identity and enhance product sales. One of the most famous and widely discussed examples are the Benetton Campaigns from the 1990s, which employed shock tactics by transgressing societal boundaries related to sex, religion, nudity, race relations, mafia violence, and controversial social issues such as HIV/AIDS or the death penalty.¹⁰

5 Barrett, Lewis, and Haviland-Jones 2016. A similar observation can be made regarding the work of Szanto and Landweer 2020. Ekman, Friesen, and Simons 1985 investigate the startle reaction, which they contend is not an emotion. However, their study does not address shock, and based on their criteria, shock seems to share more similarities with surprise than with the startle reaction.

6 Anz 2019, 168–169.

7 Lünenborg 2019, 456.

8 Parry et al. 2013, 113.

9 Rethink 2023.

10 Duffy 2017; Spiegel Geschichte 2015.

From a business perspective, these campaigns were deemed successful until they reached a tipping point in 2000 with a campaign against the death penalty, which resulted in a significant decline in Benetton's sales figures in the United States.¹¹ But from the outset, these campaigns were met with criticism, with allegations of indecency and a lack of respect.¹² In 1995, the German Federal Court prohibited campaigns featuring a tattooed naked bottom with the inscription "H.I.V. positive" and an image of child labour, stating that exploiting compassion for commercial purposes was contrary to both morality and fair competition regulations.¹³ Nonetheless, this ruling was later overturned by the Supreme Constitutional Court.¹⁴

What matters in the context of this article are the justifications provided by both the company and scholars for the Benetton campaigns. One set of rationales pertains to the artistic merit of the images: Oliviero Toscani, the photographer responsible for most of the images, produced "unique" works,¹⁵ the campaigns were an "icon of creativity".¹⁶

Another rationale for the Benetton campaigns is centred on the issues they address. Benetton has been commended for breaking down "economic, political, and religious barriers",¹⁷ and being a "campaigner for the human spirit".¹⁸ The purported reality of the motifs is underscored.¹⁹ The artist, Oliviero Toscani, contends that he had stirred up the fashion industry, which had acted like "a kind of ostrich" regarding issues such as AIDS at the time.²⁰ He further insisted that the shock effect did not result from his use of the images but from the reality they portrayed.²¹

Benetton itself rationalized their campaigns by drawing on principles of pragmatics:

1. Intent and message were consistent. The company aimed to position itself as a "concerned, socially-active, cutting edge and global fashion apparel company", which aligned with the use of the shocking motifs.
2. Recipient and message were consistent. Benetton's target consumers were in agreement with the company's approach.

¹¹ Barela 2003, 118.

¹² Barela 2003, 121.

¹³ Mitchener 1995.

¹⁴ Spiegel Geschichte 2015.

¹⁵ Barela 2003, 121.

¹⁶ Barela 2003, 119.

¹⁷ Barela 2003, 119.

¹⁸ Barela 2003, 122.

¹⁹ Barela 2003, 121.

²⁰ Anderson 2015.

²¹ Anderson 2015.

3. Sender and message were consistent. The company was known for its progressiveness, making its brand the appropriate environment for the motifs.²²

Henry Giroux, a scholar in cultural studies and pedagogy, strongly challenges Benetton's justification for their campaigns. His reasoning will be also interesting for the evaluation of the prophetic texts:

1. Intent and message were inconsistent. Benetton's campaigns promoted an empty image of corporate responsibility, as they failed to address the unjust power relations that caused the social problems depicted in the advertisements. They were disassociated "from history, context, and struggle".²³ Moreover, these campaigns did not acknowledge the conflicts and struggles that people undertook to overcome these problems.²⁴
2. Recipient and message were inconsistent. Benetton's campaigns failed to shock their global progressive, socially conscious audience into action, but instead lulled them into inaction with an "aestheticization of politics".²⁵ The campaigns abducted the addressees into a "two-dimensional world of make-believe"²⁶ and obfuscated their minds with "lucid fantasies that promote consumption".²⁷ Ultimately, these campaigns amounted to "a new form of violence against the public".²⁸
3. Sender and message were inconsistent. Luciano Benetton, the founder and then chairman of the company, was a senator of the Italian parliament who advocated for neoliberal political decisions that counteracted the necessary struggle against the grievances depicted in the campaigns.²⁹ Moreover, the company embraced a post-Fordist model of production and retailing "with less security, fewer benefits, and lower wages", thus participating in an "assault on workers".³⁰

22 Hubbard 1993, 46–47.

23 Giroux 1993, 6.

24 Giroux 1993, 8, 15, 21–22.

25 Giroux 1993, 22.

26 Giroux 1993, 10.

27 Giroux 1993, 20.

28 Giroux 1993, 6.

29 Giroux 1993, 12.

30 Giroux 1993, 12.

4 Mechanisms and Benefits of Shockvertising

The Benetton case drew special attention from scholars, but recent research on shockvertising has expanded the view and raised more technical questions about its efficacy, mechanisms, and limitations. Shockvertising is defined as a deliberate attempt to surprise the target audience by transgressing social norms and violating personal values.³¹ This transgression leads to a state of cognitive inconsistency, which in turn generates surprise, prompting a heightened level of attention from the audience towards the advertisement.³²

Researchers hold differing views on whether shockvertising achieves its intended effects. Some studies have shown that it increases attention rates and brand awareness,³³ while others argue that the attention generated by controversial ads might be insufficient for processing and remembering the content or brand.³⁴ Some researchers suggest that shocking campaigns can foster dialogue and necessary debates³⁵ and may even elicit changes in behaviour in some instances, such as campaigns against smoking.³⁶ However, others have reported negative effects associated with shocking campaigns.³⁷

There is a suggestion that the discomfort elicited by such advertisements may impede the cognitive processing and memorization of the ad.³⁸ Some consumers may choose to avoid these ads altogether to limit the negative emotions that arise from them.³⁹ This may ultimately undermine the intended effect of the campaigns by resulting in either reduced sales figures⁴⁰ or feelings of helplessness, fatalism,⁴¹ and/or anxiety.⁴²

The response to shockvertising may vary depending on the type of institution running the campaign. Non-profit organizations are perceived to be more justified

³¹ Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda 2003, 269.

³² Falkowski and Grochowska 2009, 409–10.

³³ Waller, Fam, and Zafer Erdogan 2005; Falkowski and Grochowska 2009; Wakefield, Freeman, and Donovan 2003; Veer and Rank 2012; Huhmann and Mott-Stenerson 2008.

³⁴ Huhmann and Mott-Stenerson 2008; Kilijanek and Ozga 2022.

³⁵ Sandıkcı 2011.

³⁶ Sutton 1992; Hill, Chapman, and Donovan 1998; Wakefield, Freeman, and Donovan 2003; Veer and Rank 2012.

³⁷ Sabri and Obermiller 2012; Vézina and Paul 1997.

³⁸ Kilijanek and Ozga 2022.

³⁹ Huhmann and Limbu 2016.

⁴⁰ Sabri and Obermiller 2012.

⁴¹ Henley and Donovan 1999.

⁴² Hastings, Stead, and Webb 2004.

in using this method compared to commercial advertisers.⁴³ This could be attributed to the fact that non-profit organizations are perceived to offer a corresponding solution to the problem they raise awareness for.⁴⁴

Further studies suggest that shockvertising should not only be controversial but also distinctive and well-targeted. The campaign should aim to be original and tailored to the target audience,⁴⁵ and it should recommend behaviour that effectively tackles the problem.⁴⁶ Additionally, the shock effect is more effective when it focuses on an immediate problem rather than on a situation that may occur in the future.⁴⁷ The response to shockvertising also depends on the target audience's gender, culture, language, history, and religion,⁴⁸ which is not surprising since shockvertising plays with the transgression of norms, values, and expectations.

5 Speech Act Analysis and Pragmatics

This contribution draws on speech act analysis and pragmatics to examine how the prophetic books in the Bible utilize shock to convey their theological and political agendas. Speech Act Theory was first introduced in John L. Austin's (1955) lecture series "How to Do Things with Words".⁴⁹ Hubert Irsigler applies this theory, along with subsequent linguistic developments, to biblical poetic texts, such as the Psalms.⁵⁰ He categorizes Biblical poetic speech acts into four general categories based on their basic orientation:

1. Assertive speech acts that are oriented towards facts (e.g., assertions, claims, statements).
2. Commissive, expressive, and declarative speech acts that are oriented towards the speaker (e.g., promises, threats, wishes, evaluations, judgements, appointments, definitions).
3. Directive, interrogative, and communicative speech acts that are oriented towards the addressee (e.g., commands, warnings, addresses).

⁴³ Parry et al. 2013.

⁴⁴ Tinic 1997, 11–12.

⁴⁵ Vézina and Paul 1997, 179–80.

⁴⁶ Beck and Frankel 1981; Henley and Donovan 1999.

⁴⁷ Richard, Vries, and Pligt 1998.

⁴⁸ Waller, Fam, and Zafer Erdogan 2005; Phau and Prendergast 2001; Parry et al. 2013; Pope, Voges, and Brown 2004; Huhmann and Limbu 2016.

⁴⁹ Austin 1976.

⁵⁰ Irsigler 1994.

4. Connective speech acts that are oriented towards the context (e.g., justifications, reasonings, conclusions).

Thomas Hieke and Benedict Schöning create a systematic and methodological introduction to this method.⁵¹ Their approach involves identifying both the direct speech act, which is the surface-level message, and the indirect speech acts that work beneath the surface, and then determining the dominant one of both.

They also relate this method to the field of pragmatics.⁵² The systematic analysis of a text's speech acts helps identify its purpose. What effect is the text aiming for? How does it direct the audience? What attitude should the addressees adopt or modify? How does the text accomplish this change in attitude? Which side or characters is the audience meant to identify with? This theoretical framework and these questions will guide the analysis of the following texts from three different prophetic books. The resulting conclusions will be linked to the research on shockvertising.

6 Inequality and Injustice in Amos 3:3–15*

The first example of a shocking prophecy presented in this study is situated in the 8th century BCE in the so-called Northern Kingdom, which was located in the hills surrounding present-day Nablus with Samaria serving as its capital. At that time, the kingdom was presumably ruled by King Jeroboam II (Am 1:1) of the Nimshide dynasty. His reign was marked by a period of economic growth and rising cross-regional trade, as evidenced by the archaeological excavations on the Samaria hill, which unearthed a substantial palace and luxury items, including ivory ornaments.⁵³

At the same time, this prosperity enjoyed by the Northern Kingdom rested on shaky ground. The Neo-Assyrian empire had been expanding since the 9th century and was threatening to swallow this comparatively small kingdom from the north. However, the Nimshide dynasty (845–747 BCE), was able to fend off the threat by paying tribute and benefiting from internal rivalries within the Assyrian empire.⁵⁴

The biblical Book of Amos highlights another internal factor that posed a threat to the kingdom — an increasing social inequality, a biased judiciary system, and

⁵¹ Hieke and Schöning 2017, 94–104.

⁵² Hieke and Schöning 2017, 105–109.

⁵³ Frevel 2018, 263.

⁵⁴ Frevel 2018, 249.

corruption. Amos, an outsider, is depicted as the one who delivers uncomfortable truths to the ruling class (Am 1:1; 7:14–15). One of Amos' campaigns is illustrated in the following passage, which represents the oldest layer of the text and comes closest to the words of the prophet Amos himself: Am 3:3–6, 9–10, 12, 14aaP–15.⁵⁵

An analysis of the speech acts present in Am 3:3–15* demonstrates how they effectively build anticipation and involvement. The passage begins with a 6-step structure of rhetorical questions, which gradually lead up to the final and 7th step. Each step comprises a question as a direct speech act, but these questions are not open to various answers. Instead, the indirect speech act in each case is a statement of the self-evident. The audience is anticipated to agree.

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| 3 | a | Do two walk together | הִילְכוּ שְׁנַיִם יַחְדָּו |
| | b | without having agreed (to do so)? | בְּלִתִּי אִם־נִוְעָדוּ |

In analysing the speech acts in Am 3:3, it becomes apparent that each utterance contains two speech acts. In the case of 3a, the direct speech act is a question, but its indirect speech act describes a commonplace situation of two people walking together. The direct speech act in 3b follows with a continuation of the question, but the indirect speech act introduces a condition that establishes a causal connection. If two individuals are moving in the same direction at the same speed, it is not a coincidence but a deliberate action. The audience is expected to acknowledge this and agree.

⁵⁵ The enumeration of verses and the syntactical annotation follows the Biblia Hebraica transcripta: www.bht.gwi.uni-muenchen.de. The website also offers an explanation of the abbreviations. The criteria for this source critical decision are: First, divine names: The ground layer of this text uses יהוה (YHWH), later verses feature אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה (Adonay YHWH) in vv. 7–8, 11 and אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה אֱלֹהֵי (Adonay YHWH, God of Hosts) in v. 13. Second, epithets for the Northern Kingdom: The ground layer uses שִׁמְרוֹן (Samaria, v. 9), בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַיְשָׁבִים בְּשִׁמְרוֹן (the Children of Israel, the ones living in Samaria, v. 12) or יִשְׂרָאֵל (Israel, 14aP). Later verses have יַעֲקֹב בֵּית יַעֲקֹב (House of Jacob, v. 13) and בֵּית־אֵל (Bethel, 14a). Third, doublings: The combination of אֲרִיָּה (lion) and אֶשׁ-G (to roar) occurs in v. 4 and in v. 8. However, in v. 4 it refers unequivocally to the animal, while in v. 8 it is used as a metaphor for אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה (Adonay YHWH). פָּקֵד-G (to pursue) appears in 14aP and immediately reappears in 14a, which is unusual in the rest of the text. Fourth, resumptions (*Wiederaufnahmen*): The prophetic messenger formula (כֹּה אָמַר = thus speaks + divine name) introduces to 11a, and then again to 12a – with different divine names. The same goes for the divine statement formula (נֹאֵם = statement of + divine name), which appears in v. 10 and v. 13. Fifth, thematic differences: Vv. 7–8 consider the role of the prophets, which the remainder of the text does not. Additionally, these are at odds with the 7-step climactic build-up from v. 3 to v. 6. The Assyrian conquest of the Northern kingdom is reflected in vv. 11 and 14a–c, especially the destruction of the sanctuary. Vv. 12 and 15 warn only against the destruction of the elite and their residences, pointing rather to a social revolt or to an interference of Egypt or Philistine (9a). Luxury and the perversion of justice are only criticized in the basic layer: 10a, 12c, 15.

There may be exceptions to the rule where two people do walk together without having made an appointment beforehand. However, the prophet in this text does not allow his audience to consider these exceptions. He expects their immediate agreement and moves on to the next point:

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| 4 | a | Does a lion roar in the thicket, | הִישָׂא אֲרִיָּה בַּיַּעַר |
| | b | and has no prey? | וְטָרֵף אֵין לוֹ |
| | c | Does a young lion raise its voice from its hiding-place, | הִיָּתֵן כְּפִיר קוֹלוֹ מִמְעֻנְתּוֹ |
| | d | without having caught (anything)? | בְּלֹא חֲבֵט אִם-לֶכֶד |

The subsequent two pairs of speech acts shift the focus from humans to animals. V. 4 draws on a shared experience that was likely widespread during the time the text was written: encountering lions in the thicket, such as in the Jordan valley (Jeremiah 49:19; 50:44). Lions are a common reference in the Bible, both literally and metaphorically.⁵⁶ Additionally, archaeological discoveries, such as cylinder seals and amulets, often feature these awe-inspiring and intimidating creatures.⁵⁷ Thus, this prophetic text alludes to a world that a significant portion of today's global population may not have personal familiarity with.

Modern-day scientists and observers of lions suggest that lions roar to establish their territory, intimidate other lions, or communicate with their pride members.⁵⁸ Roaring does not seem like their method of choice to announce their prey. However, v. 4 assumes the opposite. The audience is anticipated to respond to the rhetorical questions with a clear “No, not at all!” confirming the underlying message about wildlife.

Continuing the series of self-evident situations, the next verse seamlessly shifts the deictic focus from the predator to the prey in the realm of wildlife. V. 5 makes the audience identify with a trapped bird, evoking a sense of danger. Bird trapping was a common and familiar practice at the time⁵⁹ but is less common in modern societies.

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| 5 | a | Does a bird fall on a snare on the ground, | הֲתִפֵּל צִפּוֹר עַל-פַּח הָאָרֶץ |
| | b | and there is no throwing-stick for it? | וּמִוֶּקֶשׁ אֵין לָהּ |
| | c | Does a snare come up from the ground, | הֲיִעֲלֶה-פַח מִן-הָאֲדָמָה |
| | d | and will not catch anything at all? | וְלֹכֹד לֹא יִלְכֹּד |

⁵⁶ Riede 2018, 2, 4.

⁵⁷ Riede 2018, 5.

⁵⁸ Lindsey 2021.

⁵⁹ Behrens 2010, 2.

In v. 5, there is a subtle shift in the logical connection between the two speech acts within each pair. In vv. 3–4, the second speech act consistently explains the cause of the situation presented in the first. For instance, two individuals walk together (3a) *because* they planned to do so (3b). Similarly, a lion roars (4a) *because* it has caught something (4b). Within v. 5, the sequence of cause and effect is reversed. The bird falls on the bird-trap (5a) *because* it was hit by a throwing-stick (5b). But the snare comes up from the ground (5c), leading to the capture of a bird (5d) *as a consequence*. Here, the *first* speech act describes the cause of the situation presented in the second. This logical sequence is maintained in the sixth step:

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| 6 a | If a shophar horn is blown in the city | אִם־יִתְקַע שׁוֹפָר בְּעִיר |
| b | will people not tremble? | וְעַם לֹא יִחְרְדוּ |

6ab intensify the audience’s identification by shifting the spatial deixis from the wilderness to the city. All the situations in vv. 3–5 occur outside the city gates, but the speech acts in 6ab cross the boundary between outside and inside, between wilderness and city, between chaos and peace.⁶⁰ The shophar horn, which is an acoustic symbol of war, is preferably heard outside the city and far away from one’s home. A shophar being blown in the city does not bear good news. It means that an enemy is approaching.⁶¹ The people inside the city would understandably tremble upon hearing this signal. The original addressees of the verse would have immediately comprehended this and braced themselves for the next image.

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| 6 c | If there is something bad (happening) in the city | אִם־תִּהְיֶה רָעָה בְּעִיר |
| d | has not YHWH done it? | וַיְהִי לֹא עָשָׂה |

Not incidentally, this verse is the seventh one in the sequence of perilous situations. The third indirect speech act in this verse (6c) portrays a general scenario where some calamity occurs within the city’s walls. Given the context of the previous verse, this evokes an image of a war where the enemy breaches the city’s defences. In the preceding two steps (5c–6b), the first indirect speech act delineates the cause of the situation (the snare catching something in 5c, the shophar being blown in the city in 6a), while the second indirect speech act describes the result (the bird being caught in the trap in 5d, people quivering in fear in 6b).

In addition, this logical relationship is emphasized by the use of verbs in the *yiqtol* form in the second speech act (“will not catch” and “will tremble”), indicating

⁶⁰ Müller and Steinberger 2022.

⁶¹ Kammerer 2006, 4.3.

that the second action follows the first in terms of temporal sequence and points towards a later stage. This is in contrast to the speech acts in 3b and 4d, which use verbs in the qatal form (“having agreed to do so” and “having caught”), indicating that these actions have already been completed.

The expectation in 6d is for a *yiqtol* form that indicates a future consequence resulting from the bad things happening in the city, similar to the structure of 5d and 6b. Since this is the seventh situation depicted and seven is a sacred number,⁶² it is expected that the deity YHWH will intervene. The anticipated effect would be a statement such as: “If something bad happens in the city, will YHWH not help?”

However, 6d thwarts these expectations by introducing a cause: YHWH has brought about the bad things. Moreover, it uses the qatal form, indicating that YHWH has already acted and that the results are irreversible. Instead of depicting a rescuing God, this verse portrays a God who causes violence and harm, which would have been a shocking revelation for the audience.

The subsequent verses likewise employ shocking imagery, but in a somewhat distinct manner.

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| 12 a | Thus says YHWH: | כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה |
| b | Just as the shepherd will rescue from the mouth of the lion (only) two split bones or the piece of an ear, | כַּאֲשֶׁר יִצִּיל הַרְעֵה מִפִּי הַאֲרִי שְׁתֵּי כִרְעִים אוֹ בִדְל־אֶזֶן |
| c | thus will be “rescued” the Israelites, the ones living in Samaria on luxurious couches and on Damascus beds. | כֵּן יִנְצְלוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּשִׁמְרוֹן בַּפָּאֵת מִטָּה וּבִדְמֶשֶׁק עָרֶשׁ |

The parallelism in 12bc compares the upper class in Samaria to the rest of a lion’s prey with only two bones and part of an ear remaining in its mouth building on the imagery introduced in 4ab wherein the lion roars after capturing its prey. While the deixis in 4ab was centred on the lion, in 12b, it shifts to the shepherd, who fails to rescue their livestock despite their efforts.

The shepherd is a well-known ancient metaphor for the king (Jer 23:4–5).⁶³ In turn, the lion is a commonly used prophetic token for YHWH.⁶⁴ A famous seal found in Megiddo, one of the key cities of the Northern Kingdom, features a roaring lion and bears the inscription “(belonging) to Shema’, servant of Jeroboam.”⁶⁵ It is commonly assumed that this seal belonged to a high-ranking official in the court of

⁶² Gen 2:2–3; Exod 12:15–16; 16:26–27, 29–30; 24:16; Lev 23:3, 8; 25:4; Josh 6:4, 15–16.

⁶³ Hunziker-Rodewald 2021, 4.5.

⁶⁴ Isa 31:4; 38:13; Jer 25:37–38; 49:19 par. 50:44; Hos 5:14; 11:10.

⁶⁵ Riede 2018, fig. 1.

King Jeroboam II. This suggests a close association between the king's court and the personal deity YHWH, who is represented by the lion as its emblematic animal and whose help and protection are invoked by the seal. The image of a lion, therefore, conveys the idea of a powerful and protective deity who can scare off enemies (Isa 31:4; Jer 49:19 par. 50:44).

The verb “rescue” (H-נצל)⁶⁶ in 12a reinforces this association, as it typically carries positive connotations and is attributed to the Deity (Ps 7:2; 35:10; 107:6). In 12b, the text challenges the expectation of divine rescue that the city's elite seems to hold regardless of their behaviour. The lion deity does not defend them against enemies but turns against them. The shepherd king is unable to save them and is portrayed as a desperate figure who stands no chance against YHWH's actions. The text surprises the audience in a negative way, defying their expectations.

In addition to the subversive use of common metaphors, there is a deictic shift in the passage. While 4a focuses on the lion and 12b on the shepherd, 12c centres on the metaphorical prey, which is identified with the upper-class Israelites. 12bc further subverts expectations and causes surprise by juxtaposing an image of raw and violent wilderness with the sophisticated life in the city “on luxurious couches.” By exposing their luxury rather than catering to it, 12c also hints at the underlying cause for YHWH's devouring mood. This is made more explicit in v. 15.

15	a	I will strike the winter house upon the summer house.	וְהִכִּיתִי בֵּית־הַחֹרֶף עַל־בֵּית הַקִּיץ
	b	The ivory houses will perish,	וְאִבְדוּ בְּתֵי הַשֵּׁן
	c	many houses will come to an end—	וְסָפוּ בָתֵּי־רַבִּים
	cJ	statement of YHWH.	נְאֻם־יְהוָה

This verse employs conflicting images. On the one hand, it depicts a luxurious and abundant lifestyle where each season has its designated residence, adorned with ivory decorations that signify internationality and sophistication.⁶⁷ On the other hand, it employs martial metaphors through verbs such as “to strike” (H-נכה) and “to perish” (G-אבד),⁶⁸ indicating an impending war that the deity himself will lead against the inhabitants of these opulent dwellings.

In verse 10a, the text reveals that the acquisition of this wealth is the issue, as it comes at the expense of others. Therefore, the inhabitants of Ashdod and Egypt,

⁶⁶ The “H” stands for the causative H-Stem, sometimes called “Hif'il”.

⁶⁷ Frevel 2018, 230–231; Peetz 2021, 122–123.

⁶⁸ The “G” stands for the basic G-Stem, sometimes called “Qal”.

from which and through whose ports the goods are being sourced, are expected to witness the downfall of Samaria:

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|----|----|--|---|
| 9 | a | Proclaim [pl.] it above the dwelling-towers in Ashdod, above the dwelling-towers in the land of Egypt, | הַשְּׁמִיעוּ עַל-אַרְמְנוֹת בְּאַשְׁדּוֹד וְעַל-אַרְמְנוֹת בְּאַרְץ מִצְרַיִם |
| | b | and say [pl.]: | וְאָמְרוּ |
| | c | Gather [pl.] on the hills of Samaria, | הֶאֱסָפוּ עַל-הַרֵי שַׁמְרוֹן |
| | d | see [pl.] the great turmoil within her and the oppressions in her midst, | וַיֵּרְאוּ מִהוֹמַת רַבּוֹת בְּתוֹכָהּ וַיַּעֲשׂוּקִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ |
| 10 | a | they don't know | וְלֹא-יָדְעוּ |
| | aI | to do what is right— | עֲשׂוֹת־נִכְחָה |
| | aJ | statement of YHWH— | נְאֻם־יְהוָה |
| | a | those who store up violence and destruction in their dwelling-towers. | הַאֲוֹצְרִים חֶמְס וְשֹׂד בְּאַרְמְנוֹתֵיהֶם |

In verse 10a, the text traces the origins of the elite's wealth, revealing that they amass riches by perverting justice and resorting to illicit means, violence, and devastation of others.⁶⁹

The core section of Amos 3:3–15 creates a sense of shock by initially presenting a familiar world to the audience, playing into their expectations of a protective deity, and then shattering their sense of comfort and security. The prophet constructs an alternative reality in which everything the intended audience values and takes for granted is destroyed. The purpose of this is not to merely shock them but to motivate them into action. The prophet specifically targets the elite group responsible for the present unjust situation, rather than the entire population of the Kingdom, as they have the power to bring about change.

7 Nudity in Isaiah 20

The next instance of a shocking prophetic action is illustrated in Isaiah 20. The setting still pertains to the expansion of the Assyrian empire, albeit in a later phase. V. 1 provides the historical context of the Assyrian subjugation of the Philistine city of Ashdod for the narrative, which occurred in 711 BCE.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Also Am 4:1; 5:7, 11–12; 6:4–7; 8:4–6.

⁷⁰ Frevel 2018, 294.

- | | | | |
|---|------|---|-------------------------|
| 1 | aP3a | In the year that the <i>Tartan</i> came to Ashdod | בשנת בא תרתן אשדודָה |
| | aPI | that Sargon, king of Assur, sent him, | בשלח אתו סרגון מלך אשור |
| | a | he fought Ashdod, | וילחם באשדוד |
| | b | and conquered it. | וילכדה |

The “Tartan” pertains to the commander in chief of the Assyrian army. Ashdod is an important coastal town located on the Mediterranean Sea, serving as a crucial port and garrison along the ancient trade route known as the Via Maris. In 713 BCE, the city rebelled against Assyrian influence. With the support of Egyptian city-kings in the Nile delta,⁷¹ the inhabitants of Ashdod removed the Assyrian client-king and replaced him with a new king, Yamani. The Assyrians responded by conquering Ashdod and demanding the extradition of Yamani, who had fled to Cush. The new Cushite pharaoh of Egypt, Shabatka, complied with the demand in 706 BCE,⁷² exposing Egypt’s unreliability for potential rebels against the Assyrian Empire.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel had already fallen to Assyria in 722 BCE (2Kgs 17:3–6; 18:9–11). The upper class of Israel and a considerable part of its skilled work force had been either killed or deported to different parts of the Assyrian empire, resulting in the annihilation of the kingdom’s statehood, culture, and religious identity. It is likely that many of the Israelites fled to the Southern Kingdom of Judah,⁷³ bringing with them their religious and cultural traditions, genealogies, and experience of the brutal Assyrian conquest. Therefore, the people of Judah were acutely aware of the grave threat they faced from the expanding Assyrian empire.

Isa 20:2 continues with a direct speech act in the form of a divine command:

- | | | | |
|---|----|--|--------------------------------------|
| 2 | a | At that time, YHWH spoke through
Isaiah, son of Amoz, | בעת ההיא דבר יהוה ביד ישעיהו בן-אמוז |
| | aI | saying: | לאמר |
| | b | Go, | לך |
| | c | loosen the <i>saq</i> from your loins, | ופתחתך השק מעל מתניך |
| | d | take off your sandal from your feet! | ונעלך תחליץ מעל רגליך |

The text contains numerous indirect speech acts. Firstly, the *saq* is a simple garment that can be worn as a sign of repentance and self-deprecation,⁷⁴ with the intention of influencing the Deity on one’s behalf.⁷⁵ This suggests that Isaiah had recognized

⁷¹ Watts 2005, 321.

⁷² Kahn 2001.

⁷³ Frevel 2018, 280–281; Peetz 2021, 154.

⁷⁴ 1Kgs 21:27; 2Kgs 6:30; 19:1–2 par. Isa 37:1–2; Isa 22:12; Jer 4:8; Jonah 3:5–8.

⁷⁵ Olyan 2004, 62–76; Kutsch 1986.

the dire situation his people were in and had attempted to sway YHWH in their favour, so that the Judahites could resist the Assyrian expansion.

In Ps 30:12–13, the praying person praises YHWH for having loosened their *saq* so that they could sing and glorify God. In this context, “loosening the *saq*” signifies an end to a perilous situation and a regaining of divine favour. Against this backdrop, Isaiah 20:2cd creates the expectation for a continuation of the YHWH speech, in which YHWH would tell Isaiah to be happy and sing praises. However, the text does not fulfil this expectation; instead, it reports that Isaiah complied with the command literally:

2 e And that is what he did:	וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן
f walking naked and barefoot.	הֵלךְ עָרוֹם וְיָחָף

This direct narrative speech act contains several indirect speech acts, which add to its surprise factor. Firstly, it declares Isaiah’s attempts to regain the divine favour as unsuccessful. Secondly, it portrays Isaiah as an extreme follower of YHWH, who is not deterred by shame or social status. Thirdly, the passage shocks the audience by featuring a divine command that contradicts social norms—walking around naked is still today considered abnormal.⁷⁶ Improper nakedness is generally met with ostracism and shame, and several biblical passages discuss the disgrace of exposing one’s genitals.⁷⁷

Moreover, there are different notions of proper body covering based on various social spheres, often associated with class distinctions. As a court prophet, Isaiah regularly interacts with the king (Isa 7:3; 37:2, 21), and his nudity violates even stricter dress codes. Loose clothing or nakedness is typically associated with lower classes, particularly slaves (Deut 28:48; 2Sam 6:20). By obeying this divine command, Isaiah not only brings shame upon himself but also upon his social class. His actions undoubtedly draw attention to himself, and a fourth indirect speech act challenges the audience to question the reason behind this shocking behaviour.

The text does not keep the audience in suspense for long. The next direct speech act provides an explanation for Isaiah’s unusual behaviour and YHWH’s curious command:

⁷⁶ One contemporary example for the use of nudity in favour of political goals might be the Femen activists, see <https://femen.org>.

⁷⁷ Gen 9:20–27; Exod 20:26; 28:42; Isa 47:3; Lam 1:8. According to Beuken 2007, 211, and Oswalt 1986, 385, the term “naked” in this context does not necessarily mean fully unclothed, but rather partially dressed or scantily clad. However, their evidence is not conclusive. Prisoners of war on Assyrian reliefs are sometimes depicted fully dressed, sometimes half naked, sometimes naked. Isaiah’s symbolic action will have had most impact if he had indeed gone fully naked.

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| 3 | a | Then YHWH said: | וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה |
| | b | Just as my servant, Isaiah, walked naked and barefoot for three years—a sign and a symbol against Egypt and against Cush— | כַּאֲשֶׁר הִלְךְ עַבְדִּי יִשְׁעִיָּהוּ
עָרוֹם וְיַחֲף שְׁלֹשׁ שָׁנִים אוֹת
וּמוֹפֶת עַל-מִצְרַיִם וְעַל-כּוּשׁ |
| 4 | x | so shall the king of Assur lead away the Egyptians into captivity and the Cushites into exile, young and old ones, naked and barefoot, the genitals of Egypt exposed. | כִּן יִנְהַג מֶלֶךְ-אַשּׁוּר אֶת-שְׁבִי
מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת-גְּלוֹת כּוּשׁ גְּעָרִים
וְזָקְנִים עָרוֹם וְיַחֲף וְחֹשִׁיפֵי שֵׁת
עֶרְוַת מִצְרַיִם |

Contrary to the reader, Isaiah's audience within the text is left in suspense waiting for three years to receive an explanation for why Isaiah walked around naked. The explanation provided by YHWH serves as the direct speech act, revealing that Isaiah's nakedness is meant to symbolize the condition of a prisoner of war who has been stripped of his garments in an act of humiliation. The indirect speech act takes the form of a prophecy, predicting that Assyria will not only conquer the Levant, the land bridge between the two major powers Assyria and Egypt, but also Egypt and Cush (Nubia). This is an extremely radical and unthinkable message, given the military, economic, cultural, and political might of Egypt at the time. Therefore, the collective impact of 1) YHWH's disregard for traditional atonement rituals, 2) the divine command for Isaiah to strip naked, and 3) Isaiah's compliance with this command, is further intensified by 4) the prophecy of the subjugation of the only viable counterforce to the violent expansion of the Assyrian regime.

Alongside this prediction, there is a directive indirect speech act which urges the addressees to not rely on Egypt and Cush as allies against the Assyrian expansion. This plea is elaborated upon in the subsequent verses:

- | | | | |
|---|-----|---|---|
| 5 | a | They will be shocked, | וְחִתּוּ |
| | b | and they will be embarrassed | וְבִשּׁוּ |
| | c | by Cush, their hope, | מִכּוּשׁ מִבְּטָחָם |
| | d | and by Egypt, their splendour. | וּמִן-מִצְרַיִם תִּפְאֶרְתָּם |
| 6 | a | And on this day, the inhabitant of this coast will say: | וַאֲמַר יֹשֵׁב הָאֵץ הַזֶּה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא |
| | b | Look, that is our hope, | הִנֵּה-כֹה מִבְּטָנֵנוּ |
| | bR | to which we fled for help | אֲשֶׁר-נִסַּנּוּ שָׁם לְעֹזְרָה |
| | bRI | to escape the king of Assur. | לְהִנָּצֵל מִפְּנֵי מֶלֶךְ אַשּׁוּר |
| | c | How shall we escape? | וְאֵיךְ נִמְלֹט אֲנַחְנוּ |

The direct speech act in this section changes to a prediction, while the indirect speech act functions as a warning. The audience is advised against resorting to *Schaukelstuhlpolitik*, a political strategy where smaller states play off two major powers against each other to protect their sovereignty.⁷⁸ The text does not provide an alternative course of action. Nevertheless, it implies one by presenting Isaiah as a model of obedience and trust in YHWH.

Forty years later, in 671 BCE, Isaiah's prophecies were fulfilled when the Assyrian King Esarhaddon conquered Egypt and reached Memphis.⁷⁹ The book of Isaiah was not compiled into its final form until much later, likely in the Persian period (6th–5th century BCE). From this later perspective, the compilers created another moment of shock for their readers: not only did this seemingly unlikely scenario come to pass, but there was also a prophet who predicted it.⁸⁰ This realization would have shocked the audience into re-examining Isaiah's message and searching for other predictive or theological clues that might be essential for their own well-being, both individually and collectively.

8 Sex in Ezekiel 23

The Book of Ezekiel represents the last example for prophetic shockvertising. This text is situated another century later, in the early 6th century BCE. From the 7th century onwards, the Neo-Babylonian Empire had been replacing the Assyrian Empire, which had reached its zenith under King Ashurbanipal (669–631 BC)⁸¹ before experiencing a rapid decline.⁸²

The Babylonians eventually conquered Judah, for the first time in 597 BCE.⁸³ They dethroned the king of Judah, Jehoiachin, and deported him and his family to the Babylonian heartland, along with some of the kingdom's elite and skilled workforce (2Kgs 24:8–16). Among those forcefully relocated was the priest Ezekiel. According to Ezek 1:1–3, he became a prophet in exile after being unable to exercise his former function as a priest.

The remaining Kingdom of Judah, under the rule of its vassal king Zedekiah (597–586), attempted to preserve its statehood and increase its political autonomy

⁷⁸ These warnings come up repeatedly in the Book of Isaiah, e.g., in Isa 30:2–3; 31:1–3. See also the Rabshakeh's speech in 36:6–7.

⁷⁹ Frevel 2018, 301.

⁸⁰ Against Beuken 2007, 213.

⁸¹ Frevel 2018, 301.

⁸² Frevel 2018, 305; Peetz 2021, 169–170.

⁸³ Frevel 2018, 311–312; Peetz 2021, 183–184.

by negotiating with various regional powers, particularly with Egypt (2Kgs 24:20; Jer 52:3).⁸⁴ As such, the subsequent text is set within a politically unstable and militarily dangerous context. Additionally, the speaker is a deeply affected individual who has lost his home, status, and career as a court priest, someone who is likely to have witnessed the horrors of war and what we would call today human rights abuses first-hand.

Ezek 23 is a highly metaphorical text that constantly switches between the source and target realm. It starts out by picturing the source realm: Two young women, sisters, who have sexual relationships with multiple partners:

- | | | | |
|---|----|---|---|
| 1 | a | The word of YHWH happened to me, | וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלַי |
| | aI | saying: | לְאמֹר |
| 2 | aV | Son of humans! | בְּנוֹ אָדָם |
| | a | [Once] there were two women, daughters of
one mother. | שְׁתֵּים נָשִׁים בָּנוֹת אִם־אֶחָת הָיוּ |
| 3 | a | They whored around in Egypt, | וַתִּזְנֶינָה בְּמִצְרַיִם |
| | b | in their youth they whored around. | בְּנְעוּרֵיהֶן זָנְנוּ |
| | c | One groped their breasts there, | שָׁמָּה מָעְכוּ שְׁדֵיהֶן |
| | d | one squeezed their youthful tits there. | וְשָׁם עָשׂוּ דְדַי בְּתוֹלְיָהֶן |
| 4 | a | Their names: Oholah the elder and
Oholibah her sister. | וּשְׁמוֹתֵיהֶן אֹהֶלָה הַגְּדוֹלָה וְאֹהֶלִיבָה
אֶחָוֹתָהּ |

The introduction in 2a invokes the genre of a tale: “Once there were two women...” The women are introduced as sisters, but their genealogy is not given. Their actions appear as something that happened in a non-specific past. They are located in Egypt, but not at a particular place. On the surface, the narrative is not to be read as a real-life event. The audience is therefore put at a distance from these women.

The key verb *זנה* (znh) in 3a increases the distance. This verb denotes illicit sex outside of marriage. The women in question are presented as indecent and are further othered by the mention of Egypt, a foreign land. In 4a, the sisters are given names that are obviously fantasy names and bear no relation to any real names the audience might encounter within their families or communities. The language also implies that the women render themselves willingly to the addressees’ sexual fantasies.

⁸⁴ Frevel 2018, 314; Peetz 2021, 184–185.

The women are presented as both inviting and available. They are promiscuous, come in a double, their youthfulness is underlined. The narration describes in detail how they are being touched by anonymous persons. Both the women and their partners are actors in a pornographic scenery that is not too detailed leaving room for the audience's imagination. They invite the audience to enter the scenery, to identify with the sexual partner, to mentally touch the women as well, and to live out their sexual fantasies with them.

This perfect pornographic scenery gets a first crack in 4bc:

- | | | | |
|---|---|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 4 | b | They were mine, | וְהָיִינוּ לִי |
| | c | they bore sons and daughters. | וְהִלְדֵּנוּ בָנִים וּבָנוֹת |

The deity YHWH, who is introduced as the speaker in verse 1a but remains in the background of vv. 2–3, now takes a more prominent role. While the narration appears to continue on the surface, the speech acts in 4bc indirectly express an attachment to the two women, cautioning the audience against indulging too much in sexual fantasies. If the women are understood to be YHWH's wives, they are not as uncommitted as one might assume. Additionally, the women are portrayed as mothers, contradicting the availability narrative. As a result, the fantasy becomes complicated and unattractive.

4de is another step in this alienation from a seemingly arousing sexual fantasy. It introduces the metaphor's target realm, identifying the sisters with the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah.

- | | | | |
|---|----|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 4 | dP | Their names: | וּשְׁמוֹתָן |
| | d | Samaria (is) Oholah, | שְׁמֵרוֹן אֹהֶלָה |
| | e | Jerusalem (is) Oholibah. | וִירוּשָׁלַם אֹהֶל־בָּה |

This is accomplished with the help of a metonymy, whereby the capitals of Samaria and Jerusalem are used to represent the entirety of their respective kingdoms. The implied audience is situated in a context where the Northern Kingdom has already been conquered and destroyed, while Judah and its capital Jerusalem are struggling to survive. While the previous speech acts might have induced Ezekiel's addressees to indulge in sexual fantasies or to exchange raunchy comments, 4de stops them in their tracks. The fantasy is not as wild anymore once the addressees have to identify with one of the women.

However, the subsequent verses interrupt this line of identification again, introducing a third perspective for identification—the deceived husband.

- 5 a Oholah whored around under me, וּתְזַן אֶהְלָה תַּחְתָּי
 b she lusted after her lovers, after Assur, וּתַעֲגֹב עַל־מְאַהֲבֶיהָ אֶל־אֲשׁוּר
 bR guards קְרוּבִים
- 6 vR dressed in [expensive] purple [garments], לְבָשֵׁי תְכֵלֶת פַּחוֹת וּסְגָנִים בְּחוּרֵי
 governors and commanders, beautiful young חֲמֹד כָּלֵם פְּרָשִׁים רֹכְבֵי סוּסִים
 men altogether, cavalrymen riding horses.
- 7 a She bestowed her whoredom on them, the וּתְתַן תְּזוּנוֹתֶיהָ עָלֵיהֶם מִבְּחָר
 choicest Assyrians altogether. בְּנֵי־אֲשׁוּר כָּלֵם

In vv. 5–7a, the narration continues, but in 5a, the speaker YHWH makes himself recognizable by using the enclitic personal pronoun of the 1. person singular (under *me*). Therefore, the following indirect speech acts are expressions of jealousy, pain, and feelings of inferiority. They invite the addressees to identify YHWH as a hurt husband who feels helpless in the face of his wife’s obvious infidelity and is on the losing end in a competition with other men.

The text manipulates the addressees’ feelings of inferiority by portraying Oholah’s lovers as impressive members of the Assyrian elite. They are described as being dressed in expensive clothing and equipped with horses, which were the state-of-the-art military equipment at the time. This depiction combines both the source and target realms of the metaphor. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was far inferior to the Assyrian Empire, both militarily and economically, and the Assyrian Empire used propaganda to reinforce their superiority over their subjects, as seen in their palace reliefs.⁸⁵ In light of this historical background, these lines in Ezekiel stir up collective memories of Assyrian domination and humiliation. They also tap into any personal experiences of humiliation or jealousy the addressees may have had.

These verses cultivate resentment and engender sympathy for the speaker’s anger in the audience, who are motivated to wholeheartedly take the speaker’s side and defend him. However, the subsequent lines come as a jolt as the text shifts from images of sex, jealousy, and inferiority to metaphors of violence (7b–8, being secondary, are not included in this analysis).⁸⁶

⁸⁵ For instance, the Assyrian palace in Nineveh was decorated with several mural reliefs showing the conquest of different cities, the military superiority of the Assyrian army, and the humiliation of the conquered peoples, the most famous of which are the Lachish Reliefs, British Museum 2023.

⁸⁶ In Deuteronomistic discourse, the term גְּזוּלִים (“idols”) of 7b is often associated with the sin of idolatry, which is also linked to other themes such as improper worship at unauthorized locations,

- 9 a Therefore, I gave her into the hand of her lovers, לְכֹן נָתַתִּיהָ בְיַד־מְאַהֲבֶיהָ
 into the hand of the Assyrians, בְּיַד בְּנֵי אַשּׁוּר
 aR whom she had lusted for. אֲשֶׁר עֲגָבָה עֲלֵיהֶם
- 10 a They uncovered her genitals, הִמָּה גְלוּ עֲרוֹתֶיהָ
 b they took her sons and her daughters, בְּנֶיהָ וּבָנוֹתֶיהָ לְקַחוּ
 c her they slew with a sword. וְאוֹתָהּ בַּחֶרֶב הָרְגוּ
 d She became a name for women. וְהָיָה שֵׁם לְנָשִׁים

The narrative persists and recounts the appalling violence inflicted upon Oholah. The indirect speech acts no longer evoke feelings of inferiority nor cater to playful sexual fantasies. Alongside the speaker, the addressees are positioned as spectators to rape (10a), child abduction (10b), murder (10c), and the defamation of the victim (10d).

These lines are deeply unsettling for two reasons. Firstly, they play with conflicting images. They use common violence terminology such as “to take” in 10b and “to kill” in 10c. At the same time, the sexual vocabulary continues to be employed, with “to love” in 9a, “to lust” in 9aR, and “to uncover nakedness” in 10a. There is a direct connection drawn from sex to violence, with both becoming closely intertwined. The text confuses the reader as to who to identify with—apparently not with the lovers anymore, but with whom? The detached spectator husband? The victim?

Secondly, the line between the source and target realms is being blurred. While continuing the fictional tale of Oholibah, the use of war terminology such as “to give in the hand of someone” in 9a and “to slay with a sword” in 10c evokes the conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE. The mention of “sons and daughters” in 10b further blurs the line, as “sons of Israel” is a common Biblical term for adult Israelites. Additionally, Oholah’s portrayal as a female protagonist aligns with the ancient and biblical identification of cities with women.⁸⁷

Vv. 9–10 leave the audience in a state of discomfort and confusion. The previous verses prime the audience to identify with the deceived husband and therefore view the violent events with detachment or satisfaction. However, the language used in these verses evokes a collective trauma of real war and violence to convey a political message: not to play with foreign political powers.

desecration of the Sabbath, the passing of children through the fire, and moral transgressions, e.g. in Ezek 6:13; 18:6, 12, 15; 20:24, 31. Additionally, v. 8 is a repetition of v. 3.

⁸⁷ Maier 2019. E.g., Lam 1–2.

The lines concerning the fate of Oholah conclude with a direct narrative speech act, which in turn involves several indirect speech acts:

10 e they passed judgment on her.

וּשְׁפוּטִים עָשׂוּ בָּהּ

The final line of this section does more than simply conclude the story; it introduces the semantic field of justice and moral evaluation. The indirect evaluative speech act in 10e implies that Oholah is getting what she deserves, just as the Northern Kingdom did. This is disturbing on multiple levels. Firstly, it can be seen as victim-blaming, both in the fictional story and in the real-world historical context it alludes to. Secondly, it justifies violence as a means of subjugating both wives and politically weaker entities and creates fear of a similar fate. And thirdly, this seems to be the intended effect of the text.

Ezek 23 continues by describing the fate of Oholibah's sister, Oholah, in a similar manner. This time, the lovers/killers are not only Assyrians, but mostly Babylonians (Chaldeans). Babylon was a major power that threatened to completely destroy the Southern Kingdom of Judah after 597 BCE, which it eventually did in 587 BCE.

Ezek 23 serves as an illustration of an individual who has undergone trauma and employs language and imagery of violence and assault to make sense of historical events and to advocate for a political agenda: the avoidance of foreign political, military, and cultural powers since such alliances inevitably lead to catastrophic consequences. A secondary layer, added later, utilizes these themes to advance a theological message, specifically emphasizing the prohibition of idol worship (Ezek 23:7, 30, 37, 39).

9 Conclusion

In the debate surrounding the Benetton case, the artistic and creative value of the shockvertising was raised in its favour. From this perspective, the prophetic use of shockvertising is certainly praiseworthy. The analysis of Amos 3:3–15 has demonstrated the skilful composition of this text. Isaiah's use of nudity as a political message is a stroke of genius. Even in the case of Ezekiel 23, one cannot help but admire the vivid imagery created by the text. Prophetic texts and symbolic actions employ visual imagery in a culture that predates billboards and social media. These texts utilize words to construct mental images, they build up expectations only to thwart them, they combine common and uncommon experiences.

The diachronic analysis has revealed that the original prophetic campaigns were highly targeted and unique. In contrast to the Benetton campaigns, which

aimed to have a cross-cultural impact,⁸⁸ the prophets addressed specific audiences and utilized their audience's cultural memories and experiences in their messages.

In evaluating the success of prophetic shockvertising, several factors must be considered, such as the original purpose, the focus of attention, and the relationship between short-term and long-term effects. The speech act analysis has revealed that the oldest layers of the prophetic texts intended to shock. They were not merely works of art that happened to be shocking. All three texts were designed to misdirect the audience and create false expectations, only to later subvert them.

In evaluating prophetic shockvertising, it is also important to consider whether the texts focus on the issues at stake or on the prophets themselves. The analyses have shown that the historical prophets focused on the issues at stake, but they certainly built up a particular prophetic brand in the process, whether intentionally or not. Later redactions could capitalize on this brand effect. However, the texts themselves emphasize that the prophets fulfilled their mission not out of a desire for attention, but because of a divine instruction (Amos 3:15c; Isa 20:2; Ezek 23:1).

The original purpose of the prophetic texts was to effect short-term changes in behaviour, particularly among the upper class. Isa 20 sought to discourage the Judean elite from seeking support from Egypt through negotiations (Isa 20:6), which was an attainable goal for the target audience. Amos 3 aimed to end exploitation and promote proper administration of justice (Amos 3:10, 12c), which, although more complex, was still achievable for the small elite of the Israelite kingdom at the time. This would have required the wealthy to give up some of their income and immovable assets, which would have been psychologically challenging but not impossible.

Ezekiel 23 demands the most difficult change in behaviour from a political and cultural perspective. The prophet contends that the Northern Kingdom should have resisted Assyrian influence, which was felt not only militarily but also culturally and religiously (2Kgs 21:5–6). Similarly, he addresses the surviving Kingdom of Judah, urging them to resist Babylonian cultural, religious, and political influence as much as possible. However, it is inherent in an imperial and hegemonic relationship that the dominant power is better equipped to exert its influence than the inferior one. Therefore, the demand to at least not cater to its power is easier said than done. Perhaps this is the reason for the intensity with which Ezek 23 drives its message home.

It is not known whether the prophets and their records were able to elicit even a short-term change in behaviour. What we do know is that their actions and remembered words outlasted them. In any case, the prophets could not prevent

⁸⁸ Barela 2003, 117; Carroll 2000.

the worst outcomes, such as the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE (2Kgs 17:3–6) and the Babylonian conquest of the Southern Kingdom in 587 BCE, followed by the destruction of the Jerusalemite temple and the deportation of a significant portion of the population (2Kgs 25:1–21; Jer 52:11–30). Paradoxically, it was the prophets' failure that likely turned them into a long-lasting brand. Later writers were able to convince their audiences that these prophets had been right and that they should have heeded their words earlier.

Research on shockvertising in contemporary society has shown that consumers, particularly young ones, have become desensitized to controversial advertisements, which reduces their effectiveness.⁸⁹ The prophetic messages face a similar issue, but later redactors found a solution through *Fortschreibungen*, by tailoring them into new messages intended for different audiences in a new situation. They added reflections on the role of a prophet to Amos 3 (“Because Adonay YHWH does not do a thing, without revealing his council to his servants, the prophets”, Am 3:7)⁹⁰ or critiques of specific cultic practices to Ezekiel 23 (“With all their idols she defiled herself.”, Ezek 23:7b).⁹¹

While these processes of de-specification and re-contextualization are crucial for texts to be recited, copied, and preserved, it also dilutes the original impact, and the shock value is lessened. Even so, none of these texts is nowadays particularly popular in church services or Bible study groups,⁹² precisely because these texts and actions were specifically targeted and are easily misunderstood today.

Finally, there are ethical aspects to consider. Amos 3 employs violence and war to shock its audience, which in the context of heightened political and military danger would not have been a far-fetched possibility but a very real threat. Therefore, this shock effect should not have been used lightly for cheap effect. However, Amos 3 has a clear goal, at least in its original form: the proper administration of justice and a more equal distribution of wealth. The text does not advocate consumerism as an escape, like the Benetton campaigns; rather, quite the opposite. Amos 3 aims to shake people into action and targets those who are in a position to take that action. Thus, there is a consistency between the message and intent as well as between the recipient and message. Additionally, this message is consistent with the general image of Amos as a socially aware prophet.⁹³ Hence, sender and message are also consistent.

⁸⁹ Parry et al. 2013.

⁹⁰ Also “Adonay YHWH has spoken, who does not become a prophet?” (Amos 3:8cd).

⁹¹ Also, Ezek 23:7, 30, 37, 39.

⁹² For instance, in Roman Catholic liturgy, only Amos 3:1–8 is read among the three texts, and even then, it is only read on a working day (Tuesday, Week 13, Year II).

⁹³ Am 4:1; 5:7, 11–12; 6:4–7; 8:4–6.

The shockvertising in Isaiah 20 also shows a high level of consistency. Isaiah's nudity does shock. Evidently, he transgresses social norms to attract attention to his message. But this form is consistent with the message. His own nudity corresponds to the nudity of conquered and enslaved peoples. His message is also consistent with his target audience, the Jerusalem upper class, the ones taking critical political decisions. They would be most shocked by Isaiah's nudity because they would probably have the strictest norms regarding the exposure of body parts.

Most significantly, Isaiah's shockvertising is in line with his prophetic "brand." He is a politically astute prophet.⁹⁴ He is a court prophet who usually would not engage in such a behaviour. Crucially, he is known for not sparing himself or his family to get his message across.⁹⁵ He uses his own body to deliver his message, rather than exploiting the bodies of others. In this regard, his campaign bears similarities to PeTA's "I'd Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur" campaign⁹⁶ but stands in stark contrast to the Benetton's campaigns, which use other people's bodies and suffering.

In this regard, Isaiah 20 also differs from Ezek 23. By exploiting not only sex and violence but sexual violence as well, this latter text oversteps a line that even the Benetton campaigns would not dare to cross. As a result, this biblical text has been met with disquiet by many and with severe criticism by feminist biblical scholars who have referred to it as "pornprophetics"⁹⁷ or prophetic "hardcore porn".⁹⁸ Ezek 23 does not question the problem of sexual violence against women, nor does it seek to change it. Instead, it relies on victim-blaming, thereby conveying a damaging message. As such, this text is generally not read in religious services, and for good reason.

In terms of the consistency between message and target audience, two factors need to be considered. Firstly, it is clear that the audience is not a violated woman, as the sudden shift in identification from the lover to the duped husband and then to the raped woman would not be effective if the audience identified with the victim from the beginning. On the other hand, this last change works because Ezek 23 targets its audience as a group of men who have themselves suffered violence. The sender in the text, the prophet Ezekiel, is also a traumatized man who desperately tries to bring coherence into the incoherent and to prevent history from repeating itself.⁹⁹ David Garber argues that their perspective should be heard, even

⁹⁴ E.g., Isa 7:1–9; 30:2–3; 31:1–3.

⁹⁵ Other examples: Isa 7:3; 8:3, 18.

⁹⁶ PeTA 2020.

⁹⁷ Brenner 1995.

⁹⁸ Brenner-Idan 2019.

⁹⁹ Yee 2003, 111–34.

if one does not agree with their conclusions.¹⁰⁰ The mistake of feminist critiques would therefore lie in overfocussing on the descriptive and appellative speech acts and neglecting the expressive speech acts.

Toscani justifies his Benetton campaigns by referencing the reality of the issues he portrays. Similarly, the character of Ezekiel and the authors behind the text may be justified by the reality of sexual violence and subsequent victim blaming.¹⁰¹ By forcing his audience to identify with the victim, Ezekiel could potentially raise awareness for the issue and its consequences. However, the problem lies in the fact that the text's intent is not to question sexual violence or the power dynamics that enable it. Ezek 23 aims to prevent the political elite from succumbing to imperialistic cultural, political, and religious influences, rather than changing the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. While this may be a realistic goal given the power imbalance, it would not be the most appropriate model to follow if one were to use shockvertising in their prophetic message today.

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¹⁰⁰ Garber 2014, 357.

¹⁰¹ Recently, I made a similar argument for Judg 19, Eckstein 2022.

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