

## Nakedness as a Metaphor in Scripture: An introduction

Nakedness in Scripture is actually a fascinating study that very few undertake these days, because it may sound to many like something that appeals to some sort of prurient interest. I can recall vividly the way undergrads reacted when I mentioned it in class; first they start to squirm, and then the giggling begins, followed by the wisecracks, and finally the defensive accusations: "So then you're telling us that we should all..."

To be sure, most undergrads are simply too immature to deal with this subject. Over many years, I have also taught Bible classes in churches, and sooner or later, we would come across a passage where nakedness is either mentioned or avoided by translators in a text, and if the discussion of the text lasts for more than a minute or two, they start to squirm...leading me to the conclusion that most modern day Americans are too immature to deal with this subject.

I think the real reason for undertaking this study is that it follows so naturally from our recently completed study of the image of God, for it is in that image that the metaphor is to be found. It is a rich and amazing study for those who can avoid the giggling and squirming, because it goes to the very essence of our relationship with God, and even more interesting, it goes to the essence of the influence the world around us has in obstructing or corrupting that relationship.

The real question at this moment is how best to proceed; I have some editorial decisions to make at the outset. We will be doing a word study of the word "naked" first in the Old and then in the New Testament. That sounds easy enough, for if you search the word "naked" on Bible Gateway, you will find that in the NIV it appears 48 times in all, 40 in the OT and 8 in the new; all we need to do is look them up...

Only there's a problem, for if you do your word search in the King James, you'll find the word appears 87 times, 69 times in the OT and 18 in the NT; why the discrepancy? So then, you might check the New American Standard, since it is very literal, and you will discover that "naked" appears 77 times, 64 in the OT, 13 in the NT. When the discrepancy of such a simple term is this wide, you should be on alert as you go forward; something is going on here.

Since the Old Testament comes first, it is natural to begin there, and when a metaphor is under examination, they are almost always rooted in the Old Testament, so we will begin there, with the first use of the word "naked" in Genesis 2:25; this should be easy, since we covered this verse in the image of God posts. Checking with the Blue Letter Bible, we find that the Hebrew word is *arowm* (H6174)... and that it only appears in Scripture 16 times! Shortly after that, we find two other Hebrew words that mean "naked", at least in a literal understanding; do they carry different connotations?

If so, this study is going to be very interesting indeed.

At this point, you should see two things: First, this study is a little involved in a scholarly way, and second, that it has the potential to shine light not only on the metaphor, but on how culture and translating Scripture come together to either enlighten or to obscure. My plan of attack is simple: We will begin at the beginning, and examine all of the Hebrew words involved; there are three. Then we will look at selected examples of each to see how they are used and what is

going on. Next, we'll compare the three English translations I mentioned to see if we can figure out why there is such a discrepancy. Then we'll move on to the New Testament to see what, if anything has changed, and look at the discrepancies in translations again to see if we can figure out what the translators were thinking, and then we will draw some conclusions about all of this. As you can see, there really won't be much time for giggling and squirming!

### Nakedness as a Metaphor in Scripture: Word Study... "arwm" and "eyrom"

In our examination of nakedness as a metaphor in Scripture, we need to look into the instances where nakedness is mentioned in the Scriptures in an effort to figure out what is going on before we can draw any sort of conclusions about metaphors. As I mentioned last time, the first mention of nakedness of any kind came in Genesis 2:25 which tells us that Adam and Eve were both naked in the Garden, and that they were unashamed. I also mentioned last time that the Hebrew word that was used in that verse is *arwm* and also that there are a total of three Hebrew words that are rendered "naked" in the Old Testament. Since we will need to explore each of these words to be clear on their meaning and usage, it seemed sensible to me to begin with *arwm*.

***arwm*** (H6174) means naked as a state of being, and as such is morally neutral, meaning that it doesn't reflect on whether or not this state of being is a good thing or a bad thing; it just is. An example might be if a person said that they were naked in the shower this morning; their having been naked in the shower is just a fact and neither good nor bad.

The word appears 16 times in 15 verses in the Hebrew Old Testament, and those verses are:

Gen. 2:25; 1 Sam. 19:24; Job 1:21, 22:6, 24:7, 10, 26:6; Ecc. 5:15; Is. 20:2, 3, 4, 58:7; Hos. 2:3; Amos 2:16; Mic. 1:8.

It is interesting to note that in these verses, not only is "naked" mentioned simply as a state of being, Genesis 2:25 is a state of being in perfect fellowship with God, 1 Samuel is in a prophetic state, Job 1:21 is in a worshipful state of humility before God, and Isaiah 20 recounts the prophet being naked at God's command as a sign for three years. While it is way too early to draw any kind of conclusions, it would appear that a state of nakedness was not terribly unusual for prophets, and that it was not offensive to God.

***eyrom*** (H5903) means nakedness or naked, and is used to indicate nakedness with a sense of danger or threat of harm. It is found 10 times in 10 verses in the Hebrew Old Testament:

Gen. 3:7, 10, 11; Deut. 28:48; Eze. 16:7, 22, 39, 18:7, 16, 23:29.

Aside from the sense of danger or of a threat, this too is a simple state of being; morally neutral. An interesting example of this word is found in the Genesis 3 examples which you will recall are the post-Fall examples of Adam and Eve. After they had rebelled against God, their "eyes were opened" and they realized they were naked, so they covered themselves with leaves sewn together and hid *from God*. What were they afraid of – why were they ashamed? Were they

afraid of their bodies or were they afraid of what God would do? Were they ashamed of their nakedness, or were they ashamed of what they had done?

I suppose we could argue about that all day long, and scholars have debated it for centuries, but for our purposes in this study, the bottom line is to see that the word was used in a context of perceived danger.

### Nakedness as a Metaphor in Scripture: Word Study... “*ervah*”

In the last post on nakedness as a Biblical metaphor, we reviewed the Hebrew words *arwm* and *eyrom*. We found that both of these words mean nakedness, a state being in the absence of clothing. Both words we found to be neutral, describing neither a bad state nor a good state, just a state. Yet there was a slight difference between the two, for *eyrom* carried with it a sense of vulnerability or danger; it is a bit uncomfortable, while *arwm* had no such connotation. In this post, we will take a brief look at the third Hebrew word that means “nakedness”:

***ervah*** (H6172) nudity, literally (especially the pudenda) or figuratively (disgrace, blemish):—nakedness, shame, unclean (-ness)

Notice first of all that this word has both a literal and a figurative meaning that the others did not have. On the one hand it means unclothed, but it carries an implication of impropriety, as though something untoward was going on. The first two words are not used in a manner or with the implication that God is looking upon something shameful, but with *ervah*, something is going on that God doesn’t care much for.

*Ervah* appears 54 times in 40 verses in the Old Testament, yet not all of them actually refer to nakedness per se; here’s an example:

*Then Saul’s anger burned against Jonathan and he said to him, “You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you are choosing the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother’s nakedness?” (1 Sam. 20:30 NASB)*

Everything makes perfect sense until the end: What does Jonathon’s mother’s nakedness have to with anything? What is really intended here is her *shame* for the way Jonathon was behaving by showing kindness to David, as the NIV translates the verse. In Deut. 24:1, the NASB translators saw the difference in meaning and made an adjustment:

*“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some **indecent** in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house*

“Indecency” is *ervah* in the original text, and the NASB, noted for being a very literal translation, used a different word because “nakedness” just doesn’t make any sense; go ahead and read the verse again with “nakedness” in place of “indecenty”...

This discussion could go on for a couple thousand more words if we went through all of the verses, but there really isn't any point in doing so, for added connotation of *ervah* should be fairly obvious at this point. However, if you would enjoy doing some further study, **here is a link** to the Blue Letter Bible entry for *ervah* listing each and every verse in which it appears.

As I'm writing this, I'm reminded of a little story:

I must have been about 14 years old; it was a hot summer afternoon, and my Mom had given me instructions to weed a certain very large flower bed. I had spent two or three hours out in the hot triple digit sun weeding, and when I finally finished the job, I was hot, sweaty and dirty, and I was really looking forward to a shower to clean up and cool off. Nobody was due home for at least a couple of hours, and when I got out of the shower, I was in no hurry to get dressed and be hot and sweaty again (we had no air conditioning in those days). I just lay down on my bed and enjoyed how much cooler I was after being out in the hot summer sun working...

I was *arowm*.

After ten or fifteen minutes, thoughts began popping into my mind, "what if someone comes home early? What will they think? How will I explain this? If it's my older sister, will I ever hear the end of it?"

Now I had become *eyrom*.

"They might think I'm doing something dirty, I might get in trouble... but I'm not doing anything wrong... but they might think I am... my sister will never let it go, I will be humiliated"

Now I was *ervah*, for I imagined that I would be disgraced.

I quickly got dressed again and resumed sweating...

Naturally I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but I'd be surprised if most of you have never had an experience like this at one point or another.

Now that we have an understanding of these three words, we can begin to consider whether or not nakedness has a positive implication in the Old Testament, for we see now that by checking the Hebrew word that is used, we will quickly know if something "dirty" is really going on.

### Nakedness as a Metaphor in Scripture: Perspective

I've heard people say that nakedness is always bad in Scripture; pastors, professors, regular folks; this idea seems to be widely held. Yet as we have already seen in this study, it may be widely held, but it isn't quite accurate. About ten years ago, I was teaching Genesis in a church Sunday school class, and one day I was covering chapters 2 and 3. As you know, at the end of

chapter two there is the verse (2:25) that says “Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.” Which is then followed by the Fall in chapter 3, and the scene in which they realized they were naked and wove leaves together as a covering as they hid themselves from God (Gen. 3:7 ff.). Of course the question of whom and/or what were they hiding from came up and the discussion ran pretty much along the same lines that we have had here in our study. After the class, the pastor came up to me and said that he had really enjoyed the discussion, that it had been very interesting, and then he said, “I don’t care what anybody says, being naked is a sin.”

I thought this was a really fascinating statement on his part, and replied, “Did you take a shower this morning before church?”

“Yes, of course, but nobody saw me.”

Isn’t that an interesting thing to say? So I said, “Hypothetically speaking, suppose that right at the moment you were stepping out of the shower someone, thinking the bathroom was empty, opened the door and walked in, seeing you there getting out of the shower. Who is the sinner; you thinking you were alone, or the one who thought the bathroom was vacant?”

His reply?

“I can’t stand around here chit-chatting I have to go greet people!”

That remark says it all...

By examining the three Hebrew words for naked/nakedness, we have discovered that naked, as a state of being is not in and of itself offensive to God, and if anyone doubts that at this point, I would have to remind them that God actually *commanded* Isaiah to go and prophesy naked for three years as a sign; God does not command us to do wrong or to commit sin (Is. 20:2). We also have the account of Saul in 1 Samuel 19 in which Saul took off his clothes and prophesied along with the other prophets, who were accustomed to doing their prophesying while naked. If being naked is a sin or offense before God, then it seems unlikely that the Holy Spirit would come upon a naked person to bring a message from God for the people.

Looking at the difference between the three Hebrew words we have studied, and looking at the context in which they fall, we can begin to discern that nakedness is as much a state of mind as it is a state of being, which will lead us to a concept that many of us are already quite familiar with which is called “naked before God”.

I think that I’ll wrap this post up with this:

The other day I received a call from a good friend who is a sociologist with many years in Christian counseling. He was calling because he had been following the posts here about the image of God and these on nakedness as a metaphor in Scripture, and had come to the realization that we were covering a basic human need. He said that the three most basic needs of any human being (and I hope I get this right in my paraphrasing) are first for safety from harm and danger, having basic physical needs met, and intimate relationship (not necessarily of a

physical nature) with at least one other human being. He went on to say that this is what he is seeing in Genesis 2:25, the basic human need to be “naked and unashamed” before at least one other person, and God Himself; to be completely transparent, and to be safe when doing so.