

RAW MATERIAL

Studies in Biblical Sexuality

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Chapter 4

Euphemism

Talking Around the Issue

Pages 30-32

2nd Revised Ed. 2010

Euphemism

Talking Around the Issues

Euphemisms abound in Hebrew when the topic is sexual body parts and activities. Euphemisms for sexual terms, bodily wastes and death are common to most languages. However, these euphemisms usually have common non-euphemistic terms as well. In classical Hebrew, in spite of our extensive texts in and out of the canon, very few non-euphemistic sexual terms are preserved. The strong showing of euphemistic sexual terms may be related to the strong prohibition on nakedness.

The following are some of the more common euphemisms in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Sex Act

To Know: ידע — Gen 4:1, 17, 25

To Go Into: בוא אל — Gen 38:2,18

To Lie (With): שכב — Gen 34:2 Often with זרע (semen/seed).

To Approach: קרב — Lev 18:19

To Approach / Touch: נגש — Ex 19:15

To Humble: ענה — Gen 34:2; 2 Sam 13:12,14. There is a noun ענה for the conjugal rights of the wife (Ex 21:10). Probably the most loaded of the sexual euphemisms in the Hebrew language, a man's first sexual encounter with a woman is sometimes described as him "humbling" her (e.g. Gen 34:2; Deut 22:24,29). The term may specify rape, though this is not certain. The woman's loss of legitimate status does seem to be implied (van Wolde). The cognate noun does not indicate rape or loss of status. The root ענה is complex and difficult to chart. Its two main meanings are "answer" and "humiliate / afflict." Rabbis and most scholars understand the sexual term to derive from the second meaning. However the first meaning, "answer", should also be considered as a possibility, making ענה similar to "know."

The Penis

Flesh: בשר — Gen 17:11,14,23-25; Lev 15:2-19; Ezk 16:26; 23:20

Thigh: ירך — Gen 24:2,9

Hand: יד — Is 57:8

Groin/Hips: מתנים — 1 Kings 12:10

Spout (?): שפכה — Deut 23:1 (2). שפך, a verb, has the meaning of "pour / spill".

Feet / Legs: רגלים — Ex 4:24-26, Zipporah touches Moses' "feet." Is 6:2, the Seraphim have a pair of wings to cover their "feet." Ruth 3:7, she uncovers the "feet" of Boaz and lies down. In levirate transactions the foot and sandal are symbolic of the

semen provider — the levirate husband (Deut 25:5-10; Ruth 4:7-8). It is unlikely that feet/legs is a euphemism for the female genitals. The female image functions well if רגליים is translated without euphemism as "legs" (Deut 28:57; Ezk 16:25).

Urine = "foot water" — 2 Kings 18:27; Is 36:12. Pubic hair = "hair of feet" — Is 7:20; Ezk 16:7.

Testicles

[] — No term. Deut 23:1(2) refers to something "crushed", and most scholars assume that it is part of the male genitals. Translators and commentators usually understand testicles as the crushed portion of the genitals.

Shameful items: מבשים — Deut 25:11. The plural (dual?) form may either specify the testicles or include the penis as well.

The Vagina

Flesh: בשר — Lev 15:19 Like the male term.

Ejaculation

Flow: זרמה — Ezk 23:20

Lying to Seed: שכב לזרע — Lev 18:20, 23 (LXX)

Menstruation

The Way of Women: דרך נשם — Gen 31:35

Flow: זבה — Lev 15:19,25 A rare non-euphemism.

Impurity: נדה — Lev 12:2; 15:20, 25; 18:19 The official result of menstruation.

Illness / Weakness: דוה — Lev 12:2; 15:35; 20:18, possibly Is 30:22.

Period / Count: עדה / עדים — Is 64:5

Exceptions

Some terms are rarely if ever replaced by euphemisms, e.g. fornicate / prostitute (זונה), commit adultery (נאף), breast (שד), womb (רחם), semen/seed (זרע) Testicle (אשך) occurs once in non-euphemistic form. There is an exceptional non-euphemism which demonstrates the desire to use euphemism in the Hebrew texts. This non-euphemism is the verb שגל, a term for sexual intercourse considered too graphic to be spoken. The verb occurs four times (Deut. 28:30; Isaiah 13:16; Jer 3:2; Zech 14:2), each text is very harsh, and the rabbis substituted the euphemism שכב (to lie with) in each case. The verb שגל is not to be spoken, even when it occurs in the inspired text.

The two most common non-euphemisms are foreskin (ערלה) and circumcise (מול). Not only are the two terms specific and non-euphemistic terms concerning the

male genitals, but they also are used metaphorically for other concepts. Best known is the expression of circumcising the foreskin of one's heart (e.g. Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4). At one point in the Law of Moses off-limits fruit trees are described as having a foreskin (Lev 19:23-25) and thus being "uncircumcised." These terms can be juxtaposed to euphemisms with no apparent difficulty. In Genesis 17:23-24 Abraham "circumcised the flesh of his / their foreskin." Here the euphemism "flesh" is used with non-euphemisms "circumcise" and "foreskin." The foreskin is the one part of the male genitalia which truly entered common Hebrew conversation due to the importance of infant circumcision in Israelite society, and the foreskin stood as a characteristic of unclean outsiders.

The strong showing of euphemisms in the Biblical texts indicates a certain modesty in ancient Israel concerning sexual matters. The only other subject attracting this much euphemism is death, most often euphemised as "sleep." Their modesty did not prevent common talk about sexual matters. However the euphemisms indicate, along with the strong taboo on nakedness, that sexual matters were not treated as common and were kept private as far as possible.