

## The Problem of Blunt Language in the Bible

Last fall the Wartburg Project offered an online class for high school and college students on the website of *Gospel Outreach With Media*. The course was titled “Between a Rock and a Hard Place.” The basic aim of the course was to help Christian students studying journalism, English, and theology deal with a common dilemma that confronts writers and editors. Very often they find themselves in a situation in which they realize that no matter which of the available editorial options they chose, some of their readers will disapprove.

Often the issues involved are matters of taste or of human rules, and there can be (or should be) no disputing matters of taste. To use the theological term, these issues fall into the realm of adiaphora.

But people sometimes have strong feelings about adiaphora. One area in which this problem commonly occurs involves the difference between formal textbook grammar and informal conversational grammar. If, in one of the Gospels Jesus says, “Who are you looking for?” some readers will say “Jesus would not use bad grammar.” If Jesus says, “For whom are you looking?” or better yet, “Whom seekest thou?” another set of readers will say, “Nobody talks like that. Jesus would not be so stuffy.”<sup>1</sup>

This dilemma for editors of being caught between a rock and a hard place is intensified when they have to deal with sexual language and language for various for bodily functions, especially when the book involved is the Bible.

The overall trend in the Bible is to use euphemistic terms<sup>2</sup> for sexual matters (*to know* and *to lie with*) as we sometimes do in English (*to sleep with*), but some of the biblical passages pertaining to sexual conduct or misconduct use very blunt terms in the Hebrew text. English readers are sometimes unaware of these jarring statements because English translations sometimes hide them behind euphemistic softening of the biblical language. But do translators and editors have the authority to censor the Holy Spirit?

Here is a case where it is very easy for translators to state the proper principle:

The translator should try to be euphemistic where the original text is euphemistic and blunt or direct where the original text is blunt. Keep the tone and variety of the Hebrew terms.

We have no duty, indeed we have no right to be editors of what the Holy Spirit says. We are to say, as best we can, what the Spirit said. Yet this is one of those cases in which it is very easy to *say* what our principle should be, but somewhat more difficult to *practice* it.

We are concerned to do whatever we can to avoid offense that might prevent some people from reading the Bible, but the proper way to do this is not by avoiding the issue or by changing the Bible, but by teaching mature Christian people how to deal with the issue in a proper way. We can say that all Scripture is written for our learning, but not all Scripture is necessarily written for Sunday school or the lectern.

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<sup>1</sup> A fairly detailed discussion of this issue is included in the afore-mentioned course, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place,” and in other online materials at our website.

<sup>2</sup> Euphemism is the substitution of a mild, indirect, or vague expression for one that is thought to be too offensive, harsh, or blunt.

The first attempt to deal with this problem took place already in the pre-translation stage of the transmission of the biblical text. The Jewish scholars known as the Masoretes, who transmitted the Hebrew text in the form in we have it, came up with the following solution. They kept the words which they regarded as offensive in the biblical text, but they wrote a less offensive word in the margin of the text, which was to be used in reading the text out loud. An example of such euphemism occurs in the text of 2 Kings 18:27 and Isaiah 36:12 where the Assyrian envoy hammers the people of Jerusalem with the threat that during the siege of Jerusalem they will have to drink their own *shen* and eat their own *heri*. You can provide your own American equivalents. At any rate, the Masoretes said that what should be read was “you will *drink the water of your feet* and eat *what comes out*.” Because the Hebrew scribes found the vulgar threat of the Assyrian envoy too crude to be read out loud, they substituted euphemisms in the margin, but they left the cruder terms in the text.

We cannot determine with certainty whether the words were “proper” when Isaiah wrote them and became crude later, or whether they were already vulgar when the Assyrian spoke them, but Isaiah quoted them to honestly portray the vulgarity of the Assyrian envoy. The latter seems most likely. The Assyrian thug did not learn his trash talk from Mr. Rogers.<sup>3</sup>

We can sympathize with the rabbis, because they felt a conflict between their duty not to alter the text and the desire to avoid terms that in their mind would be offensive to readers and listeners. On the one hand, they taught, “Whenever a text is written indelicately, we read it delicately.” This is the opposite of the principle we suggested above. We say, “If the text is indelicate, we are to translate it indelicately.” The rabbis, however, hedged a bit on their view. R. Nahman said, “All obscenity is forbidden except obscenity at idolatry.” R. Huna b. Manoah said, “It is permitted to an Israelite to say to a Kuthean [a Samaritan], ‘Take your idol and stick it in your *shintav*.’” Perhaps this second principle of R. Huna will be useful to us when we try to explain Ezekiel’s use of very indelicate language. Perhaps the rabbis had derived this rule from Ezekiel’s practice. Ezekiel’s harsh language is always used against idolatry and gross immorality.

We may question the wisdom of the Masoretes’ decision, but they do offer us one option to consider as we try to solve our dilemma: Keep the harshness of the biblical text in the translation, but let readers substitute a more euphemistic term in settings in which the strong reading might be too much for the audience, in children’s Bible story books, in Sunday services, etc.

### *Resolving the Problem for EHV*

We will deal with the issue that confronts us, first by looking at a few of the questions that the college students discussed online, then by looking at the biggest issues that confront us in Ezekiel. We can start by reminding ourselves, “To the pure, all things are pure.” Mature Christians can and must deal with these issues, and the church must help our young people navigate the currents of sexuality and vulgar language in our society, and that includes teaching them both the beauty of what God designed, and the ugliness of going against God’s will in this area.

### *The Beautiful*

- 1) The Song of Solomon describes the beauty of love between a man and woman. The Song of Songs has a tone which is sexual but not crude. It includes lines like:

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<sup>3</sup> Other examples of such passages of substituting milder terms for harsh terms include: men forcefully or lustfully *shagal* women; the scribes suggest substituting “lie with” (Dt 28:30, Is 13:16, Ze 14:2, Je 3:2); the besieged have to eat *cheri*; the scribes suggest substituting “decayed leaves” (2 Kg 6:25) Others euphemisms are found Dt 28:27, 1 Sa 5:6,9,12, 6:4,5—hemorrhoids; 2 Kg 10:27—latrine; Dt 25:11—private parts.

Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters.

I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit.

We can hardly soften the translation here. But how do we use this book to teach a godly view of sexuality?

At what age should students study this kind of text?

A. Late grade school B. Early high school C. Late high school D. College E. After marriage.

The answer to this question is, of course, a matter of opinion. In their very closely chaperoned society perhaps the rabbinic advice, “Don’t read the Song until you are thirty,” might have worked. But many people feel that in our sex-saturated culture, unless you live on a desert island with no TV and no internet, high school is too late to begin discussing these issues with children. This is an issue our teachers must deal with.

### *The Bodily*

In 1 Samuel 25:22 David is guilty of a harsh outburst against a man who has insulted him. David says, “May God punish my enemies severely and double it, if by the morning light I leave alive so much as one person who *urinates against a wall*.” In the King James Version David says “any that *pisseth against the wall*.” Many recent translations refer to a threat “to kill *every male*.” Which term would you choose? Why?

A. Urinates against a wall B. Pisses against a wall C. Every male

If your teacher read choice B, which is from the King James Version, in class or your pastor read it in church, would people:

A) laugh B) be shocked and angry C) be surprised at first but support a literal translation.

*Every male* gives the right meaning but hides the emotional impact of the text, so it is not a very good translation. *Piss* was considered an acceptable term for the Bible in the 1600s and is in very common use today in most levels of society and among both males and females. *Urinate* is not the way most people converse, but maybe it is best for formal writing like the Bible.

How do some popular translations deal with this issue?

The King James has *piss*. Many recent translating including NIV, NASB, ESV, NKJV, NRSV, and CSB<sup>4</sup> have *every male*. In their effort to avoid a word which they think sounds too vulgar, these translations erase every trace of a special Hebrew idiom. The EHV reads *who urinates against a wall* with the explanatory note: “It appears that David uses a crude term. He does not use a standard term for *man* or *male*.”

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### *The Biggest Issue in Ezekiel*

Ezekiel has a favorite Hebrew word for idol, *gillul*, which he uses thirty-nine times throughout his book. *Gillul* is derived from a root that means “round.” Some older dictionaries say these idols were called *gillulim* because they were round like logs, but *gillul* is the round thing that comes out of the east end of a west-bound horse.

In looking for the solution to this problem, we will start with the assumption that we cannot use the expression that many Americans would use to name these objects, so would you call them?

A) idols B) dung ball deities C) filthy idols D) fecal deities?

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<sup>4</sup>CSB adds the footnote *who are urinating against the wall*.

Many contemporary translations go with the colorless “idols,” hiding the more specific term that Ezekiel chooses. *Idols* is not a very good translation because it hides the fact that *gillul* is a special, rough word. *Fecal deities* is the translation of the Concordia Commentary. This is biologically correct, but who talks that way? *Dung-ball deities* may be too colloquial and sounds a bit eccentric, but it is probably the most accurate, and it is the term that the EHV was using at first. *Filthy idols* softens the term, but at least it recognizes that this is not the generic word for idols. This term what the EHV is using at the moment. Some reviewers suggested adding *disgusting* in front of choice B or C. Some felt that choice C is too euphemistic, especially if EHV deals honestly with the very harsh sexual language in Ezekiel. Another suggestion from a reviewer was *crappy gods*.

We would welcome feedback and suggestions on this problem.

Here is how some translations handle the issue:

NET, CSB, NIV, NASB, ESV, NKJV, NRSV, and KJV have *idols*.

EHV has *filthy idols* with this note at the first occurrence: *Gillulim*, one of Ezekiel’s favorite names for Israel’s idols, is a very harsh word. *Gillulim* means ~~*idols made from round things*~~. The round things are dung balls, hence the term could be rendered ~~*dung ball deities*~~, but even this is probably too gentle a term. One of the cruder words for excrement is closer to the mark.

### *The Really Ugly*

Sometimes biblical language is blunt enough that many people are embarrassed to face the issue. In discussing the issue honestly, we are working with the assumption that to the pure all things are pure, and the mature (including high school students) can and should discuss these issues.

Issues like this are scattered throughout the Old Testament, but the issue reaches an intensity in Ezekiel which is not found elsewhere. The problem occurs throughout the book, but especially in chapters 16 and 23, in which Ezekiel describes Judah and Israel as two prostitutes, who are unfaithful to the LORD. He uses very ugly terms to describe their very ugly behavior.

In Ezekiel 16:25, many translations say that the immoral woman *offers her body* to every passerby. The Hebrew literally says *she is spreading her legs to every passerby*. Which of these terms would you choose? Why?

A. offers her body to    B. has sex with    C. spreads her legs for    D. lies down with

Discuss:

How would a high school class react to choice C?

Would it make a difference if they were seniors or freshmen?

Would it make a difference if boys and girls were in separate classes?

Would it make a difference how the teacher introduced the discussion?

Choices B and D soften a harsh expression and take some of the sting out of Ezekiel’s message. Even example A does not have the full force and offensiveness of C. All of the phrases have the same basic meaning, but they do not have the same emotional impact. Such blunt terms as *spreading her legs* cause a negative emotional reaction in many readers, but isn’t that Ezekiel’s purpose? He portrays the full ugliness of Israel’s behavior. Do translators have the right to censor the Holy Spirit? This is the question we must deal with.

The same context also describes the sexual organs of the evil ladies' illicit lovers. How do various translations try to cope with this twin problem of Ezekiel 16:25-26?

Ezekiel 16:25-26—*literal: you spread your feet or lower legs ....your neighbors' great of flesh*

NIV 2011 At every street corner you built your lofty shrines and degraded your beauty, *spreading your legs* with increasing promiscuity to anyone who passed by. <sup>26</sup>You engaged in prostitution with the Egyptians, your neighbors with *large genitals*, and aroused my anger with your increasing promiscuity.

NIV 1984 At the head of every street you built your lofty shrines and degraded your beauty, *offering your body* with increasing promiscuity to anyone who passed by. <sup>26</sup>You engaged in prostitution with the Egyptians, your *lustful neighbors*, and provoked me to anger with your increasing promiscuity.

ESV At the head of every street you built your lofty place and made your beauty an abomination, *offering yourself* to any passerby and multiplying your whoring. <sup>26</sup>You also played the whore with the Egyptians, your *lustful neighbors*, multiplying your whoring, to provoke me to anger.

CSB You built your elevated place at the head of every street and turned your beauty into a detestable thing. You *spread your legs* to everyone who passed by and increased your prostitution. <sup>26</sup>You engaged in promiscuous acts with Egyptian men, *your well-endowed neighbors*, and increased your prostitution to anger me.

EHV At the corner of every street you built your platform and made your beauty into a disgusting thing. You *spread your legs* for every man passing by, and you multiplied your whoring. <sup>26</sup>You acted like a whore with the sons of Egypt, your neighbors with their *large penises* and you multiplied your whoring to enrage me!

\*Literally *large flesh*

If there is any doubt that this passage is blunt, it is removed by the parallel in Ezekiel 23:20, which refers to the lovers' flesh and emissions which are like that of horses and donkeys.

“Offering your body” and “spreading your legs” refer to the same act, but they are not dynamic equivalents.

Some observations: The NIV became more blunt in the 2011 edition. Most recent translations are quite blunt except for some of those in the King James tradition. Ironically, the KJV itself is blunt.

Thou hast built thy high place at every head of the way, and hast made thy beauty to be abhorred, and hast *opened thy feet* to every one that passed by, and multiplied thy whoredoms. Thou hast also committed fornication with the Egyptians thy neighbours, great of flesh; and hast increased thy whoredoms, to provoke me to anger .

Another issue in this passage is whether to call the sisters *prostitutes* or *whores*. The context says that they are not prostitutes since prostitutes get paid, but the evil sisters pay their lovers. Is the harsher term justified?

There are several more examples of this problem in Ezekiel and other books, but we do not have to look at all of them to consider the principle.

What if we are not sure whether or not the expression in the text is a euphemism? There are some passages which are ambiguous. Should we translate euphemistically unless we are forced to be blunt? Translations are divided on this issue.

Ezekiel 7:17, translated literally, reads *all knees run water*. The question is do the knees run *like* water or run *with* water? The context is describing the result of the terror that strikes people during the siege of Jerusalem. Do they lose strength or do they lose control?

- ESV All hands are feeble, and all knees turn to water.
  - NIV 1984 Every hand will go limp, and every knee will become as weak as water.
  - NIV 2011 Every hand will go limp; every leg will be wet with urine.
  - HCSB All their hands will become weak, and all their knees will turn to water.
  - CSB All their hands will become weak, and all their knees will run with urine.
  - EHV All hands will hang limp, and all knees will run with water.\*
- \* Footnote: Terror will cause them to wet themselves.

So is there any good reason to present a discussion of this topic besides to give the EHV editors some cover? Actually there is. This issue provides one of the clearest tests of a translator's faithfulness. Some translators try to make the Song of Songs more graphic than it really is in order to indulge the idea that the Song has roots in some sort of heathen fertility rite. Other translators try to evade the ugly realities described by Ezekiel. Either approach is wrong. The translator's duty is to be gentle and discrete where the Spirit is discrete, and rough where the Spirit uses rough language. There is probably no translation issue that reveals more about translators' tendency, either to let the text speak for itself, or to try to "improve" the text to fit in with their sensibilities and the sensibilities of their readers. If translators do not alter the text when it offends them, they will probably not deliberately alter the text anywhere.

An interesting dilemma will arise when we publish online versions of the EHV. Before you can make your e-book live, you have to either check or not check a box that says "This book contains adult material." If you check the box, the publisher will attach a warning label to your book. Should publishers of Bibles check that box? Well, maybe "yes" because Ezekiel 16 and 23 are not Sunday school material. But maybe "no" because the label "adult content" is one of those misnomers our society likes. The label "adult content" actually means "non-adult, morally immature content." The Bible contains two kinds of material, the beautiful content of the gospel and the ugly content of the law. The latter is sometimes expressed in harsh words. This is one area where Bible translators find themselves between a rock and a hard place. But spiritually mature adults have to take the lead in helping people deal with this issue.