

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF SHAME IN THE HEBREW BIBLE:
THE PROPHETIC CONTRIBUTION**

By J Stiebert

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In this publication Johanna Stiebert explores the phenomenon of shame and shame language in the Major Prophets, since shame vocabulary is the most prevalent in these biblical books. In the *introductory chapter* she tries to indicate the multi-faceted nature of shame (cultural, social, psychological – cognitive, emotional - and physiological dimensions). Especially Scheff's sociological study of shame (in which he emphasises the emotional as well as the social aspect of shame) seems to provide a useful framework for approaching the phenomenon of shame and shame language. According to Scheff *shame operates continuously, in human interaction but also in solitude*. Experienced as a compelling emotion, shame induces conformity (23). As such, shame language could be regarded as *facilitating the impression that certain conduct should incite feelings of disgust, or that such conduct might stigmatise an individual within his or her social group*.

In the *first chapter* Stiebert points to the fact that shame is widely discussed in both the literature of psychology (in contradistinction to guilt) and social anthropology (in binary opposition with honour, where it is associated particularly with women and public loss of shame). In recent years the honour-shame model has been regularly applied in the analysis of biblical texts, particularly the patriarchal narratives and Deuteronomistic history. However, Stiebert argues that the honour / shame model is inadequate for the interpretation of shame in prophetic literature, since the honour / shame model tends to apply to static societies, whereas the social conditions implied in prophetic literature is normally depicted as times of turmoil and social change, related to the exile. Thus, she questions the application of observations from more static societies to contexts of disrupted social conditions. Sociological models based on contexts of social revolt might be more appropriate (164). For Stiebert honour / shame *does not emerge as a useful binary pairing for the purposes of examining human interactions in biblical literature* (165). This is an interesting viewpoint, and will evoke reactions from different interest groups.

Insightful is Stiebert's discussion of anti-language, deviance amplification and grotesque language in the prophetic literature. *Anti-language* refers to languages of anti-societies *seeking self-consciously to create a different kind of society from that which has been or is dominant. The purpose is to radically alter everything and is characterized by overcharged rhetoric, subversive wordplay and metaphor, vulgarity and grotesque parodies of reality*. It is a medium of resistance and protest. It is also an insiders language and difficult to for the outsider to compre-

hend. In the literature of sociology, *deviance amplification* is described as originating in social groups *wishing to promote and enforce an agenda by distorting and exaggerating that which they label deviant, with a view to justifying and bringing about its containment*. It can have an inflammatory effect and could lead to certain action by those who are addressed. *Anti-language* tendencies might suggest a subversive or extremist provenance, *deviance amplification* the infiltration of an inflammatory ideology, of responding to social crisis by inciting more moral panic. Characteristics of *grotesque language* include exaggeration, hyperbole and excessiveness focused especially on the body and bodily life. *This focus may conceal a larger, cosmic dimension, most often a catastrophe, the terror of which is made bearable through the degraded, humanized and transformed characteristics of the grotesque*. Even though the essentially comic quality of the grotesque is less clear in the book of Ezekiel, Stiebert presents a strong argument, indicating that grotesque language, anti-language and deviance amplification can provide a valuable lens through which the functioning of shame and the use of shame language in the Major Prophets can be interpreted.

It should be pointed out that Stiebert does raise the important question as to what degree existing social realities are reflected in prophetic literature (85). She points to the limitations or impossibility to reconstruct social reality on the basis of biblical texts (165), *'since anthropological studies does not provide one with a 'native's perspective.'* It follows that an understanding of shame does not necessarily propel us to understand social constructions of the time when these texts were produced. Despite this, Stiebert does suggest a date after 587 BCE (Second Temple period) for the development of the three Major Prophets, since the more stable social context would have allowed for the composition of this material (2).

In chapter 2 she investigates shame in the book of Isaiah. She tries to illustrate the deficiencies of the honour and shame model and also discusses shame vocabulary in the context of idolatry discourses (86). Although Isaiah contains a lot of honour and shame vocabulary, it is difficult to argue for it reflecting the social patterns of honour and shame societies (108-109). Honour belongs to Yahweh (as both the source of honour and the generator of shame) and is not primarily associated with men or contested for by them. Shame is depicted as belonging to humanity in general and not to women in particular. The negative feminised imagery is balanced with positive woman metaphors pertaining to restoration. The challenge-riposte interaction does not feature prominently in Isaiah. She suggests that shame in Isaiah pertains to an unsound moral condition, to the disapproved of practice of idolatry and to a dysfunctional relationship between humanity and deity. Idolatry is linked with both shame and foreignness, which may point to an anti-foreign ideology.

In chapter 3 she investigates shame language in the book of Jeremiah and argues that a social-scientific model such as the honour / shame matrix is unsuitable for examining shame discourses. She proposes Ideological criticism as an appropriate alternative (127-128) since it challenges the reading of texts at face value and recognizes that texts (may) have agendas. A discernable agenda in

Jeremiah is the anti-foreign polemic. As in Isaiah, shame and idolatry are repeatedly linked, but so are shame and infertility (emphasizing the dangerous and shameful nature of 'foreign contamination'). Sexual metaphor is also a feature, linked to the condemnation of apostasy as well as foreign practices. Perhaps it is aimed at effecting revulsion and restraint in the form of proper shame. Jeremiah attests both a positive and a negative meaning of shame.

In chapter 4, which is particularly insightful, the focus is on the book of Ezekiel. The connections and distinctions between shame and impurity are pointed out. Impurity is linked with deliberate transgressions and has an ethical dimension (161-162). This is also seen in Yahweh's granting of *restoration, which entails outward cleansing as well as the acknowledgement of guilt and inward purging*. Accordingly, the vulgar sexual imagery in Ezekiel is used to evoke the realization of defilement and shame. The negative depiction of both actual and metaphorical women (e.g. the women / city metaphors of Ezek 16 and 23) forms part of this evocation. In this regard Stiebert reminds the reader that a preoccupation with the surface meaning of the feminised metaphors has sometimes ignored the fact that they are actually aimed at Jerusalem. Therefore she is critical of anachronistic readings, e.g. A Brenner who views the material in the book of Ezekiel as pornographic and misogynistic, or DJ Halperin who provides a Freudian reading of the book and views the prophet Ezekiel as suffering from an Oedipus complex. Responding to such readings, Stiebert points out that *shame in the context of an anti-language would constitute neither the repressed sexual drive of an individual (psycho-analytical), nor would it be inculcated by misogynist ideologies with a view to subjugating women (feminist); instead it would be inculcated to subvert and resist the values of a ruined culture and to construct an alternative counter-reality*.

In the short excursus on shame and shame language in the *Psalter* she indicates that shame is presented as a generally outward condition, *a state of humiliation rather than the self-conscious, subjective emotion of personal shortcoming*. It is important to note that shame language in the context of sexual imagery is absent in the *Psalter*. Here Yahweh is also considered as the generator of shame, though Stiebert is correct in stating that the role of Yahweh in the analysis of shame language in the Hebrew Bible needs further investigation (165).

This publication raises some important questions concerning the methodology employed in the study of shame and shame language in the Hebrew Bible, especially the Major Prophets. It also makes some valuable suggestions. Stiebert clearly illustrates that the multifaceted and complex nature of the phenomenon of shame necessitates a variety of approaches for elucidation (i.e. a more multi-dimensional approach) and that hasty conclusions (resulting from one-dimensional approaches) should be avoided. It is clear that different disciplines still have much to learn from each other regarding the study of shame. For this reason, no definition or understanding of shame can be separated from social, ethical, theological and ideological factors. Stiebert makes a valuable contribution to the study of shame and shame language in the Hebrew Bible and this publication can be recommended to all interested parties.