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Table of Contents

VOLUME ONE

Introduction	vii
List of Contributors	ix
Transcription Tables	xiii
Articles A-F	I

VOLUME TWO

Transcription Tables	vii
Articles G-O	I

VOLUME THREE

Transcription Tables	vii
Articles P-Z	I

VOLUME FOUR

Transcription Tables	vii
Index	I

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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 *addād*-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 *תקוני סופרים* *tiqqune soḥrim* '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 עָבַר 'ābar 'to pass away' (Nah. 1.12), שָׁכַב šākab 'to lie down' (Isa. 14.8), יָשָׁן yāšēn 'to sleep' (Jer. 51.39), נָוַם nūm 'to slumber' (Nah. 3.18), נָוַח nūah 'to rest' (Prov. 21.16), נָחַת nāhat 'to recline' (Job 17.16), יָרַד yārad 'to descend' (Gen. 37.5), נָפַל nāpal 'to fall' (1 Sam. 4.10; cf. Job 3.16), קָץ qēs 'end' (Gen. 6.13), הָלַךְ דְּוָמָה dūmā 'silence' (Ps. 115.17), הָלַךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ hālak bad-derek 'to go the way' (1 Kgs 2.2), תָּמַם tāmam 'to be complete' (Num. 14.33), and אֵין 'ēn 'is not, is no more' (Ps. 39.14). A number of verbs for dying are passive (generally, but not exclusively, *nif'al*) forms. These include הִטָּף hātaḥ 'to snatch' (Job 9.12), קִימָה qummaḥ 'to be seized' (Job 22.16), נִקְּפָץ niqpaṣ 'to be drawn in' (Job 24.24), נִסְּפָה nispa 'to be swept away' (Num. 16.26), כִּלְּלָה killā 'to finish' (Job 36.11), נִקְּרַת nikraṭ 'to be cut off' (Jer. 11.19; cf. Isa. 53.8), בָּצַע bāsa 'to sever' (Job 27.8), נִאֶסַף ne'ēsaf 'to be gathered' (Deut. 32.50), לָקַח lāqah 'to take' (Jon. 4.3).

The deceased lying in state is euphemistically called a מִטָּה mittā 'couch' (2 Sam. 3.31) or a מִשְׁכָּב miškāb 'bed' (2 Chron. 16.14). The underworld or grave is referred to as a בַּיִת bayit 'house' (Job 17.13; cf. Qoh. 12.5), בּוֹר bōr 'cistern' (Isa. 14.15), עָפָר 'āpār 'dust' (Dan. 12.2), אֶרֶץ 'ereṣ 'land' (Jer. 17.13), שְׁחָת šahat 'ruin, pit' (Ps. 30.10), or simply as שָׁם šām 'there' (Job 1.21). Euphemisms for the moment of death include one's יוֹם yōm 'day' (Job 15.32) and עֵת 'ēt 'appointed time' (Qoh. 7.17).

Some euphemisms soften the topic of 'killing'. These include נָגַע nāgā 'to touch' (Exod. 12.23), נִחַם niḥam 'to obtain relief from' (Isa. 1.24), and הִכָּה hikkā 'to smite' (Gen. 4.15), and they sometimes are attributed to the יָד yād 'hand' of God (2 Sam. 24.17).

Related are euphemisms that refer to fatal illness and disease. When one becomes ill, verbs such as נָגַע nigga 'to touch' (2 Kgs 15.5) or נָגַף nāgāp 'to strike' (Zech. 14.12) are used, often again collocated with the יָד yād 'hand' of God (1 Sam. 5.9). A 'quarantine zone' is euphemistically called a בֵּית הַחֲפְשִׁית bēt ha-hāpšit '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 יָד yād 'hand' (Isa. 57.8), רֵגֶל reḡel 'leg' (Isa. 7.20), יָרֵךְ yārēk 'thigh' (Gen. 24.2), פְּחָד p̄ḥad

paḥad ‘haunch’ (Job. 40.17b), *בֶּרֶךְ* *berek* ‘knee’ (Ezek. 7.17), *עֶקֶב* *‘āqēb* ‘heel’ (Jer. 13.22), *בָּשָׂר* *bāšār* ‘flesh’ (Lev. 15.2), *זָנָב* *zānāb* ‘tail’ (Job 40.17a), *זֵרְמָה* *zirmā* ‘stream’ (Ezek. 23.20), *כֶּלִי* *kālī* ‘vessel’ (1 Sam. 21.6), and *שֹׁפְכָה* *šāpkā* ‘pouurer’ (Deut. 23.2). A pejorative euphemism for ‘penis’ occurs in 1 Kgs 12.10, where it is called a *קָטָן* *qātān* lit. ‘little, i.e., pinky finger’. A euphemism for ‘testicles’ is *מַבְשִׂים* *mabūšim* ‘objects that invoke shame’ (Deut. 25.11).

A euphemism for ‘vulva’ is *שֹׁרֶר* *šōrēr* ‘navel’ (Song 7.3), while other (apparently more pejorative) terms for female genitalia include *פֶּה* *pe* lit. ‘mouth, i.e., vagina’ (Prov. 30.20), *לָשׁוֹן* *lāšōn* lit. ‘tongue, i.e., clitoris’ (Isa. 57.4), and *קָלוֹן* *qālōn* lit. ‘dishonor, i.e., vulva’ (Jer. 13.26).

In addition to basic verbs meaning ‘lie’, ‘love’, ‘know’, ‘come, enter’, etc., ancient Hebrew attests to the following euphemistic usages for sexual intercourse: *רָבַעַ* *rābaʿ* ‘to stretch out’ (Lev. 20.16), *כָּרַעַ* *kāraʿ* ‘to crouch’ (Job 31.10), *טָחַן* *ṭāḥan* ‘to grind’ (Job 31.9–10), *חָרַשׁ* *ḥāraš* ‘to plow’ (Judg. 14.18), *גִּלְלָהּ* *gillā* ‘to reveal’ (Isa. 57.8), and *אָכַל* *ākāl* ‘to eat’ (Gen. 39.6). The noun *זִמְמָה* *zimmā* ‘plan, scheme, mischief’ is used for ‘fornication’ (Judg. 20.6) and ‘incest’ (Lev. 18.17). A ‘woman’ may be erotically referred to as a *גַּן* *gan* ‘garden’ (Song 4.12), *כֶּרֶם* *kerem* ‘vineyard’ (Song 2.15), *בּוֹר* *bōr* ‘cistern’ (Prov. 5.15), *מַעְיָן* *maʿyān* ‘spring’ (Song 4.12), and *מְקוֹר* *māqōr* ‘spring’ (Prov. 5.18).

Euphemisms that avoid distasteful things include the use of *יָשַׁב חוּץ* *yāšab ḥūš* ‘to sit outside’ (Deut. 23.14) and *הִסִּיד רַגְלִים* *hāsīd raglīm* ‘to cover the legs’ for ‘to defecate’ (1 Sam. 24.3); and *צָאָה* *šēʿā* ‘that which has exited’ for ‘feces’ (Deut. 23.14). ‘Menstruation’ is referred to as a woman’s *דֶּרֶךְ* *derek* ‘way’ (Gen. 31.35) or *אוֹרֵחַ* *ōraḥ* ‘path’ (Gen. 18.11); see also *עֲדִים* *iddīm* ‘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 *בֵּרַךְ* *bēraḥ* ‘bless’ him (1 Kgs 21.10; Job 1.5); while the man who blasphemed Yahweh is said to have done so to *הַשֵּׁם* *haš-šēm* ‘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 *tiqqune soḥrim* arose due to concern for harsh language, e.g., 2 Sam. 12.14, where the addition of *אֹיְבֵי* *‘ōybē* ‘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 *שָׁכַב* *šākab* ‘to lie down’ instead of *שָׁגַל* *šāgal* ‘to ravish’ (Deut. 28.30; Isa. 13.16; Jer. 3.2; Zech. 14.2); *טַחְוִרִים* *ṭahōrīm* ‘swellings’ instead of *עֲפָלִים* *‘āpālīm* ‘hemorrhoids’ (Deut. 28.27; 1 Sam. 5.6); *מּוֹצְאוֹת* *mōšā’ōt* ‘places of exiting’ instead of *מַחְרָאוֹת* *mahārā’ōt* ‘toilets’ (2 Kgs 10.27); *צוֹאֲתָם* *šō’ātām* ‘their exitings’ instead of *חֲרִיָּהֶם* *ḥārēhem* ‘their feces’ (2 Kgs 18.27; Isa. 36.12); and *מֵימֵי רַגְלֵיהֶם* *mēmē raglēhem* ‘water of their legs’ instead of *שֵׁנֵיהֶם* *šēnēhem* ‘their urine’ (2 Kgs 18.27; Isa. 36.12).

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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 adverbial expressions, parenthetical remarks, and embedding under perception and mental verbs (cf. Cinque 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 completive clauses, parentheticals, and adverbial expressions, exemplified in what follows, each in its turn.

- (1a) ראיתי שהילדים אכלו צהרים
ra'iti še-ha-yeladim 'axlu
 saw-ICS that-the-children ate-3CPL
šohorayim
 lunch
 'I saw that the children ate lunch'.
- (1b) ראיתי את הילדים אוכלים צהרים
ra'iti 'et ha-yeladim 'oxlim
 saw-ICS ACC the-children eat-MPL
šohorayim
 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