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## Dysphemisms

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## Dysphemisms

All of us are familiar with puns, wordplays, and the fun such word games provide. Euphemisms, where an objectionable word is replaced by a less objectionable one, are a practical and sometimes amusing aspect of these word games. For example, in the nineteenth century and extending into the twentieth century, the word *pregnant* seems not to have been common in polite conversation. Instead, euphemisms such as “with child” or “in a family way” were used. I can remember my mother, in hushed conversations, rather than saying “pregnant,” would quietly declare, “She is PG.” This may explain why the large, white block letter on the mountain (a common occurrence in intermountain western states) above the city of Pleasant Grove, Utah, is simply “G” and not “PG.”

Word games are not a modern, or even a classical, invention. Old Testament Hebrew writers had a penchant for puns, wordplays, and paronomasia. Given the number and range of examples in the Hebrew Bible, it must be admitted that the Hebrew authors enjoyed themselves at times. They were able to play with the text and the words in ways that are scarcely imagined today, unless Hebrew is your first or second language.

Used even less than euphemisms, dysphemisms take a perfectly good word and make something disreputable out of it. Dysphemisms are not common in English, except perhaps in political rhetoric. Even Latter-day Saints might indulge in a dysphemism or two when not overcome by our typical Latter-day Saint niceness. But the writers of the Old Testament were not handicapped by fits of niceness and therefore indulged themselves in dysphemisms and other forms of maculate wordplays.

For example, Abigail’s first (as far as we know) husband was named *Nabal*. That was probably not his real name;<sup>1</sup> no parents would have named their son *Nabal*. His name, as used in 1 Samuel 25, must be a dysphemism, which I will explain as soon as I have set the stage. To begin with, when Abigail and her husband are first introduced in 1 Samuel 25:3, Nabal is contrasted with his wife. He is described as “churlish and evil in his doings”; she on the other hand was “a woman of good understanding and of a beautiful coun-

tenance.” Even his clan affiliation, “the house of Caleb,” is a play on words in Hebrew. *Caleb* is the legitimate name of a Judahite clan of non-Israelite origin (see Genesis 15:19 and Numbers 32:12). But *Caleb* is also the normal Hebrew word for *dog*. Already the Hebrew reader is laughing at the dysphemism on the name *Nabal* and double entendre of the house of Caleb.

The next verse introduces David into the mix by explaining how David, who at this point in his career was not yet the king, attempted to secure provisions for his collection of outcasts. When he approached Nabal for a “contribution,” Nabal unceremoniously turned David down.<sup>2</sup> Nabal’s servants, who described their master as “a son of Belial” (1 Samuel 25:17), a term that means approximately “good for nothing” or “idiot,” hastened to let Abigail know that their master had dismissed David. Being wise, Abigail quickly went out to assuage David and his men.

After this setup, I can introduce the dysphemism. *Nabal* in Hebrew means “fool, folly, good-for-nothing.”<sup>3</sup> This meaning is confirmed in verse 25, where he is again called a “man of Belial [good-for-nothing], even Nabal: for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name and folly is with him.” There is no chance that his parents named their son “stupid” or “folly,” even if they called him that on occasion. Therefore, whether *Nabal* was his real name or not, 1 Samuel 25 used *Nabal* as a dysphemism.

The play on words does not end with the dysphemism on Nabal’s name. This passage also plays with his name in a different way.<sup>4</sup> One name for a wineskin (“bottle” in King James English, 1 Samuel 25:18) in Hebrew is *nbl*. Verse 36 states that Nabal was “very drunk,” that is, full of wine. But the next morning, “when the wine was gone out of Nabal,” that is, when the wine was gone out of the wineskin, Abigail related how she had saved his life by catering to David. With no wine in the wineskin, Folly’s “heart died within him” (verse 37).

Another example of a Hebrew dysphemism comes from progeny of Saul. One of his sons is called *Ish-bosheth*. (See the first occurrence of this name in 2 Samuel 2:8.) The name means “man of shame,” hardly a name that loving parents would give to their son. First Chronicles 8:33,

however, preserves his real name, *Esh-baal*. The Hebrew word *baal*, often used as the name of the Canaanite god in the Old Testament, means simply “lord” or “master.”<sup>5</sup> It is an honorific title that is even used for Jehovah in earlier parts of the Hebrew Bible (see 2 Samuel 5:20). Therefore, *Esh-baal* means “Man of the Lord.” At some point in the transmission of the Bible, his original, perfectly good name must have fallen out of favor, probably because it contained the title *baal*, which some people would have confused with the common name/title for the Canaanite deity Baal. Therefore, someone decided to change his real name, which had become anathema, to the dysphemism *Ish-bosheth*.

In my view, one of the more interesting dysphemisms in the Old Testament is not even a Hebrew dysphemism but, rather, was borrowed by the Hebrews from Mesopotamia.<sup>6</sup> In many verses of the Bible, the king of Babylon is called *Nebuchadnezzar*. But his real name was *Nebuchadrezzar*, which is preserved mostly in Jeremiah. We know from the Babylonian form of his name, *Nabu-kudurru-ušur*, that his name means “Nabu protect the heir,” a reference to the patronage of the Babylonian national god Nabu in watching over the crown prince. Apparently, he was not universally liked in Babylon because the other spelling of his name, *Nebuchadnezzar* (*Nabu-kudannu-ušur*), the dysphemism, means “Nabu protect the mule.”<sup>7</sup> Given that this second spelling is much more prevalent in the Hebrew Bible than his real name, it might be easy to guess how the biblical writers felt about the man who destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in 586 BC.

Not to belabor the dysphemisms in the Old Testament, because there are others, I will mention last of all a dysphemism that is singled out for inclusion in the King James Version of the New Testament. In 2 Kings 1:2, the king of the northern kingdom of Israel, Ahaziah, had been injured and wondered if he would recover. So he sent to “enquire” of the Philistine deity “Baal-zebub.” The Hebrew here clearly means “Lord of the flies.”<sup>8</sup> However, the Hebrew word *zebub*, meaning collectively “flies,” is no doubt a dysphemism for *zēbūl*, meaning “prince, glory, dominion.” The correct meaning of *zēbūl* appears in 1 Kings 8:13, which should be translated “I have surely built you a

house of glory.” *Baal-zēbūl*, the title that was dysphemized in 2 Kings 1:2, would originally have meant “Lord of glory” or “Lord Prince.”

In the New Testament, when Jesus is accused of working miracles by the power of “Beelzebub the prince of the devils” (Matthew 12:24), the text reference is obviously a dysphemism derived from the 2 Kings 1, the only place in the Old Testament where *baal-zebub* occurs. The interesting note about the New Testament use of this Old Testament dysphemism is that the Greek texts of Matthew 12 do not include it. On the contrary, most Greek texts use the real name of the Philistine god, namely, *beelzebul* (Βεελζεβούλ). Somehow, the tradition of the original *baal-zēbūl* seems to have remained alive into New Testament times, despite the fact that in the Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, and Syriac versions of the Old Testament it is consistently rendered as “Lord of the Flies.”

In conclusion, what is to be made of dysphemisms in the scriptures? Probably nothing more than that the ancients enjoyed wordplays as much as we do, and were not averse to using them, even in their sacred texts.

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#### Notes

1. Some have argued that Nabal was his real name and have suggested various Semitic etymologic possibilities. At the very least, even if the name is authentic, the text here plays off the rather transparent dysphemism. See below when 1 Samuel 25:25 is mentioned.

2. David, who was not encumbered by English prudence (and neither were the King James translators), responded, “So and more also do God unto the enemies of David, if I leave off all that pertain to him by the morning light any that pisseth against the wall” (1 Samuel 25:22). For the modern counterpart of this expression, adjusted to our language and understanding, see Doctrine and Covenants 121:15.

3. See *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.v. נבל.

4. I thank Matthew Bowen for calling my attention to this play on words in 1 Samuel 25:25.

5. The modern Hebrew word for “husband” is *baal*.

6. The vocabulary that allows for this dysphemism does not exist in Hebrew, but it does work in Babylonian.

7. For a short discussion of Nebuchadnezzar/Nebuchadrezzar, see Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36*, Anchor Bible 21B (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 100.

8. Thus also the Septuagint, the Aramaic, the Syriac, and the Vulgate.