

RAW MATERIAL

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL SEXUALITY

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Chapter 3

Naked and Ashamed

Genesis 3, etc.

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Divine Clothing

As noted in the previous chapter, the biblical God is never described as having or using genitals or producing semen. Neither is he ever naked. In Isaiah 6 his garments fill the Temple. Notably in this chapter as well as Ezekiel 1 the seraphim and kerubim use one pair of wings solely to cover themselves. In Ezekiel 1 the wings were used to cover their bodies (גִּיּוֹרָה) and in Isaiah 6 they were used to cover their “feet,” probably a euphemism for their genitals. In the Aramaic Daniel the Ancient of Days is described as clothed in white garments (7:9) and in the Hebrew Daniel a divine being similar to Ezekiel’s appears to him clothed in linen (10:5). Divine and angelic bodies are not described as naked and usually specified as clothed. What was this divine clothing hiding? And why were the original couple unclothed until their transgression made them painfully aware of their nakedness? Is this part of the being, “like gods, knowing good and evil,” the need to clothe the body?

First some context is helpful. From the ancient Near East archaeology has uncovered a variety of statues of divine and human subjects from the Iron Age and before. Nude female figures abound. However, though early nude male figures are known, by the Iron Age such figures were all but eliminated from the images of the period. One image from Kuntillat Ajrud, crudely drawn on a potsherd, may be an exception to this rule. Occasionally Assyrian reliefs depict captives naked. Other exceptions may be found in Egyptian art. But in general the male figure is clothed, at least between the waist and knee, while the female figure was frequently unclothed.

Greece gives an interesting contrast to this pattern. From early in the Iron Age nude males and clothed females were the norm. A multitude of Archaic Period kores and kouroi/Herms have been uncovered, the young females uniformly and modestly clothed, the males uniformly and unashamedly nude.¹ Not only does this convention continue through Classical Period statuary, but

¹ E.g. a debate over a group of kouroi from Naucratis, whether they are of Greek or Cypriot manufacture. One central factor in the debate is whether the statues are draped (Cypriot) or nude (Greek), or portray a transparent compromise between drapery and nudity (Jenkins 169-171; fig 5a-c).

also in the various vase paintings. The exceptions are usually vase paintings of sexual activity, but even there the males tend to be nude but the females frequently remain as clothed as possible considering the activities. Only in the late Classical period does Greek sculpture make its initial forays into nude female sculpture, with clear indications that they were bucking convention (Boardman p. 54; c.f. Himmelmann pp. 187-198). The rare late Classical nude female was usually attempting modesty, and the less self-conscious nude female was not evident until the Hellenistic Period.

The Hellenistic period saw a flowering of nude female figures with a surprising number of partially or fully clothed males. It must be noted however, that the female genitals of the Hellenistic statues were not explicit in detail like the rest of the carved female body (Smith p. 83). In contrast Classical and Hellenistic male genitals were carved with painstaking accuracy.² The Hellenistic period was characterized by Greek culture spread thinly over the various Near Eastern cultures (Miller 1996, pp. 8-11), and the result was Near Eastern conventions with Greek appearance and language. The flowering of nude females and clothed males is one example of these Near Eastern conventions expressed in Greek form.

Within the context of the Iron Age Near East it is not remarkable that divine and angelic beings were explicitly described as clothed or “covered,” especially as God and the angels were consistently treated as male. Even lacking explicit descriptions of clothing there is no anomaly in Biblical writers not describing divine genitals or lack thereof. Given the cultural climate of the region we should assume unless otherwise specified that divine and angelic bodies were understood as clothed or otherwise covered. At times the convention is strongly specified.

However humans, who were created in the image of God, were created naked. Was God likewise unclothed until shame drove humans to require clothing? Is God’s clothing a response to human shame? Or is human clothing part of becoming, “like gods, knowing good and evil”? Remember that Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1 strongly insist that seraphim and kerubim require covering in the divine presence, and presumably these high angelic beings have not experienced what the first couple experienced in Genesis 3. Any supernatural being (such as a seraph or kerub) who would transgress like Adam and his wife would also be expelled from the divine presence altogether (e.g.

² For a recent popular treatment of nudity in Near Eastern and Greek art, see Bonfante.

Ezk 28:12-19; Miller 1993a).

Shame and Cover in Genesis 3

Cover is necessary when there is exposure, but nakedness is exposure only when there is a danger present. Once evil has been set loose along side the good, protection becomes necessary. It is not simply nudity that makes cover necessary. And vegetation does not provide sufficient cover for this nakedness.

The protective nature of cover is confirmed in the second sin of Genesis, Cain's murder of his brother Abel. The story ends with Cain building the first city (4:17). It may seem odd to have a city with so few people, but it is important to understand the meaning of the Hebrew term "city" (*'ir*; עיר). A city is defined by its walls and defenses (Otto 54-55). One possible translation is "fortress." If an urban area lacks walls it is not an *'ir*. If an unwalled settlement is isolated the collection of dwellings is known as a village (*hatser*; חצר; e.g. Josh 13:23,28; 1 Chron 4:32-33), but the unwalled dwellings grouped outside the city walls of an urban area are known as the "daughters" (*benot*; בנות) of the city (e.g. Josh 15:45,47; Jud 1:27). In Genesis 4 Cain founded the first dwelling with defensive walls — the first city-fortress. With these walls he covered himself and his family from the practice which he created — murder. Sin produces a need for cover, a need for protection.

The parallel is found in the previous chapter, Genesis 3. Once the man and woman eat from the tree they find themselves not merely uncovered but exposed and in need of cover. There is a danger in exposure, and the couple use vegetation to cover themselves. First they manufacture clothing from leaves, then they hide themselves in the vegetation. But the vegetation provides inadequate cover. More substantial cover is necessary, the clothing of skins which God provides (3:21). And the skins imply the death of an animal in order that humans may be clothed.

We can draw another parallel from the experience of Cain. No explanation is given for God's approval of Abel's offering and his disapproval for Cain's, but Cain offered vegetation while Abel offered a slain animal. The slain animal was acceptable and vegetation proved to be an inadequate offering. To clothe Adam and Eve likewise vegetation was inadequate and an animal had to die and provide them with its skin.

Many modern readers are unaware of the vegetarian ideal of paradise. Within Eden even the

animals are vegetarian, for there is no death there (Gen 1:29-30). Likewise in the utopia described by Isaiah the animals are vegetarian (Is 11:6-9; 65:25) It is not until after the flood that Noah is given permission to eat animals, but even then Noah is forbidden to eat the blood. The blood is reserved for the Creator, for it represents the animal's "soul" or life (*nephesh*; נֶפֶשׁ ; Lev 17:10-12). In this context the two events stand out in high relief, God clothing the first couple in the skins of the first animal to die in Eden, and Abel offering the life of an animal in sacrifice to God. Cain who neglected to take the life of an animal ended up taking the life of a human, his own brother. And that shed blood cries out to God. So Cain covers himself from bloodshed with a fortified city wall.³ There he hides himself, east of Eden, away from the divine presence and walled away from the human violence that he invented.

Some have noted how the serpent is the animal which denudes itself when it sheds its skin. It is an informative pun which notes that the serpent was the most subtle animal (3:1), for the term subtle (*'arum*; עָרוּם) has the same spelling and pronunciation as the term naked (עָרוּם ; 2:25).⁴ By clothing ourselves we are effectively the antithesis of the serpent which sheds its skin and becomes "naked". Indeed, no other animal clothes itself as we humans do (Eilberg-Schwartz, 88). No other animals hide their bodies, including their genitals, in the human fashion. The animals have no shame, at least about their bodies, for they are innocent, naked and unashamed. Humans do need to hide our nakedness. To do that effectively the very skin of the shameless animals is taken to cover human shame.

Drunk Noah

This story is primarily one of incest. It bears several narrative similarities with the stories of Lot with his daughters, Tamar with her father-in-law Judah, and Reuben with Bilhah (Miller 2000a). Ham broke down the sexual boundary between the generations, and as a result his son Canaan was cursed. The sin of incest, it seems, produces a curse which may move among family

³ I have discussed elsewhere the Genesis themes of wandering and the city of Cain (Miller 1996, 118-119).

⁴ The Rabbis noticed this use of עָרוּם and understood it as a reference to the way a snake becomes "naked" by shedding its skin. So they concluded that the skin used to clothe Adam and Eve was the shed skin of the serpent. In this scenario there is no animal death.

members. To gaze upon the nakedness of another is a sexual act. If that other person is your own father the gaze is a literal example of the euphemism used in Leviticus 18 for incest, to “uncover the nakedness of” the offended relative. By enjoying his father’s exposure, Ham exposed his son to the curse.⁵

While drunk, Noah exposed himself to the very thing from which Adam and Eve sought to protect themselves. Only loss of self-control would explain this uncovering. There are several points of contact between Genesis 3 and Noah’s nakedness (Stordalen 444). For instance, Adam is derived from the ground (אֲדָמָה, *adamah*) and is a tiller of the ground, and Noah is called a man of the ground when he plants the vines which get him drunk (9:20). God asks Adam, “Who told (*haggiyd*) you that you were naked?” (3:11) and Ham tells (*yagged*) his brothers that their father was naked (9:22). So God clothes Adam and his wife, and Shem and Japeth cover their father, ending the nakedness and shame.

The proper response is that of Shem and Japeth, to be sensible for the senseless and cover his nakedness. Because Ham did not avert his gaze and provide his father with propriety, his is the transgression, the violation and the defilement of his father through gazing on his nakedness. Apparently Noah carries no stigma for making himself drunk, senseless and naked, though his son is held responsible for taking advantage of his senseless and naked father.

Joseph’s Escape

In Genesis 39 the wife of Potiphar attempts to seduce Potiphar’s chief slave, Joseph. However, Joseph refuses to commit adultery with his owner’s wife. As he attempts to escape the wife grabs hold of his garment and he leaves it behind as he flees. Joseph is often depicted as naked as he flees the wife of Potiphar, but this is not specified in the text. It is entirely possible that Joseph was wearing more than one layer of clothing and the wife managed to tear loose only one of the garments of Joseph.

The text makes no issue of Joseph’s nakedness, and this is important. Nakedness has a significant dramatic effect when inserted in the story. Thus the neglect of Joseph’s nakedness is a

⁵ Some rabbis noted that Ham could not be cursed himself because he was blessed as a son of Noah. Therefore the curse had to fall on his son (*Gen Rab* 36.7.3). This explanation is at least as old as the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QpGen a / 4Q252, 2.5-7).

sure sign that the author did not want to imply nakedness. The author assumed that Joseph had another garment on under the garment which was grasped by Potiphar's wife.

Priests

Among the articles of a priests clothing are "breeches," linen pants which reach from waist to knee, covering groin and thighs (Ex 28:42-43). The breeches are described as covering the nakedness of the wearer even though they are worn under a long robe which already covers the nakedness of the priest. Also stairways are forbidden for the altar lest the priest reveal his nakedness by using steps (Ex 20:26). Instead the altar is required to have a ramp which, presumably, would cause less tossing of the robe's hem while the priest ascends and descends. Much care is taken that the priest does not reveal any nakedness within the Sanctuary grounds, for such nakedness is an abomination.

The rabbis attribute the sin of Nadab and Abihu to carelessness about wearing the breeches as well as their drunkenness and presentation of strange fire (*Lev Rab* 20.9). Remember that Isaiah's seraphim and Ezekiel's kerubim use a pair of wings to cover their bodies in the divine presence. Nakedness is not acceptable in the Sanctuary setting.

Isaiah and Saul among the Prophets

In the prophets nakedness is often used to describe the degradation of conquered people, a threat of foreign domination (e.g. Is 47:2-3). Isaiah 20 is the famous passage where Isaiah is commanded to remove his sackcloth (already symbolizing the humiliation of Judah) and go about in an even more humiliating manner, naked. In Micah nakedness is a sign of mourning, probably even more excessive than sackcloth (1:8)

Twice Saul is taken up into prophetic ecstasy. The first time prophesying is a symbol of Saul's chosenness and shows the presence of the divine spirit within the newly anointed king (1 Sam 10:5-13). The first time Saul remains fully clothed. The second time, however, was after Saul lost the support of Samuel and God. In fact Saul was in pursuit of the newly anointed king, David. This time when he was caught up in the prophetic ecstasy he disrobed himself and lay at the feet of Samuel, now his adversary (1 Sam 19:23-24). Saul's nakedness was a humiliation and a sign of abject and involuntary submission to the prophet. Saul was a captive of divine wrath and his

nakedness was like that of the captives in Isaiah.

David once danced before the Lord in ecstasy, though not a prophetic ecstasy like Saul. David was not naked, but his clothing was minimal. He wore a linen ephod when he danced and his first wife Michal later commented on David exposing himself in public (2 Sam 6:14,20). When he danced apparently his ephod exposed what the priests are so careful to conceal in the Lord's presence. No wonder Michal was offended. But apparently God was not offended, even though David bared himself in a dance before the Ark of the Covenant. David, even in divine ecstasy, was not Saul.

This dance of David has raised the hackles of many commentators who react in a variety of ways. Among fundamentalists who eschew dancing David's dance is reinterpreted as something much more sedate. Michal's response is often characterized as excessive and treated as a comment on her character, not David's dance. And redaction sometimes is invoked to make Michal's response secondary and "late" (Wright 223). Most troublesome is the supposition that David's dance is treated here as erotic. In the text Michal finds it shameful. Eroticism may be implied, but it may not. Shame of exposure need not include eroticism, for the king already had concubines. This could not be construed as an attempt to expand his harem. The king of the land exposed himself before everyone, even the young women (who have no power and are unlikely to ever stand before the king in his court). This exposure is shameful aside from any implied erotic content.

Women

For women the shame of nakedness has its strongest passages in the prophets where Israel and Judah are described as unfaithful wives to God. In Hosea 2:9-11, Jeremiah 13:22, 26 and Ezekiel 16:37,39 God threatens to shame his unfaithful wife Israel by exposing her nakedness. Nineveh receives the same punishment in Nahum 3:5 and Babylon in Isaiah 47:2-3. The punishment is severe and implies a great shame for a wife, or probably any woman. Other texts on female nakedness are very few. Aside from Eve and a few brief comments there are no other substantial mentions of female nakedness. The *Targums Megilla* on Esther state that Queen Vashti was commanded to appear naked for the king's nobles (Esther 1:10), but the Masoretic Text does not support this interpretation, nor do other versions. Likewise Josephus (*Ant* 11.6.1) is ignorant of this tradition. Apparently the Rabbis felt the story needed more drive and intensified the shame of Vashti

by adding the requirement that she appear naked.

Though there is sporadic concern over female nudity, the Biblical texts clearly are more interested in the nakedness of the male. Even in Leviticus 18 the incestuous violation of a woman is usually described as uncovering the nakedness of the offended male. Only occasionally is a woman's nakedness at issue.

New Testament

Nudity is treated only marginally in the New Testament. There is the added color in Mark's version of the arrest of Jesus; a young follower was grabbed by his tunic but the lad fled naked, leaving the tunic behind (14:51-52).⁶ John 21:7 adds similar color when Peter, taken by surprise while fishing, throws a tunic over his nakedness then jumps into the water to get to shore. Apparently while fishing he found it convenient to work unclothed, but in a comic touch he first wraps himself in a garment, then soaks the garment by jumping into the water. In 1 Corinthians 12:23-24 Paul speaks of the church as a body with body parts which are presentable and parts which are unpresentable and must be covered. It is not one of Paul's more tactful metaphors (who wants to be an unpresentable part of the church?) but the theme of shame and covering remains strong. Likewise in 2 Corinthians 5:2-4 the shame of being naked is used as a metaphor for resurrection and against gnostic detestation of material bodies. The Christian does not hope to discard the body altogether like clothing, but rather to receive better clothing — a better body in the resurrection. Rev 16:15 offers a warning to keep watch and stay ready for Christ's return lest you be found naked. Elsewhere nakedness is a way of describing poverty and abject need (e.g. Rev 3:17), and clothing the naked is a good deed enjoined on Christ's followers.

A bit more substantial is the demoniac from whom Jesus casts out a legion of demons (Matt 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-15; Luke 8:26-39). Only Luke is explicit that the demoniac is naked among the tombs (8:27), but Mark and Luke both state that the man was clothed after he was healed (Mark 5:15; Luke 8:35). In this story clothing is one of the defining features of someone in his right mind, and nakedness indicates a certain loss of control, something like Saul before Samuel.

⁶ There seems to be an intentional allusion to Genesis 39:12 LXX when Joseph fled the wife of Potiphar, centering on the verb . However, the meaning behind such an allusion is not clear. Perhaps the tradition of Joseph fleeing naked was widespread in the 1st century.

The New Testament does not build a concept of nakedness, but uses it in incidental ways to illustrate other points. The basic theme retains the same shame of nakedness we find in Genesis 3. Almost as important, nakedness is used to symbolize poverty and great need for charity.

One great unmentionable in the New Testament is the nakedness of Jesus as he hung on the cross. Complete stripping of prisoners was a routine part of the crucifixion process, and the gospels are meticulous in describing the removal of Jesus' clothes and how they were divided among the guards (Matt 27:35; Mk 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:23-24), but none draw attention to the shame of his nakedness during the crucifixion. There is a reticence about describing this particular humiliation, but the reticence may have applied to the crucifixion of any hero, not just that of Jesus.