Bowdlerizing in the Old Testament

A recent reading of Noel Perrin’s *Dr. Bowdler’s Legacy* 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. 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.” 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—in 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, *mâlê* Qal, “to be full”; Piel, “to fill”; and *kîlî* Qal, “to be complete”; Piel, “to complete.” But the Piel of *nâ'as* 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 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 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 *whšqyl brjlk* "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."

Perhaps 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* msyq hwr t-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-

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