

ON THE MEANING OF *šgl*

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INTRODUCTION

The verb *שגל* occurs in Deut 28:30, Isa 13:16, Zech 14:2, and Jer 3:2, and the noun *שגל* in Ps 45:10, Neh 2:6 and Dan 5:2, 3, 23. The verb *שגל* has been relegated to the category of “unmentionables,” but the noun *שגל* found its place in royal company. That a root used in the Hebrew Bible could have opposite meanings is not in itself an unusual phenomenon.¹ What is intriguing about the verb *שגל* is that already in ancient times it was considered so obscene as to merit first place in the list of such notorious obscenities as *עפלים*, *חריונים*, *חוריהם*, *שיניהם*, and *למחראות* (TB *Megillah* 25b). Moreover, in the Ketib (K) and Qere (Q) system of the Hebrew Bible, grammatical forms of *שכב* have been invented to serve as the Qere euphemisms for the corresponding forms of *שגל*, so offensive was the verb *שגל* considered.²

The list of obscenities to which we referred is in the Talmudic passage:

כל המקראות הכתובים בתורה לגנאי קורין אותן לשבח כגון ישגלנה ישכבנה בעפלים בטחורים חריונים דביונים לאכול את חוריהם ולשתות מימי שיניהם (TB *Megillah* 25b)

This passage states that all the obscene words in the Bible are to be read

¹ *ברך* (curse – bless); *חסד* (kindness – disgrace); *רנן* (shout for joy – moan (Lam 2:19)); *מרזח* (revelry (Am 6:7) – lamentation (Jer 16:5)); *נבל* (distinguished, Arab. (2Sam 25:20) – despicable); *קלס* (mock – praise), in the Bible and Ben Sira 11:4 only “mock” but in post-biblical Hebrew and Syriac “praise”; *רגע* (disturb – be at rest); *בוקק* (luxuriant (Hos 10:1) – empty, waste (Isa 24:3)); *מתאב* (despise (Am 6:8) – desire); *עזב* (leave, forsake – assist, strengthen), both meanings in Ex 23:5; *פסח* (leap – limp); etc. Cf. R. Gordis, “Studies in Hebrew Roots of Contrasting Meanings,” *JQR* 27 (1936), XXX.

² The verb *שגל* is transitive, but *שכב* is intransitive everywhere else in the Hebrew Bible.

using proper language. Thus, שגלת/תשגלנה/ישגלנה should be read שכבת/תשכבנה/ישכבנה (Deut 28:30, Isa 13:16, Zech 14:2, Jer 3:2); טחריכם / טחרי / בטחרים / עפליכם / עפלי / בעפלים / עפלים / ועפלים should be read טחריים / טחריים / טחריים / טחריים (Deut 28:27, 1Sam 5:9, 5:6, 12, 6:4, 5); חרייונים should be read דביונים (2Kgs 6:25); צואתם חריהם should be read צואתם (2Kgs 18:27); ממי חריהם should be read צואתם (Isa 36:12); שיניהם should be read מימי חריהם (2Kgs 18:27, Isa 36:12); and למחראות should be read למוצאות (2Kgs 10:27).³ In each of these cases the Reader is enjoined to substitute a word of milder force for a word in the text, which might sound too coarse when read in the synagogue.

Gordis averred that in all instances mentioned in TB *Megillah* 25b, the difference in meaning between K and Q is very slight.⁴ This is not immediately obvious nor can it be deduced from the fact that the list of “unmentionable words” is part of the K-Q system. The K-Q system contains many cases where the K and Q are words having completely different meanings.⁵ Thus, it is necessary to understand the meaning of the K words without reliance on their euphemistic substitutes. Our focus in this study is the verb שגל. In particular, we are interested in exploring its meaning, obscene content and offensiveness to the listener. It is hoped that this analysis will also shed some light on the noun שגל and the remaining members in the list of “unmentionable words.”

³ H.M. Orlinsky, “The Origin of the Kethib-Qere System: A New Approach” VTSup 7 (1960) 186–187. There are no references to the specifics of the K-Q system in either the Talmud or Jerome. The passage in TB *Megillah* 25b perhaps served as a prototype for the development of the K-Q system and was later incorporated into it. Gordis (29–31) argued that the Tetragrammaton and substitution of euphemisms for indelicate expressions were the first elements of the K-Q system. It is generally believed that the K-Q system consists of variant readings (“collation model”) or corrections of what was perceived to be an error (“correction model”).

⁴ R. Gordis, *The Biblical Text in the Making: A Study of the Kethib-Qere* (Philadelphia: The Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1937) 167.

⁵ For instance, there are many cases (Lev 25:30, 1Sam 2:3, 2Sam 16:18, Isa 49:5, Ps 100:3, Prov 19:7, Job 13:15, Ezra 4:2, 1Chr 11:21, etc.) of לא/לו interchanges in the K-Q system. Often the gender or person in the K and Q differ. For instance, we find אחת instead of אחד (Gen 32:8); 2Chr 11:18 בן (K) but בת (Q); 1Sam 15:16 ויאמר (K) but ויאמר (Q); 2Sam 12:24 ויקרא (K) but ותקרא (Q); 2Sam 22 עבדו (K) but עבדך (Q); 2Sam 21:3 לי (K) but לנו (Q); 1Kgs 17:15 והיא היא (K) but והוא היא (Q); etc. Sometimes the words in the K and Q are orthographically different and have obviously different meanings, as in 2Sam 23:21 אשר (K) but איש (Q); 1Kgs 22:49 עשר (K) but עשה (Q); and, 2Kgs 20:4 העיר (K), but חצר (Q).

EARLY TREATMENT OF שגל

The verb שגל, in the three grammatical forms *Qal*, *Niph'al* and *Pu'al* occurs in Deut 28:30, Isa 13:16, Zec 14:2, and Jer 3:2 as *Ketib*, and the corresponding *Qere* is the verb שכב, unnaturally in the same three grammatical forms. Deut 28:30 is publicly read as part of a weekly Torah reading. Zec 14:2 and Jer 3:2 are each publicly read as part of a lectionary. Thus, concern with excessive obscenity and improper language in public use seems justified. That the verb שגל posed significant difficulties becomes clear when one reviews earlier efforts to decipher its meaning. We shall discuss each instance separately.

Deut 28:30

The Septuagint translates ישגלנה ἔξει αὐτήν “shall have her,” and similarly the Targum Neofiti and Peshitta render “shall take her.”⁶ Gordis believes that the Septuagint read here the *Qere* ישכבנה.⁷ This is, however, debatable. The phrase “shall have her” is general enough to cover a broad range of sexual intercourse with a woman. Targum Onqelos’ literal translation *yišk^ebinnah* (ישכבינה/ישכבנה) reflects the old tradition to read the euphemistic ישכבנה instead of ישגלנה. The Samaritan Bible offers the grammatically more appealing reading ישכב עמה. Targum Jonathan’s ישמש עמה (“will have sexual intercourse with her”), while somewhat more explicit, is still far from being an obscenity, and so is the Vulgate’s *dormiat cum ea*, which seems to follow the Targum Jonathan. Orlinsky notes that “in Deut. 28:30, Jer 3:2, and Psa. 45(44):10, Aquila has reproduced the obscene שגל (K), disregarding the “guide against obscenity.”⁸ Aquila renders the K, using the same root (*synkoitos*) as he does for שגל in Ps 45:10.⁹ These translations reflect some ambivalence about the meaning of שגל and do not offer any insight into the obscene content that made שגל unmentionable.

The ambivalence with respect to the meaning of שגל can be also felt in Rashi’s treatment of this verb. In Deut. 28:30 Rashi says: ישגלנה, לשון שגל, פלגש, והכתוב כנהו לשבח ישכבנה (מגילה כה) ותיקון סופרים הוא זה.¹⁰ The

⁶ M. McNamara, *Targum Neofiti 1: Deuteronomy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997) 130.

⁷ Gordis, *Biblical Text* 84.

⁸ H.M. Orlinsky, “Problems of Kethib-Qere.” *JAOS* 60 (1940) 33

⁹ Gordis, *Biblical Text*, 64.

¹⁰ The interpretation of שגל as פלגש probably rests on the occurrence of שגל, in reversed order, in the last three letters of פלגש.

commentary on Rashi (שפתי חכמים)¹¹ explains that Rashi means אשה פלגש, i.e., a concubine. The שבה is in the other person's taking her formally as a concubine and not as a prostitute: ישכב אותה שלא כדרך זנות. אלא שיקח אותה לפלגש. Yet, this sense would better follow from ישגלנה.

Rabbinic sources testify to a number of places in the Scripture in which the text was corrected by the scribes (תקון סופרים) "to preserve the honor" (מפני הכבוד). These are very distinct cases and few in number.¹² Thus, there are two problems with Rashi's considering ישגלנה a תקון סופרים: (a) this case is not mentioned among those considered as such;¹³ and (b) if ישגלנה is a תקון סופרים then it is the corrected text and does not have to be replaced by ישכבנה, in contradiction with the statement in TB *Megillah* 25b. We cannot say that the words ותקון סופרים הוא זה are extraneous since the commentator (שפתי חכמים) refers us to his own explanation of this term used by Rashi in Gen 18:22 (which is in the list of תקוני סופרים). Perhaps Rashi intended to say that reading ישכבנה instead of ישגלנה has been enacted by the סופרים, taking the term תקון סופרים in its broader rather than technical sense. Yet, he does not follow this practice in other K-Q cases. Does Rashi's add on ותקון סופרים הוא זה indicate a positive understanding of שגל?

Rashi's explanation leaves us with considerable misgivings as to the onerous and unmentionable nature implied in the transitive verb שגל. It seems that even Rashi's commentator (שפתי חכמים) had a hard time culling from Rashi's explanation what precisely is the advantage of the Q language and he created a hodgepodge of both.¹⁴

¹¹ A popular supercommentary on Rashi's Torah commentary by Rabbi Shabtai Bass (1641–1718).

¹² A. Geiger, *Urschrift und uebersetzungen der Bibel in ihrer abhängigkeit von der innern entwicklung des Judenthums* (Breslau: J. Hainauer, 1857) 309f. There are 11–18 *Tiqqune Sopherim* in the various lists found in rabbinic sources.

¹³ There are various lists of *Tiqqunei Sopherim* that have reached us. Some have 7, 11, 13, 15, or 18 entries. For instance *Tanhuma* on Beshalach 16 mentions Zec 2:12, Mal 1:12, 1Sam 3:13, Job 7:20, Hab 1:12, Jer 2:11, Ps 106:20, Hos 4:7, Job 32:3, Gen 18:22, Num 11:15, Num 12:12, 1Kgs 12:16, Lam 3:20, 2Sam 16:12, Ez 8:17. It is reasonable to assume that there were other instances of *Tiqqunei Sopherim* that were forgotten. Cf. *Mekhilta Sirata* on Ex 15:5, *Sifre* on Num 10:35, and the *Masorah* on Num 1:2 and on Ps 106:12.

¹⁴ S.J. Fin, *האוצר*, vol. III, (Warsaw: Achiasaf, 1912) 490. In modern times this ambiguity continues to persist. Fin says, [שגל] נראה שלא משום דבור בלשון נקיה נגעו בו [שגל], כי אם משום טעם אחר בלתי ידוע לנו. בכל אלה בלשון התלמוד היה גם השם שגל ללשון גבאי. (It does not seem that the Sopherim dealt with it [שגל] for the sake of speaking in clean language, but because of another reason unknown to us. In all this, in the language of the Talmud the noun שגל became obscene).

Ibn Ezra says, כנוי לשכיבה וכן שגל המוכנה לשכיבה (ישגלנה) is a term for ‘sleeping with’ and so שגל is a woman who is ready ‘for sleeping with’). This interpretation would make the verb שגל much too passive. It is interesting to note that the commentary on Ibn Ezra says: (Ps 45:10) כמו כלבה שגל לימינך (as a bitch is שגל to your right). Does this commentator suggest that שגל is a woman ready to copulate as a bitch?

Isa 13:16

In Isa 13:16 the Septuagint consistently renders תשגלנה ἔξουσις “shall take.” The Targum’s ישחבן seems to be in line with the tradition (TB *Megillah* 25b) and consequently with the Q. However, the Peshitta’s (“ravished”) and Vulgate’s (*violabuntur*) suggest a more aggressive sexual encounter. Metzudot expresses this sense more directly, saying ויאנסו נשיהם (“and they shall rape their women”). Surprisingly, Rashi has nothing to offer. Ibn Ezra repeats that תשגלנה is an appellation for the act of sexual intercourse, and that the term תשכבנה is more respectful. Kimchi apparently just states the K-Q fact, confusing the terms: כתיב ותשגלנה קרי ותשכבנה. We note that none of these medieval Jewish commentators make any attempt to explain why תשגלנה was obscene. The Isaiah Scroll (1Q Isa^a), 13:16, seems to incorporate the euphemism תשכבנה, not found in the *Ketib* of MT.¹⁵

Luzzatto (1800–1865) felt that the obscenity of שגל stems from the fact that it is an intensive verb, expressing something that the “man does and the woman receives” (שהזכר עושה והנקבה מקבלת). On the other hand, שכב is a passive verb; thus when it is used for male and female it is not obscene. Luzzatto was baffled by the fact that the queen is called שגל in Ps 45:10 (ולא נבין איך היה שהמלכה נקראת שגל).¹⁶

Jer 3:2

In Jer 3:2 the Septuagint renders שגלתך ἔξεφύρθης “thou has been utterly defiled,” and is followed by the Peshitta (“you have defiled yourself”). Targum’s אתחברת (“you associated, you joined”) does not reflect the

¹⁵ A. Rubenstein, “A Kethib-Qere Problem in the Light of the Isaiah Scroll,” *JSS* 4 (1959) 130. Perhaps, תשכבנה represented a different version rather than a euphemistic term.

¹⁶ P. Shlesinger and M. Hovev, (eds.), *S.D. Luzzatto’s Commentary to the Book of Jesaiah*, (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1970) 117–118. Luzzatto mentions the opinion of Gussetius (1635–1704) that the root of שגל is derived from גלה by adding a *w* as in שעבוד, thus meaning indecent exposure. Similarly, Rabbi Yehudah Arie (1717) argued that יש גלוי = שגל. Luzzatto rejects these opinions because גלה by itself has no sexual connotations.

passiveness of the subject (woman) implied by the *Pu'al* in MT. A similar objection can be raised with respect to Vulgate's *prostrata sis*. Both the Targum and Vulgate attempt to capture the situation alluded in **ישבת להם** but miss the aggressive intrusiveness into the subject (woman) expressed in the *Pu'al* of **שגל**. Rashi almost mechanically repeats **פלגש לשון**, even though this sense does not fit the context in which the woman (Israel) waits for customers or hopes to be violated. Kimchi notes that the prostitution is ritualistic, part of the idolatrous practices (**ישכבנה לשון** (נקיה וכבר פרשנו הזנות והשכיבה הוא עניין העכו"ם).

Zec 14:2

In Zec 14:2 the Septuagint renders **תשגלנה** *μολυσθήσονται* “ravished,” and so does the Peshitta. Targum's **ישתכבן** (as in Isa 13:16) seems to be in line with the tradition (TB *Megillah* 25b) and consequently with the Q. However, the Septuagint's and Peshitta's (“ravished”) and the Vulgate's (*violabuntur*) allude to a more aggressive sexual encounter. Rashi and Kimchi skip explanation of **שגל**. Ibn Ezra's statement that **תשכבנה** דרך כבוד כי תשגלנה כנוי המעשה וככה המוכנה למטה approach to the verb **שגל** and to the noun **שגל**. Ibn Ezra consistently translates the verb **שגל** as the act of copulation, and the noun **שגל** as being ready for copulation. While this approach closely ties the verb and the noun, it would seem awkward in Ps 45:10, Neh 2:6, and Dan 5:2, 3, and 23.

It seems that the *Versions* and earlier Jewish commentators struggled with the interpretation of **שגל**, and were baffled by its prestigious aspects and offensive connotations.

MODERN SCHOLARSHIP ON **שגל**

The etymology of **שגל** continues to be obscure in modern times. Haupt felt that the verb **שגל** originally meant “to pour,” like the Arabic *sájala*. In Arabic *má'u dákarin*, “water of a male,” denotes *semen virile*.¹⁷ Thus, **שגל** would mean “deposit semen.” Feigin identifies the Akkadian *rehû*, “pour” and “cohabit,” as the corresponding term. He claims: “since the meaning ‘cohabit’ is not preserved in the Arabic and neither is ‘pour’ for **שגל** in Hebrew, we may regard the word original Hebrew and not connected with *sájala*.”¹⁸

¹⁷ P. Haupt, *The Book of Nahum: A New Metrical Translation with an Introduction, Restoration of the Hebrew Text and Explanatory and Critical Notes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1907), 46.

¹⁸ S. Feigin, “Critical Notes” *AJSJL* 43 (1926) 48.

Feigin tried to link שגל with שגר, noting such ר/ל interchanges as הרץ/חלץ, שרשרת/ששלת, נשר/נשל, חבר/חבל, יתערם/יתעלם, etc. In his view שגל is the same as שגר, “womb.” He says, “This makes it clear why the verb שגל was regarded unworthy to be pronounced in the synagogue and was substituted by שכב (Tosephta, Megillâ, toward the end). The verb in the Old Testament has the meaning ‘to rape,’ to act as a beast, in distinction from human intercourse.”¹⁹ Yet neither the concept of access to a woman’s womb nor that of rape is banished from the synagogue, as is the verb שגל. For instance, we find רחם רחמתי in Jud 5:30, and ענה in the obvious sense of “rape” in Gen 34:2, 2Sam 13:12, 14, 22, 32, etc.

Mandelkern translates the verb שגל *concupere cum muliere* (“to have intercourse with a woman”). He says, regarding the meaning of שגל, “It should be resolved according to the Arabic *škl* (an exchange of the type גיכ”ק), in the sense of ‘entwine’ and ‘mix.’ It refers to the embrace of a naked couple, and was changed to the more polite שכב.”²⁰ What is offensive in the entwining is not clear. Clearly, any sexual act involves some “entwining.”

Surprisingly TDOT has no entry for שגל. Driver renders שגל “to ravish,” noting that “the Hebrew word is a strong one, implying indelicate treatment such as might be expected at the hands of a captor.”²¹ Gordis considers “to ravish” an adequate translation of שגל.²² The commentary דעת סופרים exhibits the previously noted ambivalence regarding שגל saying:

ישגלנה. משום שהמאירס ימות במלחמה או בגזרה המשונה. שכל הנישאת תחילה תיבעל because he who weds will die in the war, or some strange edict. Anyone first to remarry would be had by a chieftain.²³ One might wonder why was it necessary to have a Q if that were the case. Hacham says that שגל is “to have intercourse with a woman.” He notes that the verb is always used in situations of sin or curse.²⁴

Standard English translations have:

Deut 28:30 – “shall lie with her” (KJV, NKJV, RSV, ASV, Young, Darby, Webster, HNV); “will ravish her” (NLT, ESV); “will take her

¹⁹ Feigin, 47. Note that in the Hebrew Bible שגר is only used with respect to animals.

²⁰ S. Mandelkern, *Veteris Testamenti, Concordantiae Hebraicae Atque Chaldaicae*. (Lipsiae: Veit et Com, 1896) 1149.

²¹ S.R. Driver, *Deuteronomy* (ICC, New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1909) 311.

²² Gordis, *Biblical Text*, 167.

²³ Ch. D. Rabinowitz, *דברים* (Jerusalem: Vardi, 1957) 359.

²⁴ A. Hacham, *ספר ישעיהו*, vol. I (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1984) 146 note 17

and ravish her” (NIV); “will violate her” (NASB); “will have her” (JB); “shall enjoy her” (NJPS); etc.

Isa 13:16 – “ravished” (KJV, NKJV, NIV, ESV, RSV, ASV, Darby, Webster, HNV); “raped” (NLT, JB, NJPS); “lain with” (Young); etc.

Jer 3:2 – “lain with you” (KJV, NKJV, RSV, ASV, Young, Darby, Webster, HNV, NJPS); “defiled by your adulteries” (NLT); “ravished” (NIV, ESV); “violated” (NASB); “offered your body” (JB); etc.

Zec 14:2 – “ravished” (KJV, NKJV, NASB, RSV, ASV, Darby, Webster, HNV, JB); “raped” (NLT, NIV, ESV); “are lain with” (Young); “violated” (NJPS); etc.

While little consistency can be discerned in these translations, they still convey an understanding of the verb שגל as a violent sexual act. Can any additional characterization of this act be culled from the Hebrew Bible?

THE MEANING OF שגל

It seems that the critical verses for understanding the meaning of the verb שגל are Jer 3:2 and Deut 23:19. In Jer 3:2 the term שגלה is seemingly explained in terms of רעתך and זנותך. This suggests some overlap of the semantic fields of שגל and זנה. In Deut 23:19 the noun זנה parallels the noun כלב. This suggests that the semantic fields of שגל and כלב might also overlap to some extent. However, as the parallelism in Deut 23:19 and ancient documents indicate, here כלב is probably not “dog” but rather “male prostitute.”²⁵ In this context it would then seem reasonable to infer that the noun שגל is perhaps a woman that copulates as a male prostitute, and the verb שגל would then mean “to sodomize,” both Hebrew words being derived from the same root. The meaning “to sodomize” for the verb שגל eminently fits the violent context in which the verb is used in the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, because the act was unnatural, painful, and performed at the anus, it was obviously so obscene that it merited a euphemism.

It is possible that Mandelkern alludes to a similar chain of reasoning for the verb שגל in his cryptic comment in the כלב entry. He says, מחיר כלב לד"ק כנוי לאתנן קדש. וזכור מאמרם: מאי שגל כלבתא (“a dog’s pay” according to our ancients, a nickname for the fee of a male prostitute. And one recalls their saying: What is שגל, a כלבתא).²⁶

²⁵ E. Bilik and Ch. Beinart, כלב, In *Encyclopaedia Biblica* Vol IV (Jerusalem: Bialik Inst., 1962) 113. The authors note that the list of those serving in the Temple of Marsilia included lads and ‘dogs.’ Cf. NJPS on Deut 23:19.

²⁶ Mandelkern, 559.

Mandelkern refers to TB *Rosh Hashanah* 4a:

ויאמר לי המלך והשגל יושבת אצלו (Neh 2:6), מאי שגל? אמר רבה בר לימא משמיה דרב: כלבתא. אלא מעתה הא דכתיב מרא שמיא התרוממת די ביתיה ולמאנייא היתיו קדמך ואנת שגלתך ולחנתך חמרא שתין ורברבניך בהון (Dan 5:23). ואי שגל כלבתא בת משתיא חמרא היא? לא קשיא. דמלפא ליה ושתייא. אלא מעתה דכתיב שגל ימינך בכתם אופיר (Ps 45:10). ואי שגל כלבתא היא מאי קא מבשר להו נביא לישראל הכי? קאמר בשכר שחביבה תורה לישראל כשגל לעובדי כוכבים ומזלות זכיתם לכתם אופיר. ואי בעית אימא לעולם שגל מלכתא היא. ורבה בר לימא גמרא גמיר לה. ואמאי קרי לה שגל? שהיתה חביבה עליו כשגל. אי נמי שהושיבה במקום שגל.

(and the King said to me while the *šgl* was seated at his side (Neh 2:6). What is *šgl*? Said Rabba bar Lima in the name of Rav: *klbt'* ("bitch"). If so, how then can we explain You exalted yourself against the Lord of Heaven, and had the vessels of His Temple brought to you. You and your nobles, your *šgl*, drank wine from them (Dan 5:23)? If *šgl* is a bitch, how does she drink wine? There is no difficulty. This is a case where he trained her and she drank. If so, how then explain *šgl* on your right decked in gold of Ophir (Ps 45:10). If *šgl* is a bitch, what does the prophet herald to Israel? He says, because the Torah is favored by Israel as much as *šgl* to the idolaters, they merited the gold of Ophir. If you wish you might say that *šgl* in general means "Queen," and Rabba bar Lima expounded a tradition. And why did he call her *šgl*? Because he liked her as a *šgl*. Therefore he put her at the place of the *šgl*).

It appears that the full meaning of *šgl*, a woman that copulates anally as a male prostitute (כלב) in an act of sodomy, was lost in the oral transmission. Rabba bar Lima only remembered the most essential part of a tradition that was transmitted to him via Rav. It was that *šgl* is a כלבתא. However, what כלבתא alludes to had already been lost by then. Consequently, the Talmud assumed that כלבתא is "bitch," its primary meaning, and subjected the concept to its customary logical analysis. Feigin appears wrong in suggesting that "The strange explanation of שגל as כלבתא, 'bitch,' by Rabba bar Lima (TB *Rosh Hashana* 4a) is possibly based upon a tradition that שגל as well as שגר is a designation of a beast's womb, thus שגל would be a beast. Since no other beast besides a dog was imaginable, this meaning was applied to it."²⁷ There is not an iota of evidence for a tradition that שגל (or שגר) designates a beast's womb. While the dog was probably the first animal domesticated, it was

²⁷ Feigin, 48.

not by any means the only one. In the royal context one could easily imagine a reference to the שגל as לביאה (Nah 2:12).

My suggestion that *šgl* the noun is a woman that copulates through the anus, as a male prostitute, and *šgl* the verb is “to sodomize,” also finds support in the underlying characteristic of the members in the list of unmentionable Ks. All members of this list are in some obvious manner associated with the anus:

1. עפלי/עפלים (K) and טחרי/טחרים (Q) – In Deut 28:27 Targum Onqelos uses the Q. It seems from the Septuagint (εἰς τὴν ἔδραν) and Targum Jonathan (ובטחוריא דמסמין חזוּתא) that עפל is like אפל, and accordingly חזוּתא means that they were in the anus. Driver notes that “to judge from the Syriac טחורים would mean ‘dysentery’ (lit. *tenesmi*).”²⁸ Vulgate has *et parte corporis per quam stercora digeruntur* (“and the part of thy body, by which the dung is cast out”). Mandelkern defines עפלים: *mariscae haemorrhoidales, tumores ani* (piles, tumors in the anus).²⁹ Arabic *'afl* means tumor in the vulva or anus. Rashi in TB *Megillah* 25b explains: לשון מפורש הוא, לגנאי יותר מטחורים, ושניהן בנקב בית הריעי (עפלים is explicit language, more obscene than טחורים, and both are in the anus). While עפלים have been generally understood as “hemorrhoidal swellings” in the anus, Driver raised the possibility that “plague-boils” are actually meant. He bases this possibility “partly on the position of the word here between two other terms denoting afflictions of the skin, partly of the rapid diffusion of the עפלים among the Philistines (1Sam 5-6), and the fact that the mouse was regarded in antiquity as the emblem of a pestilence.”³⁰ However, it is not clear that גרב is an affliction of the skin. For instance, Ibn Ezra says, רבים גם גרב בעין על דעת (according to many, גרב is also in the eye). What exactly the role of the rats was in the spread of the disease is also not clear. Perhaps, Josephus (*Ant* 6:1) is correct in saying that עפלים was dysentery (as the *Peshitta*), which would agree with the other excrement-related items in the list of “unmentionables.”

2. חרייונים (K) and דביונים (Q) – The K term is a *hapax legomenon*. It has been understood by the *Versions* as “dove’s dung.” Septuagint renders κόπρου περισπερῶν, Targum מפקת יוניא דזבל and Vulgate *stercoris*

²⁸ Driver, *Biblical Text*, 310. Lamsa renders עפלים/טחרים “hemorrhoids” (G.M. Lamsa, *Holy Bible from the Ancient Eastern Text* [New York: Harper and Row, 1968] 234).

²⁹ Mandelkern, 905.

³⁰ Driver, *Biblical Text*, 310.

columbarum.³¹ Mandelkern seems to consider חרייונים = חרי + יונים and חרי being a construct form of חרא (“excrement”).³² Rashi in TB *Megillah* 25b explains: חרייונים. חרי לשון ריעי. דביונים. הזב מן היונים. שלא לפרש שהיו חרייונים (חרי means excrement. דביונים is what drips from the doves. So as not to mention that the Israelites were eating their droppings in Samaria). Gordis believes that the K, as two words, can only be translated “dung of doves.”³³ Geiger suggested that we read the K as *ħiryôñîm* “*Menschenmist*.”³⁴

3. חריהם/חריהם (K) and צואתם (Q) – Each of the forms, חריהם (2Kgs 18:27) or חראיהם (Isa 36:12), is a *hapax legomenon*. However, both appear to be variant spellings of the same word. Septuagint renders חריהם *κόπρανα αὐτῶν* and חראיהם *κόπρανα*, apparently reading in Isa 36:12 חרא instead of חראיהם. Targum has “their excrement” (מפקתהון), Peshitta “their own dung,” and so the Vulgate (*stercora sua*), in both places. Rashi in TB *Megillah* 25b explains: חריהם (את חוריהם. ריעי היוצא דרך הנקב. חריהם excrement that comes out through the anal ring). Gordis notes that the root חרי and חרא occurs in later Hebrew, Aramaic, and Mandaic.³⁵ Arabic *hari* has the meaning “dung,” and currently *hara* means “excrement” in Arabic.

4. שיניהם (K) and מימי רגליהם (Q) – The term שיניהם is essentially a *hapax legomenon*. Septuagint renders שיניהם *οὐρον* “their urine,” and so does the Peshitta. Gordis observes that the root שין “urinate,” or its cognates, is found in all Semitic languages.³⁶ For instance, we find *šānu* in Akkadian, *tun* in Aramaic, *mathana* “bladder” in Arabic, etc. BDB translates *šayin* or *šên* “urine.” However, the fact that משתין “urinating” occurs six times in the Hebrew Bible and is not considered obscene raises the question whether the sense “their urine” for שיניהם is adequate. Moreover, this K-Q is unique in replacement of a single MT word with

³¹ Ralbag has some difficulty imagining what use חרייונים could serve in time of famine. He surmises that the doves could not digest all the seeds that they consumed. Undigested seeds could be found in the doves’ excrement and were eaten by the famished. Cf. Kimchi ad loc. Josephus (Ant. 9:69) suggested that dove’s dung was used instead of salt. Relying on Akkadian, חרייונים was translated “locust beans” (NEB) and “carob pods” (NJPS). Cf. M. Cogan and H. Tadmor *II Kings* (AB 11, New York: Doubleday, 1988) 79.

³² Mandelkern, 422.

³³ Gordis, *Biblical Text*, 167.

³⁴ Geiger, 409.

³⁵ Gordis, *Biblical Text*, 167.

³⁶ Ibid.

two different words.³⁷ That may not have been the case for all the manuscripts. Indeed, it seems that the quote in TB *Megillah* 25b is from a manuscript that had מימי שיניהם. This version would result in the K שיניהם corresponding to the Q רגליהם, which would make the meaning “urine” for שיניהם rather awkward. Rashi in TB *Megillah* 25b explains that צואה לחה ורכה קרויה מימי שיניהם (“soft and watery excrement is called מימי שיניהם”).³⁸ He understands שיניהם as secretion from the teeth-like glands that support the rectum, and so apparently do Kimchi and Qara (2Kgs 18:27). This understanding makes שיניהם (or מימי שיניהם) indeed obscene and unmentionable, and it better fits the context. Rashi’s interpretation, which seems to rely on an ancient tradition, also supports our suggestion that the obscene Ks are all related to the anus.

5. למחראות (K) and למוצאות (Q) – The word למחראות is a *hapax legomenon*. It has been understood by the Septuagint as λυτρωῶνα “a draught-house”; Targum has אנשא לבית מפקת; Peshitta renders למחראות “a public toilet-room”; and, Vulgate *latrinas*. In 2Kgs 10: 27 Rashi simply says למחראות. לשון בית הכסא וכן לאכול את חוראיהם (Isa 36:12). However, in TB *Megillah* 25b he explicates the relation to the anus:

למחראות. גבי עבודת כוכבים כתיב בספר מלכים, כי חור לשון מוצא ריעי הוא

(למחראות refers in the Book of Kings to idol worship, because חור is the ring of the anus from which excrement comes out), and so does Metzudot in 2Kgs 10:27. Kimchi says והענין שהיו נפנין שם (and it means that they relieved themselves there), as does Ralbag. Cogan and Tadmor translate למחראות “latrine” in line with the Septuagint and medieval Jewish exegesis, but suggest that it might be a “public dump” (cf. NKJV).³⁹

³⁷ There are many instances in the K-Q system where a word is read as two words. These cases have all resulted from improper separation of the original text. For instance, Gen 30:11 בגד (K) but בא + גד (Q); Ex 4:2 מזה (K) but זה + מה (Q); Jud 16:25 כי טוב (K) but כטוב (Q); 1Sam 9:1 מבן ימין (K) but מבנימין (Q); 1Sam 24:8 מן המערה (K) but מהמערה (Q); Isa 3:15 מלכם (K) but מה לכם (Q); Isa 44:24 מי אתי (K) but מאתי (Q); Jer 6:29 מאשתם (K) but מאש תם (Q); etc. Cf. Gordis’ (99–100) List 10 and List 11.

³⁸ Cf. Rashi and Kimchi on 2Kgs 18:27. Kimchi says on שיניהם there, לענין לאכול את צואתם (it means to eat their excrement). Cf. also Rashi on Isa 36:12. He explains there, שיניהם צואה לחה, שיני דכרכשתא. היא החלחולת שקורין בלע״ז (tabahie) (soft excrement, teeth-like glands of the rectum. It is the rectum, called tabahie, supported by three teeth-like glands). Cf. TB *Shabbath* 82a “the rectum is supported by three teeth-like glands.”

³⁹ M. Cogan and H. Tadmor *II Kings* (AB 11, New York: Doubleday, 1988) 105, 116.

In all these instances the anus is the common element and apparent cause for considering them unmentionable in the synagogue. Consequently, it would seem reasonable to identify שגל as being also anus related, as I suggested.⁴⁰ It should be noted that in TB *Sanhedrin* 95b, שגלונות, a diminutive of שגל, appear together with זונות in the camp of Sennacherib.⁴¹ This implies that in a later time, either by tradition or inference, שגל was considered to be in the same category as זונה, but different in some respect. My suggestion would conveniently accommodate this perspective.

In some cases in the Hebrew Bible (Ps 45:10, Neh 2:6, Dan 5:2, 3, and 23) the noun שגל has distinct royal characteristics. Some scholars raised the possibility that the verb may have an obscene meaning that the noun does not possess. Lagarde already suggested that שגל, in the biblical cases that were mentioned, is a distinct, borrowed root.⁴² Indeed, in the Hebrew Bible the noun שגל occurs only as a person of high rank in a royal court, and in all these cases, foreign nationals are referred to. It is possible that in each case the author refers to them using their foreign title or rank.

In his *Mahberet*, Menahem ben Saruk (910–970) interprets the noun שגל in Ps 45:10, Neh 2:6 and Dan 5:2 as “lady” (ענין גבירה המה). Rashi seems undecided between “queen” (מלכתא) and “bitch” (כלבתא).⁴³ Akkadian *šā ekalli* “of the palace,” always written with the feminine determinative, has been proposed by a number of scholars as the origin of Hebrew and Aramaic שגל and ^{SAL}É.GAL has been identified as the title of the king’s main wife.⁴⁴ This title spread from the court of the Neo-Assyrian kings to royal courts in the west.⁴⁵

Feigin found the usual explanation of שגל as *ša ekalli*, “queen,”

⁴⁰ In Sumerian *šà-gál* is “inside of the opening.” Feigin (48) suggests that *šà-gál* is an expression for “uterus” or “pudenda.” However, Sumerian has not preserved the meaning “womb” for *šà-gál*.

⁴¹ TB *Sanhedrin* 95b has שגלונות וזונות של זהב ועמהם שגלונות וזונות.

⁴² P. Lagarde, *Übersicht über die im Aramäischen, Arabischen und Hebräischen übliche Bildung der Nomina, nebst Register und Nachträgen* (Osnabrück: O. Zeller, 1972) 51, 153.

⁴³ J. Florsheim, *Rashi Le-Mikra be-ferusho La-Talmud* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1989) 278–280.

⁴⁴ L. Oppenheim, et al. eds. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the University of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) 61f.; W. von Soden. *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965–81) 193.

⁴⁵ Ch. Y. Greenfeld, שגל. In *Encyclopaedia Biblica* Vol VII (Jerusalem: Bialik Inst., 1976) 523.

implausible “since we have הִכַּל for *ê-gal*; also here we expect *ša hekalli*.”⁴⁶ He prefers to consider שגל another form of *šigirtu*. Like *šigirtu*, שגל would mean “lady of the harem.” There is certainly a problem with the etymology that rests on ^f*ša ekalli*. If Aramaic adopted this term, *sgl* would have been expected rather than *šgl*. Millard suggests several possibilities of how Akkadian ^f*ša ekalli* led to Aramaic *šgl*. One of these is that the Aramaic *šgl* in the Hebrew Bible should be read שגל “and the Massorettes’ pointing in the biblical texts changed, their understanding having been influenced by the unrelated root *šgl* ‘to violate.’”⁴⁷ Kaufman asserts that “in spite of phonetic difficulties, a loan is almost certain here. As demonstrated by Landsberger,⁴⁸ the reading *ša ekalli* for ^{SAL}É.GAL cannot be doubted, and the identity in meaning between the Akkadian and Biblical Hebrew and Biblical Aramaic could not be coincidental.”⁴⁹

Kaufman argues that Millard’s explanation cannot be accepted. He says, “The Biblical Hebrew term *šgl*, with no other known cognates, can hardly be anything but a denominative from *šēgāl*; but one cannot be forced to regard the loan as early merely because this verb seems attested in otherwise pre-Exilic Biblical Hebrew texts. It may even be that the Massoretic substitution of Qere *škb* for written *šgl* actually reflects an earlier substitution in reverse, when *šgl* was felt to be the euphemistic form.”⁵⁰ However, Mankowski rejects Kaufman’s position. He says, “there is little reason to think that the obscene verb שגל, is denominative from שגל. The semantic connection is tenuous, and, even if granted, one would expect the denominative verb to serve as a euphemism; but the Masorettes regarded the word as unutterable and supplied the *Qere* שכב for each occurrence. Moreover, if שגל in Jer 3:2 is really a *Qal* Passive (as seems probable, given the existence of a *Qal* active and the lack of a *Pi’el*), the occurrence of the root in this non-productive conjunction would all but rule out derivation from the loanword שגל.”⁵¹

It seems that the borrowed term שגל (or שגל) referred to a female of

⁴⁶ Feigin, 47.

⁴⁷ A.R. Millard, “^FŠA EKALLI – ŠGL – ^DSAGALE” *UF* 4 (1972) 162.

⁴⁸ B. Landsberger, “Akkadisch-hebräische Wortgleichungen” *SupVT* XVI (1967) 198.

⁴⁹ S.A. Kaufman, *The Akkadian Influences on Aramaic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 97.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* See n. 335.

⁵¹ P.V. Mankowski, *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, c. 2000) 137–138, note 514.

high rank in the court. The lesser status of a woman so titled in the Book of Daniel can be understood by the nature of the Persian court in which there were many women and concubines. At the same time, there seems to be a tradition, reflected in some Talmudic passages, which assigns an obscene sense to the noun שגל. Therefore, it would be prudent to adopt Lagarde's position and consider שגל in Psalms, Nehemiah, and Daniel a borrowed word. The Hebrew שגל, verb and noun, could then be treated uniformly.

CONCLUSION

The etymology of שגל remains obscure. In the Hebrew Bible the verb and noun שגל occur a number of times, and suggest diametrically opposed meanings. There seems to be a strong late tradition for understanding the verb שגל as an obscene term for copulation.

We attempted to go a step beyond the general characterization of שגל as “an obscene term for copulation” and delve into the nature of its obscenity. Our analysis of biblical and Talmudic sources led us to the conclusion that the obscenity of שגל (verb and noun) stems from its relation to the anus. Specifically, the verb שגל is “to sodomize a woman” and the noun שגל is “a woman that copulates anally, as a bitch.” In some cases in the Hebrew Bible, which deal with foreign royalty, a borrowed Akkadian term שגל is used in the sense of “queen, lady.” The Hebrew שגל and the Akkadian term appear to be unrelated.

Our analysis also shed some light on the nature of the other items included in the list of biblical obscenities deemed too improper to be mentioned in the synagogue. All the items in this list obviously relate to the anus.

The indelicate nature of the topic discussed would appear to belong to a different and coarse realm, so unlike the assumed sublime ideational content of the Hebrew Bible. Tur-Sinai, who confronted a similar situation in the interpretation of כפי תחרא (Ex 28:32), took the position that “our ancients wrote whatever they wrote with pure and natural feelings, and with those same feelings we should accept their words.”⁵² Biblical scholarship would probably be well served by following Tur-Sinai’s advice.

⁵² N.H. Tur-Sinai, הלשון והספר (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1960) 219–223. For many years Tur-Sinai withheld the publication of his research on כפי תחרא (Ex 28:32) because its scatological content, similar to that presented in this paper, would have been considered tasteless according to our norms. If we are correct regarding the characterization of the obscenity in the list of “unmentionables,” then Tur-Sinai’s suggestion that כפי תחרא = חרא + כפית would seem rather doubtful. Had his suggestion been as obvious and natural as Tur-Sinai deems it to be, a euphemism would have been found for it.