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Bowdlerizing in the Old Testament

A recent reading of Noël Perrin's *Dr. Bowdler's Legacy*¹ and its chapter on bowdlerizing the Bible led me to pursue a subject which had been lying dormant in the back of my mind since my studies for my doctoral dissertation.² Thomas Bowdler (1754–1825) was an English editor of an expurgated edition of Shakespeare. He went on from there to the King James Bible and other examples of English literature. His activities led to the verb “to bowdlerize”—“to expurgate by removing or modifying passages prudishly considered immodest.”³ While Bowdler has given his name to a common literary device, it was already widely practiced long before his time in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament.

My initial inquiry had begun with the text of 2 Sam 12: 14: “. . . thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme” (KJV). The Hebrew text does not permit this translation, as if a causative form of the verb were there. The verbs—infinitive construct and perfect—are both Piel. To be sure, there are some Hebrew verbs which have a causative meaning in the Piel; for example, *mālē* Qal, “to be full”; Piel, “to fill”; and *kālā* Qal, “to be complete”; Piel, “to complete.” But the Piel of *nā'aš* never has the meaning of “cause to blaspheme.”

The text as it stands can be translated only as “because you have greatly blasphemed the enemies of the Lord,” which makes no sense in this context. The solution was noted by C. D. Ginsburg,⁴ that the word *'yby* “enemies of” was inserted by a scribe to absolve David of Nathan's harsh judgment “you have greatly blasphemed the Lord.”

A similar act of the scribe may have occurred in 2 Sam 12: 9. Here Nathan's condemnation of David is “wherefore hast thou despised the com-

mandment of the Lord?" One could argue that David's act of adultery with Bathsheba and his subsequent legalized murder of her husband constituted "despising the word [or commandment] of the Lord." But I would suggest that the original indictment by Nathan may well have been "wherefore hast thou despised the Lord?" and that this sacrilegious idea was softened by a scribe who inserted the word *dbr*. It is interesting that Theodotion omitted the word.

Another form of bowdlerizing in the MT is the use of euphemisms for genital organs. In Gen 24: 2-3 Abraham commands his servant, "Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear." The servant is to touch the scrotum of Abraham, much as we put our hand on a Bible to be sworn as a witness in court. Here was the whole future of Abraham's seed to ensure the servant's carrying out the command. Is it a coincidence that in Latin *testis* means both "scrotum" and "witness"?

In Is 6: 2 we are told that the seraph in the prophet's vision used two wings "to cover his feet." From the use of the word "feet" elsewhere as a euphemism, it is likely that the seraph was covering his genitals. Other examples would include Is 7: 20 where "hair of the feet" means "pubic hair," and Ruth 3: 4, 7 where the young widow's "uncovering the feet of Boaz" may mean "exposing his genitals." In Ex 4: 25 Zipporah's act in casting her son's bloody foreskin at Moses' "feet" may mean "touching his genitals."

Deut 11: 10 *whšqyt brglk* "and waterest it [the land] with thy foot" (KJV) has been a puzzle to the commentators. "As far as we know, most of the machines used in lifting water into irrigation ditches were not run by the foot."⁵ Could it be that the Hebrew workers turned aside in their labors to perform a natural function, much as millions of farm laborers before them and since have done? Thus "water with thy foot" may mean "to urinate."

It is well known that elsewhere in the Old Testament the MT bowdlerizes its descriptions of natural functions. In Judg 3: 24 Eglon, king of Moab, is said to be "covering his feet" *msyk hw' ʿt-rglyw* when he was evidently relieving himself. Similarly, in 1 Sam 24: 3, Saul was "covering his feet" (RSV "went in to relieve himself"). A less certain case is that in which natural functions may have been intended by the euphemism "gone aside." In Esther 7: 7, King Ahasuerus "rose up in wrath and went into the palace garden," leaving his vizier, Haman, alone with the young queen. Perhaps the king had had too much wine at the feast, which necessitated his hasty departure from the scene.

Another euphemism for "genitals" in the Old Testament is "nakedness." In Gen 9: 22 Ham is cursed for seeing his father's nakedness. Some com-

mentators⁶ have suggested that the severity of the curse on Ham was due to his having committed an unnatural act with his father, for which the MT used a euphemism. Elsewhere (Lev 18: 6 ff) "carnal knowledge" is similarly bowdlerized by the expression "to uncover the nakedness of."

The Babylonian Talmud⁷ suggests another example. In Is 62: 4 "and your land Married" (MT *b'ūlah*, the passive participle from the verb *bā'al*, "to possess as a husband") is possibly alluding to the sexual act in which the land is impregnated by the rain, as the husband upon the wife.

Another example of euphemism can be seen in Ezek 16: 17, where the text *šalmē zākār*, literally "images of flesh [or men]," has been translated in the RSV "and with them has played the harlot." Could this coarse language of the prophet mean that the women were using dildoes?

Dr. Bowdler was not alone in his desire to clean up the Bible, Shakespeare, Burns, and other works of English literature. In 1952, there appeared the *Olive Pell Bible*,⁸ published by Mrs. Pell at her own expense. A vegetarian, she took out of the Bible all mention of the eating of meat, as well as of sex and violence. It sold fairly well, a commercial publisher took over the book, and it is still in print.

NOTES

¹ Perrin, Noel, *Dr. Bowdler's Legacy: A History of Expurgated Books in England and America*. New York: Atheneum, 1969.

² Englert, Donald M. C., *The Peshitto of Second Samuel (JBL, monograph series, vol. 3)*. Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, 1949.

³ *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Random House, 1967.

⁴ Ginsburg, C. D., *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible*. New York: KTAV, 1966: "That this is an official alteration is attested by Rashi, one of the most illustrious Jewish expositors of the middle ages and the most faithful depository of the ancient traditions. He emphatically declares, 'This is an alteration due to the reverence for the glory of God,'" p. 364.

⁵ *IB*, II, p. 404.

⁶ Speiser, E. A., *Genesis (AB)*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1964, p. 62. Also von Rad, G., *Genesis*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961, p. 133.

⁷ Ta'anit 6b.

⁸ Pell, Olive, ed., *The Olive Pell Bible*. New York: Crown (undated).