

The Barren Woman of Psalms 113:9 and the Housewife: An Antiphrastic Dysphemism

DAVID MARCUS

Jewish Theological Seminary

Much of the late Professor M. M. Bravmann's work was devoted to illustrating curious nuances of style and expression in the Semitic languages.¹ He investigated these rhetorical features both in the Arabic dialects, his major field of study, and in the cognate languages. It is fitting, then, that in dedicating this paper in his memory we should discuss a feature of Semitic rhetoric which comes under the rubric of euphemism.

The use of euphemism as a linguistic device among all Semitic speaking peoples is well known.² It was used to avoid infelicitous or offensive concepts such as death, urination, excretion, etc. For some time now we have been investigating a special type of euphemism called antiphrasis (< Greek *antiphrazein* 'to speak the opposite').³ An antiphrastic euphemism is one which connotes the opposite of the literal meaning of the word or phrase. In this respect it is similar to an ironic or sarcastic use of a word as, for example, the word 'brave' in "you are a brave man", said of a coward, or the word 'freezing' in "it is freezing in there", said of a hot furnace.⁴ But an antiphrastic euphemism differs from irony or sarcasm in one very important respect. The ironic or sarcastic use of a word depends solely on the context in which it is employed. Where the term is used outside of the sarcastic context it retains its regular meaning. Thus, in our examples 'brave' and 'freezing' may be employed elsewhere with their normal meanings. However, with an antiphrastic euphemism, once the term has gained acceptance as an antiphrasis it is not used again in its literal sense.

1 His rhetorical studies are now conveniently collected together in the second part of his *Studies in Semitic Philology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977).

2 For a bibliography, see my article on "Some Antiphrastic Euphemisms for a Blind Person in Akkadian and Other Semitic Languages," forthcoming in *JAOS* 99 / 4.

3 Ibid.

4 Cf. the sarcastic use of the word *ṣeḥru* 'child' by Shamshi-Adad to his inept grown-up son, Yasmah-Adad in *u attā ṣeḥrēta* "You are a 'child'!" (*ARM* I, 85:6). Some further instances of sarcasm and irony in Mesopotamian literature have recently been indicated by B. R. Foster, "Humor and Cuneiform Literature," *JANES* 6 (1974), 69-85, and by J. S. Cooper, "Structure, Humor, and Satire in the Poor Man of Nippur," *JCS* 27 (1975), 163-74.

For example, one of the expressions in Hebrew to denote a blind man is the antiphrasis *me'ôr 'ênayim* lit. 'light of the eyes' = 'eyesight'. Similarly, the Aramaic term *saggî nâhôr*, lit. 'much of light' = 'much eyesight' (which becomes the technical term in later Hebrew for 'euphemism' in general), is an antiphrastic euphemism. Once used as antiphrastic euphemisms these phrases do not revert to their original meanings.

It will be noted that the construction of these antiphrastic euphemisms takes the form of a construct-genitive relationship. This is a characteristic feature of this type of antiphrasis and is also attested in Akkadian as, for example, in *damqa ini* lit. 'keen of eye' = 'keen-sighted' but used antiphrastically to denote 'a blind person'. Since the construct-genitive is a typical feature of the Semitic languages the phenomenon of an antiphrastic euphemism can be categorized as a characteristic of Semitic expression.⁵

In this paper we would like to discuss a parallel phenomenon to the antiphrastic euphemism, namely the antiphrastic dysphemism. A dysphemism is the antonym of a euphemism. Whereas a euphemism is substituted for an offensive expression, a dysphemism substitutes a distasteful expression for a wholesome or desirable one as, for example, calling a beautiful woman an 'ugly' one.⁶ One explanation for the use of dysphemisms among the Semites is the fear that too great happiness may attract envy and that the 'evil eye' might be averted by giving an esteemed thing a bad name.⁷

An antiphrastic dysphemism shares the same features as an antiphrastic euphemism. It has a construct-genitive formation, and once it has gained general acceptance is not used again in its literal (i.e. offensive) meaning. A good example of an antiphrastic dysphemism is the Hebrew phrase *'aqeret habbayit*.⁸ The phrase literally means 'barren of the house' = 'a barren woman', and it occurs once in the Bible in Psalms 113:9. The verse reads: *môšibi 'aqeret habbayit 'em habbānim šemēhā* "He sets the childless woman among her household as a happy mother of children."⁹ The phrase *'aqeret habbayit* meaning 'barren woman' admirably fits the thought of this verse and the context of the preceding verses which glorify the Almighty by stressing contrasts, "He raises the poor from the dust, lifts up the needy from the refuse heap to set them with the great, with the great men of His people."¹⁰ The Psalmist makes the point that just as God can elevate and transform the poor and the needy, so too can He enable the barren woman to give birth and be a mother of children.

5 We have shown elsewhere (see n. 2 above) that it is only when the components of the antiphrasis are used outside this construct-genitive construction, or indeed when suffixes are added to the construction that the original meaning returns. For example, when suffixes are added to the Hebrew phrase *me'ôr 'ênayim* (antiphrastically = 'a blind person') it reverts back to meaning 'eyesight', as in "big strides rob a man of one five-hundredth part of his eyesight (*me'ôr 'ênāw*)" (TB *Taanit* 10b).

6 Good examples of dysphemisms may be found in the articles on "Euphemism" in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (1903), 5:267-68, and in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971), 6:959-62.

7 This explanation is found in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* article referred to in the previous note. Cf., also, J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (N.Y., 1939), 56.

8 We had previously (article cited n. 2 above) incorrectly identified this phrase as an antiphrastic euphemism. But we did not face the problem that the phrase did not conform to the principles of euphemism which is the substitution of a wholesome term for a distasteful one (in this case 'the barren'). In a euphemism the term expressing the defect or handicap is the one replaced by another term. It is the opposite with *'aqeret habbayit*, for here the wholesome term (motherhood) is being replaced by the unwholesome one (barrenness).

9 Translation: *The Book of Psalms*, Jewish Publication Society (Philadelphia, 1972), 119.

10 Loc. cit.

In later Hebrew the phrase acquires an antiphrastic connotation and is used to denote not a barren woman, but her opposite—a housewife (with children).¹¹ To explain the different meanings of *qeret habbayit* some scholars have suggested that *qeret* is a homonym¹²: that is, there are two different words *qeret*, one derived from the noun *qārā* 'barren', and the other related to the word *iqqār* 'root, chief thing', or to another word which has been lost in Hebrew but is found in Phoenician.

It has also been suggested that the second *qeret* (housewife), since it is derived from *iqqār*, should be repointed *iqqeret*.¹³ Against this suggestion is the fact that *iqqār* does not have a feminine form, and that the traditional vocalization, if it is not to be respected, has at least to be explained.

The proposal that *qeret* is a homonym but to be associated with a Phoenician word has been made by Y. Ben Shem. He pointed to the word *qrt* which occurs in Phoenician in an alleged meaning of 'stronghold' and thought that this might be the required homonym for *qeret*. The phrase *qeret habbayit* would then be translated 'stronghold of the house' = 'its protector'. But this suggestion cannot be accepted because the Phoenician word *qrt* does not mean 'stronghold'. It occurs in line 6 of the Azitawadda inscription which reads: *wml' nk qrt p'r* translated according to Ben Shem "I filled the strongholds of Pe'or." This translation of *qrt* as 'stronghold' is based mainly on an equation with Aramaic *hqr* / *qr* and Greek *akra*, an equation which is most dubious for Standard Phoenician, the dialect of the Azitawadda inscription.¹⁴ Secondly, the corresponding word in the parallel Hittite version is 'granaries'¹⁵ so that line 6 should be translated with Rosenthal "I have filled the storehouses of Pa'r."¹⁶

We believe that *qeret* is not a homonym, but in both cases is the construct of *qārā* 'barren'. We explain its semantic change by the fact that it is an antiphrastic dysphemism. It is a dysphemism because the term 'barren' is a substitute for the desirable term 'mother', and it is an antiphrasis because of its form (construct-genitive). It started out as 'barren woman' and then acquired the antiphrastic meaning 'housewife (with children)'. Once the phrase had gained acceptance in its new meaning it was not used again to denote a barren woman, rather the absolute form *qārā* was used.

The origin of the antiphrasis is clearly midrashic. The element *qeret* was associated by the Rabbis with the word *iqqār* 'chief thing'. Thus in Midrash *Numbers Rabbah* 14:8 there is a play on the word *qarat*: 'dish' of Numbers 7:61. it is stated: "Don't read *qarat* rather *qeret*, corresponding to Rachel who was *qeret habbayit*: she was the chief (*iqqār*) of Jacob's household." That *qeret* is the correct vocalization here and not *iqqeret* (the ambiguity arises from the unpointed text) is clear from the fact that the same play on the word *qarat* occurs earlier in reference to Jacob and in that context the vocalization is not ambiguous but must be read *qeret*. The text reads: "Don't read *qarat*

11 See the standard Hebrew dictionaries.

12 E.g., Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 1074; I. Ben Shem, *Beth Mikra* 49 (1972), 218–19.

13 N. Berggrin, *Leshonenu* 1 (1928/9), 323–24.

14 The equation is perfectly plausible for later dialects like Punic or late Aramaic where *q* occurs for *q*.

15 P. Meriggi, *Manuale di Eteo Geroglifico* (Rome, 1967), 2:73.

16 *ANET*³, 653.

rather *‘aqeret*, corresponding to Jacob who removed (*‘āqar*) [lit. uprooted] the birthright from Reuben and gave it to Joseph.”¹⁷

It is interesting to note that even the word *‘aqārā* was also playfully associated with *‘iqqār*. Thus in *Genesis Rabbah* in a comment on Genesis 29:31 it is stated: “But Rachel was barren (*‘aqārā*). R. Isaac said: Rachel was the chief of the house (*‘iqqārō šel bayit*) as it says: ‘but Rachel was barren’, meaning that she was the chief of the house (*‘iqqar habbayit*).”¹⁸

It should be observed that both these midrashim associate the terms *‘aqeret* and *‘aqārā* with *‘iqqār* for purely homiletical purposes, and obviously no serious claims for homonymy can be made on the basis of these midrashim alone.

In sum, the phrase *‘aqeret habbayit* acquired its antiphrastic meaning through association with the word *‘iqqār* on the lines of the midrashic passage cited above. Once the phrase was used for a housewife it was not used anymore for a barren woman. This is in perfect accord with the characteristics of an antiphrasis as outlined above. We therefore identify *‘aqeret habbayit* as another example of that curious Semitic locution, the antiphrastic euphemism / dysphemism. Originally it denoted a barren woman; subsequently it denoted its opposite, a housewife with children.

¹⁷ *Numbers Rabbah* 14:7.

¹⁸ *Genesis Rabbah* 71:2.