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Euphemism in the Hebrew Bible

Euphemism is the substitution of a word that is unpleasant, offensive, or taboo with another word. Since a euphemism’s primary function is substitution, it can, and often does, overlap with other usages and devices, such as antiphrasis, litotes, metaphors, double entendres, and addad-words (i.e., contronyms, lexemes that bear both one meaning and its opposite meaning). There are numerous types of euphemisms in the Hebrew Bible, and many can be found in the cognate languages (Landsberger 1929; Anbar 1979; Marcus 1980; Held 1987; Paul 1994b; 1995; 2000; Schorch 1999). Though scholars have long been aware of them (Grimm 1901; Nöldeke 1910; Geiger 1928; Melammed 1948; Brichto 1963; Opelt 1966; Ullendorff 1979), the euphemisms in the Hebrew Bible have received comprehensive treatment only in more recent times (Schorch 1999).

The majority of euphemisms found in the Hebrew Bible avoid explicit reference to the usual issues of (a) death (Paul 1994b; Schorch 1999:215–220); (b) sex (Delcor 1973; Ullendorff 1979; Gravett 2004; Paul 1994a; 1997; 2000; Schorch 1999:220–225); and (c) distasteful things (Schorch 1999:222–224). In addition, one finds terms that (d) avoid making direct negative reference to oneself or God (Melamed 1948; Schorch 1999:227–232). Most of the euphemisms surveyed herein appear in the Hebrew text itself. A few others appear in the Masoretic margins and alert the reader that a substitution should be used when reading the text aloud (Pope 1992; Schorch 2000:256; Paul 2007). These belong to the larger category of Masoretic glosses known as qotiqune soppim ‘scribal corrections’, which provide the reader with an alternative for what is written by way of the Ketiv/Qere ‘written/read’ system (Tov 2001:64–67).

Euphemisms for ‘death’ in the Bible include נָחָת ‘to recline’ (Job 17.16), רָעָד ‘to ascend’ (Gen. 37.5), נָפַל ‘to fall’ (1 Sam. 4.10; cf. Job 3.16), נֶגֶס ‘end’ (Gen. 6.13), נַמָּה ‘silence’ (Ps. 115.17), נָהַלַכְתָּ ‘to go the way’ (1 Kgs 2.2), נַמָּת ‘to be complete’ (Num. 14.33), and נֶפֶשׂ ‘is not, is no more’ (Ps. 39.14). A number of verbs for dying are passive (generally, but not exclusively, נִפְלָת) forms. These include נִגַּח ‘to be seized’ (Job 9.12), נְצַמֶּח ‘to be gathered’ (Dan. 12.2), נְכָבָה ‘to be swept away’ (Num. 16.26), נִכְרַת ‘to finish’ (Job 36.11), נָף ‘to cut off’ (Jer. 11.19; cf. Isa. 5.8), נְבַשָּׁה ‘to sever’ (Job 27.8), נֶאֶסֶף ‘to be gathered’ (Deut. 32.50), נֶפֶשׁ ‘to take’ (Jon. 4.3).

The deceased lying in state is euphemistically called נֶשֶׁת ‘couch’ (2 Sam. 3.31) or a נֹשֶׁב ‘bed’ (2 Chron. 16.14). The underworld or grave is referred to as a נַבְיִית ‘house’ (Job 17.13; cf. Qoh. 12.5), נֵבֶר ‘cistern’ (Isa. 14.15), נֵבָר ‘dust’ (Dan. 12.2), נֵבֵשׁ ‘land’ (Jer. 17.13), נִבְרָת ‘ruin, pit’ (Ps. 30.10), or simply as נֵב ‘thee’ (Job 1.21). Euphemisms for the moment of death include נִבְדָת ‘applied time’ (Qoh. 7.17).

Some euphemisms soften the topic of ‘killing’. These include נָגַג ‘to touch’ (Exod. 12.23), נִבְדָת ‘to obtain relief from’ (Isa. 1.24), and נִבְדָת ‘to smite’ (Gen. 4.15), and they sometimes are attributed to the נַבְדָת ‘hand of God’ (2 Sam. 24.17).

Related are euphemisms that refer to fatal illness and disease. When one becomes ill, verbs such as נָגַג ‘to touch’ (2 Kgs 15.5) or נָגַג ‘to strike’ (Zech. 14.12) are used, often again collocated with the נַבְדָת ‘hand’ of God (1 Sam. 5.9). A ‘quarantine zone’ is euphemistically called בֶּט הָאָבֶפָּה ‘house of freedom’ (2 Chron. 26.21 [Qere]).

A great many euphemisms relate to sex, especially sexual body parts. Thus, one finds a number of substitutions for the word ‘penis’, including נַבְדָת ‘hand’ (Isa. 57.8), נַבְדָת ‘leg’ (Isa. 7.20), נַבְדָת ‘thigh’ (Gen. 24.2), נַבְדָת
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pabad ‘haunch’ (Job 40.17b), beryk ‘knee’ (Ezek. 7.17), bawsh ‘heel’ (Jer. 13.22), basar ‘flesh’ (Lev. 15.2), bawsh zanab ‘tail’ (Job 40.17a), awr qimma ‘stream’ (Ezek. 23.20), kali ‘vessel’ (1 Sam. 21.6), and awqil sakh ‘pourer’ (Deut. 23.2). A pejorative euphemism for ‘penis’ occurs in 1 Kgs 12.10, where it is called a waw qatan lit. ‘little, i.e., pinky finger’. A euphemism for ‘testicles’ is wawem mishsim ‘objects that invite shame’ (Deut. 25.11).

A euphemism for ‘vulva’ is awr yorer ‘navel’ (Song 7.3), while other (apparently more pejorative) terms for female genitalia include the use of awem mishsim (Deut. 25.2). In addition to basic verbs meaning ‘lie’, ‘love’, ‘know’, ‘come, enter’, etc., ancient Hebrew attests to the following euphemistic usages for sexual intercourse: min aly wapas ‘to stretch out’ (Lev. 20.16), qar karda ‘to crouch’ (Job 31.10), waw tahan ‘to grind’ (Job 31.9–10), warsh haras ‘to plow’ (Judg. 14.18), awqil gilal ‘to reveal’ (Isa. 57.8), and awqil ‘akal ‘to eat’ (Gen. 39.6). The noun awqil zimmah ‘plan, scheme, mischief’ is wawem mishsim (Deut. 25.2).

Euphemisms that avoid distasteful things include the use of warsh bawsh yasad hush ‘to sit outside’ (Deut. 23.14) and qawar yasad haksar raglayim ‘to cover the legs’ for ‘to defecate’ (1 Sam. 24.3) and ay hadia ‘that which has exited’ for ‘feces’ (Deut. 23.14). ‘Menstruation’ is referred to as a woman’s wawy derek ‘way’ (Gen. 31.35) or坳ha ‘orah ‘path’ (Gen. 18.11); see also wawem mishsim ‘iddim ‘period’ (Isa. 64.5).

Lest they impinge on the divine or invoke his wrath, the Israelites euphemistically avoided making direct negative reference to Yahweh. Thus, those who curse God are said to wawy berek ‘bless’ him (1 Kgs 21.10; Job 1.5); while the man who blasphemed Yahweh is said to have done so to warsh hasam ‘the Name’ (Lev. 24.11). Similarly, when the Israelites made oaths, they avoided 1st-person references. Thus, when David swears an oath, he states “May God do so to the enemies of David” (1 Sam. 25.22). When Micah sought to retrieve his priest and the gods he had made from the Danites, the latter threatened him and his men by saying “Shut up, lest some desperate men (i.e., we) attack you, and you gather your life and the life of your household” (Judg. 18.25).

Several of the tiqune soprim arose due to concern for harsh language, e.g., 2 Sam. 12.14, where the addition of awr ovy ‘enemies of’ creates a text which has David spurning the enemies of Yahweh (quite nonsensically, in fact) instead of Yahweh himself (cf. Mulder 1968; Parry 2006). The Masoretic device of Ketiv/Qere ‘written/read’ also signals euphemisms at times. Thus, we are advised to read awk sakh ‘to lie down’ instead of awk sagonal ‘to ravish’ (Deut. 28.30; Isa. 13.16; Jer. 3.2; Zech. 14.2); wawem mishsim ‘to ravish’ instead of wawem mishsim mahara ‘toilet’ (2 Kgs 10.27); wawem mishsim ‘their exits’ instead of wawem mishsim bareh ‘their feces’ (2 Kgs 18.27; Isa. 36.12); and wawem mishsim ‘water of their legs’ instead of wawem mishsim sehen ‘their urine’ (2 Kgs 18.27; Isa. 36.12).

References
Marcus, David. 1986. “Some antiphatic euphemisms for a blind person in Akkadian and other

Evidential

Evidentiality is a category that indicates the source of information bringing a speaker to utter an underlying proposition, and by so doing to establish the reliability of the propositional content (Chafe and Nichols 1986). Cross-linguistically, the category is marked by quite a wide array of linguistic means (Willett 1988; Palmer 2001). Scholars point to a correlation between grammaticalization of the category and the oral/written divide: oral languages tend to have dedicated morphemes or grammatical forms for expressing the category, while written languages tend to make more use of adverbal expressions, parenthetic remarks, and embedding under perception and mental verbs (cf. Cirque 1999; Rooryck 2001a; 2001b). Generally speaking, languages make a distinction between evidential markers for direct or indirect evidence for the underlying proposition (Willett 1988; Palmer 2001), where direct evidence is obtained via sensory means and indirect evidence depends either on report or reasoning inference. However, there is no overall agreement on exactly how to delimit the category and to define it semantically in a uniform manner.

Modern Hebrew does not have dedicated morphemes that mark evidentiality. This meaning can be expressed by complective clauses, parentheticals, and adverbal expressions, exemplified in what follows, each in its turn.

(1a) רוצי הוהילדימ אוכל יצורים
ra’iti še-ha-yeladim ’axlu
saw-1cs that-the-children ate-3mpl
sohorayim lunch
‘I saw that the children ate lunch’.

(1b) רוצי הוהילדימ אוכל יצורים
ra’iti ’et ha-yeladim ’oxlim
saw-1cs acc the-children eat mpl
sohorayim lunch
‘I saw the children eat lunch’.

(1a), which presents a full embedded finite clause under a perception verb, differs considerably from (1b), where the embedded clause is dependent on the time of the main clause. The former