

On Dealing with Metaphors in Jeremiah 1–29

Notes from a consultant check in a Turkic language. PS. 2019.

1. Metaphors that could be kept in the receptor language

Reference	NASB Text	Metaphor's meaning HB = <i>Handbook</i>	Remarks
2:13	They have forsaken <u>Me</u> , <u>The fountain</u> of living waters		The Hebrew text itself makes the figure of speech transparent. (Used relative clause construction: ... <u>me</u> , <u>who</u> is the spring-of-water-of-life ...)
2:22	Although you wash yourself with lye And use much soap, <u>The stain of your iniquity</u> is before Me		The genitive in Hebrew itself explicates the meaning.
3:4	Have you not just now called to Me, 'My <u>Father</u> , You are the friend of my youth?	See Martens. ¹	Back translation: "You are our father. Since our youth you are our friend."
9:1	Oh that my head were <u>waters</u> And my eyes a <u>fountain of tears</u> , That I might weep day and night For the slain of the daughter of my people!	Oh that my head were a <u>well</u> , and my eyes a <u>fountain</u>	The metaphor was expanded[!] by adding "well", but the Hebrew word for "tears" was necessary as explanation.
27:12	Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon <u>and serve him</u>	put neck under yoke = submit to rule	The Hebrew text itself interprets the metaphor.

¹ Martens (Cornerstone, 2005): "Israel's response to God is odd. The change in metaphor by which Israel calls God "Father" is strange. Jeremiah uses both metaphors—marriage and parenting—to describe a bonded relationship. Their use in such close proximity reminds us that these are metaphors, and that neither should be pressed too far. That Israel addresses God as a parent perhaps suggests that she has not understood the covenant and the resulting partnership, but sees herself as a minor, not to be held responsible. ..."

2. Metaphors that had to be resolved in the receptor language

Reference	NASB Text	Metaphor's meaning HB = <i>Handbook</i>	Back translation from receptor language	Remarks
1:10	I have appointed you ... To pluck up and to break down, To destroy and to overthrow, To build and to plant.	HB has a longer explanation, but no precise definition of what "pluck up" etc. stands for. Martens (Note): "Jeremiah is to be something of a verbal wrecking ball; ..."	<u>I have given you the right to pass on</u> <u>visions</u> about the kingdoms ... You will proclaim the kingdoms' being-uprooted-and-thrown-away, being split up ...	"I have appointed you" was made into a separate introductory sentence, with interpretation. The verbs of destruction etc. were then okay.
1:12	I am watching over My word to perform it.	HB: not really explained. "to watch" = to make sure / to see to it that ...	two sentences: (1) I am <u>vigilant</u> . (2) I will quickly carry out my word.	(The Hebrew word play with "almond" is an additional issue.) Similar: 31:28.
1:17	gird up your loins	HB: = preparation or readiness	"bind your waist" (<i>or</i> : Get ready!)	Also in 1Ki 18:46.
2:16	... have shaved the crown of your head.	HB: "To have your head shaved forcibly most probably was a sign that you were being reduced to slavery."	shaved your hair & made you slaves	I.e. we used metaphor + explanation.
4:3	<u>Break up your fallow ground</u> [Lit <i>Plow for yourselves plowed ground</i>], And <u>do not sow</u> among thorns.	HB: = "... preparing their hearts for the LORD ...". T4T [in Paratext]: " <i>Cause your inner beings to be ready to receive my messages / like farmers plow up hard ground in order that they can plant seed in it. ...</i> "	Soften <u>the fields of your hearts</u> , do not throw seed onto the thorny place.	The first half of the metaphor was explained by the genitive "fields of your hearts", the second half was kept.
5:5	they have broken the yoke And burst the bonds	HB: = "reject authority / refuse to obey"	They reject your authority and do not submit to you.	A "yoke" is perceived as a hardship and was so negative that it could not be used of the Lord's rule. > Was replaced.
5:10	Go up through her vine rows and destroy, ...;		The verse was introduced by the clarifying sentence "I say to your	A potential logical problem is the pruning/trimming of branches in line

	Strip away her branches, For they are not the Lord's.		enemies: ...” Also, we begin by saying “Enter <u>my vineyard</u> ...”	(b) <i>after</i> “destroying” the vines in line (a).
23:15	I am going to feed them <u>wormwood</u> And make them drink <u>poisonous water</u>	Thompson (NICOT, 1980): “Yahweh’s sentence on false prophets was bitterness and tragedy.”	I will <u>afflict</u> them, I make them drink <u>poisonous water of punishment</u> .	The figurative use of wormwood for bitterness was not a problem, but the plant wormwood is unknown. Therefore, the two parts of the metaphor (wormwood & poison) got combined, and explicated.

3. Special case: shepherd

This metaphor is dealt with separately, because it occurs frequently; in the translation, not always the same solution was adopted.

Reference	NASB Text	Metaphor's meaning HB = <i>Handbook</i>	Back translation from receptor language	Remarks
2:8	The <u>priests</u> did not say, 'Where is the Lord?' And those <u>who handle the law</u> did not know Me; The <u>rulers</u> [<u>shepherds</u>] also transgressed against Me, And the <u>prophets</u> prophesied by Baal And walked after things that did not profit.	HB: shepherds = leaders / rulers.	leader / guide	While the synonyms (priests / who handle the law / prophets) could help to explain the meaning of "shepherd", it would be strange to have one of the nouns as a metaphor, while all the others are concrete terms (but it shows just how easily this "metaphor" works in Hebrew).
3:15	I will give you <u>shepherds</u> after My own heart, who will <u>feed you</u> on knowledge and understanding.	HB: shepherds = rulers. feed = teach. [Or: "lead with knowledge and understanding"? (e.g. NIV)]	leaders / guides lead with understanding	Metaphor resolved.
6:3	<u>Shepherds and their flocks</u> will come to her, They will pitch their tents around her.	HB ²	<u>Just like</u> shepherds come with their flocks ...	Metaphor was turned into a comparison.
23:1	<u>Woe to the shepherds</u> who are destroying and scattering <u>the sheep of My pasture!</u>	HB ³	We used a word that means a "male goat", and is also used figuratively for "guide / leader".	Receptor language has its own idiom. But "sheep of my pasture" became "my people".

² "For the understanding of **shepherds** as leaders or rulers, see 2.8; 3.15. TEV completely does away with the imagery by translating "kings"; GECL is able to maintain the imagery by using a noun that means "shepherds of people." It is possible to use a comparison; for example, "Kings will come with their soldiers, as shepherds come with their sheep...." ... It would seem advisable either to change the imagery entirely or to use a comparison, since in verses 4-5 the **shepherds** and **flocks** speak out."

³ "**Shepherds** (see 2.18; 3.15; 22.22) is translated "rulers" by TEV. GECL has "the leading men among my people." Whereas TEV does away completely with the figure of shepherd and sheep, GECL follows with the figure: "Like shepherds who don't care, they allow my flock to be scattered and destroyed." The sheep and shepherd image is so common in the Bible that most translators do try to retain it. One way is to use a simile, as in "How terrible for those rulers who destroy my people and let them be scattered. They are like shepherds scattering and destroying my sheep.""

4. Special case: unfaithful wife / prostitute

This metaphor is dealt with separately, because it occurs frequently;⁴ in the translation, not always the same solution was adopted.

Reference	NASB Text	Metaphor's meaning HB = <i>Handbook</i>	Back translation from receptor language	Remarks
2:20	But you said, 'I will not serve!' For on every high hill And under every green tree <u>You have lain down as a harlot.</u>	HB: "...Although some translations take this as a <u>figure of speech which means Israel's worshipping other gods was like someone who was unfaithful in marriage and went with prostitutes</u> (see NAB note, for example), it should in fact be taken literally of young Israelite women who dedicated themselves to the fertility god. ...". [Debatable.]	You said: We do not believe in you. <u>You were unfaithful to me and worshipped idols, just like a prostitute on high hills and under green trees</u>	The metaphor was kept and explained in the form of a comparison ("like ..."), but the significance of the "high hills" was not explicated in this place.
2:23	"How can you say, 'I am not defiled, I have not <u>gone after the Baals</u> '? Look at your way in the valley! Know what you have done! <u>You are a swift young camel entangling her ways</u>	HB: "It will be helpful in many cases to make the comparison clear from the beginning, as in "Be aware of what you have done. You are like a frantic young female camel running around in all directions" or "Look at what you're doing! You are running around in all directions like a wild camel in heat.""	... We have not <u>bowed down to the Baal</u> idols ... Think about the serious sins you have committed there. <u>Like a female camel in heat looking for a partner, you ran looking for idols.</u>	In the Hebrew itself, the metaphor is used as an additional illustration, after the matter of Baal worship was stated in clear terms already. In the translation, the point of comparison was stated once more.
3:6	Have you seen what <u>faithless Israel</u> did? She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and <u>she was a harlot there.</u>		Have you seen how bad Israel's <u>faithlessness</u> is? <u>Just like a woman committing adultery they worshipped idol gods</u> on high hills and under green trees.	Although the Hebrew text speaks explicitly of faithlessness, the metaphor was explained again (and in v. 8 again).

⁴ Very occasionally, it is not clear whether it is really a metaphor, or whether God accuses his people of committing actual adultery.

3:20	as a woman treacherously departs from her lover, <u>So</u> you have dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel,” declares the Lord.		We used “ ... like ...”.	Hebrew itself expresses a kind of comparison, using כֵּן <i>kēn</i> “so”.
5:7	They committed adultery And trooped to the harlot’s house.	HB: “See 3.8. Here again the reference is to the immorality connected with the worship of the Canaanite fertility gods.” [?]	<u>They related to me just like a woman who is faithless</u> to her husband. They hurried to the harlot houses.	Used simile. (One question that came up was whether the word choice should reflect (a) a case of adultery, or (b) a wife who has left her husband for good, or (c) prostitution.)

Conclusion

At first, each metaphor has to be interpreted. In some places, the sense is debated (as e.g. “to feed” in 3:15).

Metaphors can be solved in the following ways:

1. Keeping the metaphor as in Hebrew
2. Keeping the metaphor, and adding an explanatory phrase
3. Turning the metaphor into a comparison / simile
4. Replacing the metaphor by another metaphor or idiom of the receptor language
5. Replacing the metaphor by a concrete wording.

In extended allegories, it is sometimes enough to add an explanatory phrase in the beginning, and then continue in figurative language.