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A Recuperative Theology of the Body: Nakedness in Genesis 3 and 9.20-27

Emily Toler

One of the most exciting methods of reading the book of Genesis is to engage in the text with a literary sensibility. This interpretive framework is invited by the recurrence of particular themes, tropes, and motifs in and across the book--recurrences that imply an important question: what does it mean that this text includes stories that have similar narrative structures or modes of representation? These similarities are hardly coincidental, and understanding them is far from straightforward. The stories of Genesis are sometimes contradictory and sometimes mutually informative; they are frustratingly ambiguous and frequently elide what seem to be crucial details; they are never exactly parallel, even when they deploy related themes and symbols.

In this paper, I will engage these interpretive questions by focusing on two passages: Genesis 3, the story of Adam and Eve's temptation, and Genesis 9:20-27, the story of Noah's drunkenness and Canaan's curse. I have chosen to read these stories in conversation because they are both stories of a new creation--that is, they offer new paradigms of human existence in the world.⁵¹ More specifically, these stories share a particularly compelling (and perplexing) characteristic: an exploration of human nakedness. Because the stories of creation clearly demonstrate that nakedness is fundamental to humanity,⁵² I want to consider what nakedness means in the Biblical context. I suggest that nakedness is not merely the condition of being unclothed, but is a signifier of sociocultural status and, perhaps more importantly, a means of understanding humanity's relationship vis-à-vis God. Furthermore, numerous commentaries and interpretations suggest that nakedness in the Biblical text is not an 'immoral' or 'sinful' condition, but an unavoidable condition of being human that God, and other 'moral' actors in the

⁵¹ See John H. Hewett: "The primeval Hebrew stories of human beginnings serve useful explanatory functions... they attempt to answer the obvious questions attendant to the advent of human life upon earth. They explain the world we know... [and] grant a glimpse of how the children of Israel defined the mighty acts of God in creating the earth, it's human inhabitants, and their family systems" (237). Anthony J. Tomasino also acknowledges this relationship: "the story of Noah's drunkenness... [parallels] the Fall" (129). He subsequently argues that "the crises [of these stories] are not identical-- in fact, they are almost mirror images of each other" (129) and that, therefore, "these parallels show that history truly does repeat itself, albeit with an ironic twist or two. The story of Noah's drunkenness provides us with a new "Fall" (130).

⁵² "And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed" (Gen. 2.25 NRSV)

stories, consistently affirm. This paper is an attempt to recuperate nakedness from its negative connotations to suggest that it should be understood as part of God's 'good' creation.

Skeptical readers may not be convinced that a single verse (Gen. 2.25) offers sufficient evidence that nakedness is indeed the basic condition of humanity as established by God. Understanding the important parallels between the story of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3) and the story of Noah's drunkenness (Gen. 9), however, provides strong textual and thematic evidence that nakedness is indeed the 'natural' condition of human beings. Devorah Steinmetz suggests that, in addition to establishing familial and national hierarchies, the story of Noah is significant because "it is the first vignette that we are offered of the postdiluvian [sic] world... [and] as such, it describes for us what this new world is like" (194). Its authority to describe this new world, and the position of human beings in it, is reinforced by its connection to the previous creation narratives: nakedness "is central both to the Adam and Eve story and the vineyard story... [which suggests] that we must read the vineyard story in the context of the prior creations and violations and that such a reading will provide a description of human existence in the new--and-real-world" (194-5). Steinmetz's contentions are well-founded, and to make sense of both narratives she cites, we must first turn to the constructions and connotations of nakedness in Genesis 3.

To understand these connotations, it is important to note that Genesis 2.25 and 3.7 use two different words for 'naked': '*arum* and '*erom*, respectively (Davidson 122). In other Biblical texts, '*arum* refers to a person who is not clothed in a 'normal' manner, but verse 2.25 indicates neither what 'normal' is nor how Adam and Eve's nakedness differs from that norm. To help explain this ambiguity, both Richard M. Davidson and Alon Goshen Gottstein turn to the understanding that humanity is created in the image of God. Davidson points to Ps. 104.1-2 as evidence that God is "clothed with honour and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment" (NRSV); therefore, if humanity is created in the image of God, and if God's 'normal' clothing is symbolic 'garments' of "honour and majesty," then human nakedness might also refer to being *metaphorically--not actually--* clothed with glory (122). Similarly, Gottstein suggests that "the body of Adam is more radiant than the sun" (179) and demonstrates that "the original luminosity of Adam's body" is a central understanding in some rabbinic interpretations (180). The concept of *zelem* is also instructive in understanding the particularities of human nakedness: *zelem* refers to the "image" of God (Gottstein 174), a divine radiance, but when understood in the context of creation, it also has corporeal

connotations (175). Thus, *zelem*, the luminosity implied in the image of God, is integral to the created human condition--that is, to nakedness. This implies that nakedness is natural and, more importantly, not *undesirable*; nakedness is not, at least in the second chapter of Genesis, figured pejoratively.⁵³

Jonathan Z. Smith suggests, however, that this ancient emphasis on divine glory may be rooted primarily in a cultural anxiety about nakedness and not in the application of subsequent Biblical texts:

For most ancient interpreters, shame and nakedness belonged together--even before the fall. Despite Gen 2:25 (where Adam and Eve are clearly described as naked), early interpreters of Genesis (Jewish and Christian alike) understood Adam and Eve to be clothed with the glory of God right up until the moment of their sin. The assumption is that prelapsarian Adam and Eve could not really have been naked--shameful condition that it is--and so must have been clothed with the divine glory. (57)

Smith's interpretation has historical merit, but so too does it have shortcomings: it excludes the possibility that the emphasis on divine glory may have been equally motivated by theological, as well as cultural, concerns. This elision is understandable in the context of Smith's argument; in his article, he hopes to draw connections between royalty, wisdom, and clothing, so to acknowledge the possibility that nakedness might also be associated with glory would certainly undermine his contentions. Similarly, he goes so far as to contend that "the unashamed nakedness of Adam and Eve in Gen 2:25 cannot itself be seen as an investiture (clothing) with God's glory, as most ancient interpreters believed" (58), but his interpretation is inflected by anachronistic assumptions. He believes that Adam and Eve's lack of shame at their nakedness cannot be "taken as an indication that this condition was part of their perfect state" because "young children feel no shame at their nakedness and yet this is not taken as an indication that they should never be clothed"; instead, this lack of shame simply represents ignorance of "their own nakedness and the need for clothing" (59). Ironically, while Smith criticizes interpreters both ancient and modern for assuming that shame is associated with nakedness, he himself assumes that clothing is necessary, an assumption that is just as grounded in a specific culture, epistemology, and ideology as the assumptions he declaims. Thus, while Smith's relative dismissiveness does warrant consideration, his intellectual investments and historical position must also be acknowledged.

⁵³ Bruce Vawter observes that, at the conclusion of chapter 2, Adam and Eve "react to their situation like children who find nudity, man's original state, to be quite natural and therefore sense no shame about it." He interprets this shame not as an affirmation of nakedness as idyllic harmony but as evidence of a lack "of a sense of responsibility and adulthood [because] a shameless man is either a conscienceless monster or an idiot child" (76). For Vawter, then, nakedness may be natural-- but it is by no means good.

Some commentators have interpreted the meaning of nakedness in the early verses of Genesis differently, of course. Michael L. Satlow cites a *tosepta* (a compilation of rabbinic teaching and interpretation) that seems to offer an alternative understanding of God's creation: "For when God created Adam, he did not create him naked, as it is written, 'When I clothed [him] in clouds, swaddled [him] in dense clouds' (Job 38.9). 'Clothed him in clouds'--this is the embryonic sac; 'swaddled him in dense clouds'--this is the placenta" (436-7). But Satlow explains that this *tosepta* is actually one of many attempts to keep Jewish men from performing sacred activities, such as reciting prayers or being seen in holy places, while naked; it is primarily a behavioral and ritual code, not a suggestion that Adam and Eve were not actually naked at creation. But, because theology and ritual practice were so closely intertwined for some ancient Hebrew communities, some interpretations that reject nakedness wholesale do exist. Satlow's article offers extensive evidence that ancient rabbinic traditions expressed not only a "disgust at men going naked in sacred arenas" but also "a more general disapproval [that] is the natural conclusion once it is acknowledged that God is omnipresent" (437). That is, if rabbinic literature decried nakedness in the presence of God, and if God is present everywhere, then nakedness *anywhere* should perhaps be disavowed.

Ancient rabbinic interpretation is, however, only one interpretive model, so to understand the evolution of Biblical representations of nakedness, other paradigms must be included. Davidson and Gottstein provide helpful frameworks for mapping these changes, acknowledging that, even if human nakedness is originally good and created in the image of God, the nakedness in Gen. 3.7 is different from the luminous nakedness of Gen. 2.25. Indeed, the word itself is different: nakedness is no longer '*arum*' but '*erum*', which, as used later in the Bible, refers to nakedness as "total (and usually shameful) exposure" (Davidson 122). Adam and Eve's physical appearance has perhaps not changed, but nakedness signifies more than just exteriority: "nakedness is not merely being without clothing (although it can be); it also can carry sociocultural and theological meaning. Again, *who* is naked and in what context he or she is naked convey different meanings" (Satlow 431).

This significant transition from '*arum*' to '*erum*' has important theological and existential implications. Davidson suggests that "as a result of sin, the human pair find themselves 'utterly naked,' bereft of the garments of light and glory, and they seek to clothe themselves with fig leaves," but he is careful to point out that they are not ashamed before each other--only afraid before God: "even this post-Fall nakedness should not, however, be interpreted as causing Adam and

Eve to be ashamed of their own bodies before each other. There is no mention of mutual embarrassment or shame" (123). Indeed, Adam and Eve "knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves" (3.7 NRSV), but there is no mention of shame or fear in the text--only of knowledge: "the eyes of both were opened" (3.7 NRSV). The only reference to any emotional or moral reaction to nakedness comes from Adam to God: "He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself'" (3.10 NRSV). The text explicitly draws a causal relationship between Adam's nakedness and his shame: he hides *because* he is naked. No such connection is established between Adam and Eve, which suggests that it is fear of God, not nakedness itself, that motivates his shame.

Even so, however, Adam and Eve's sin inaugurates a new relationship between humanity and nakedness. (Once again, this is not surprising, given that 'nakedness' implies so much more than a lack of clothing. Their nakedness, a physical condition, may be unchanged, but the theological and existential connotations of that nakedness have been irrevocably altered.) Davidson returns to the text and points to an apparent paradox: "Adam's nakedness described here is also obviously more than physical nudity, for Adam depicts himself as still naked even though already covered with fig leaves" (123).⁵⁴ Clearly, then, after the 'fall,' nakedness is associated with knowledge and with shame.

This transformed conceptualization of nakedness dominates much of the discourse about nakedness in the Biblical tradition and in the ancient Near East. Bruce Vawter suggests that "nudity... was particularly abhorrent to adult Israelite mores in distinction to the ways of other peoples [and] was sometimes inflicted as a form of shameful punishment or an insulting humiliation" (76); indeed, "nakedness... was an abdication of the right to human respect" (139). Vawter's representation of nakedness represents a dramatic shift: whereas nakedness in Gen. 2.25 does seem to be precisely the created condition of humanity, it is now characterized as absolutely antithetical to that condition. Davidson suggests that this change has less to do with nakedness itself than with the way that Adam and Eve *understand* their nakedness: "the nakedness of Gen 3 seems also to include a sense of 'being unmasked,' a consciousness of guilt, a nakedness of soul" (123). Physical nakedness is not the problem in Genesis 3; instead, it is Adam and Eve's "nakedness of soul" and related "guilt." Gerhard Von Rad's commentary further

⁵⁴ "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves" (Gen. 3.7 NRSV); "[Adam] said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself'" (3.10).

develops this interpretation, suggesting that “shame always seeks to conceal, it is afraid of nakedness... the narrative sees it above all as the sign of a grievous disruption which governs the whole being of man from the lowest level of his corporeality” (91). Again, it is not nakedness itself that the text decries; it is the shame and guilt that proceed from it. Genesis 3 does not condemn nakedness, but the shame, the alienation from God and from humanity’s fundamental *zelem*, that nakedness signifies.

Michael Satlow seems to agree with this interpretation, enumerating the effects of this shift in the interpretation of nakedness:

In the Hebrew Bible, nakedness primarily signifies poverty and vulnerability. “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there,” Job cries out (Job 1:21; cf. Job 24:7; Hos 2.5; Eccl 5:14; Isa 20:2-4). The enemies of Israel will be stripped naked as punishment (Isa 20:4) and the defeated warrior flees “naked” (Amos 2:16). A man is forbidden to keep a man’s mantle overnight, “that he may sleep in his cloth” (Deut 24:12-13). God is portrayed as the one who provides clothing, covering the naked (Gen 28:20; Isa 61:10). In narratives, nakedness conveys a sense of vulnerability. Hence... Noah’s drunkenness leads to his nakedness and humiliation (Gen 9:18-27), and Saul is portrayed as vulnerable while urinating (1 Samuel 24). (447-8)

Clearly, the story of Adam and Eve dramatically transformed ancient interpretations of nakedness. Genesis 2.25 suggests that nakedness is indeed the human condition--and, this condition is the image of God (*zelem*), that it is far from undesirable--but humanity’s disobedience inflects that nakedness with connotations of “poverty and vulnerability” (Satlow 447), of “a nakedness of soul” (Davidson 123), and of “an abdication of the right to human respect” (Vawter 139). It is critical to note that these interpretations do seem to be influenced, however covertly, by dominant ideological and theological preoccupations with sexuality; that is, the sexual knowledge enabled by the recognition of human nakedness stimulates a profound uneasiness in these commentators. These at least partially anachronistic interpretations are representative of a tradition that has conflated sexuality and nakedness--a tendency that is largely maintained in many interpretations of Genesis 9.20-27, the story of Noah’s drunkenness. In my analysis of this story, I want to interpret how this conflation has influenced interpretations of Genesis 9 and suggest that it is not nakedness itself that is cursed in this passage; instead, it is likely improper sexual transgression that warrants condemnation.

This story is a bizarre episode indeed, but its anomalousness suggests

that it serves an important, if perhaps not easily identifiable, purpose.⁵⁵ Many commentators have focused on the curse of Ham--and rightly so, because it has been so destructively deployed by ideologies that attempt to legitimate slavery, imperialism, or other forms of dehumanizing domination--but I want to consider what Noah's nakedness might mean. It is clear from my analysis of Genesis 3 that "nakedness is not merely being without clothing (although it can be); it also can carry sociocultural and theological meaning" (Satlow 431), and commentaries that explore the "sociocultural and theological meaning" of Noah's nakedness in this story have largely suggested that it is the sexual connotations implied in Ham's sin, which is enabled by Noah's nakedness, that are condemned; the sin is not nakedness itself.

A particularly popular strategy among many commentators is to read this story in light of the Levitical Holiness Code, particularly Lev. 18 and 20. These chapters make frequent (and emphatic) use of the phrase "to uncover the nakedness of,"⁵⁶ and this phrase almost undoubtedly serves as a metaphor for sexual intercourse. This is important because Ham's transgression is described as "[seeing] the nakedness of his father" (9.20), and understanding this description both literally and metaphorically is crucial to understanding what actions are actually being condemned. Basset attests to the importance of this hermeneutic:

That the original offense was in part sexual gains additional support from the Old Testament usage of the expression "to see the nakedness of someone." In the laws prohibiting certain sexual relations in Lev. xviii and xx, this expression clearly has an idiomatic force, meaning to have sexual intercourse. Although the idiom typically used in these laws is "to uncover the nakedness of someone," both idioms are used in parallelism in Lev. xx 17. (233)

Indeed, for Bassett, "the idiomatic interpretation is so firmly established in Leviticus that it should be accepted as the normal one unless some other meaning is demanded by the context" (237). Thus, like many commentators, I will proceed from the assumption that the phraseology of Gen. 9.20 implies more than just seeing, and therefore examine the evidence that Ham's action is sinful not because

⁵⁵ Marc Vervenne's "What Shall We Do With a Drunken Sailor? A Critical Re-Examination of Genesis 9:20-27" (*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 20.68 (1995): 33-55) is a particularly adroit distillation of many of the debates-- thematic, linguistic, and exegetical-- that have surrounded this passage. Although I will not cite his article in this paper, his reasoned argument, and delightfully wry prose, are valuable resources for any consideration of these problematic verses.

⁵⁶ While it is tempting to list each of the specific prohibitions in Lev. 18, I will instead choose a representative sample: ⁷"You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness. ⁸You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is the nakedness of your father. ⁹You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether born at home or born abroad. ¹⁰You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness" (Lev. 18.7-10 NRSV).

it involves nakedness *per se*, but because it implies forbidden sexual activity.⁵⁷

Anthony Phillips also emphasizes the significance of the verses in Leviticus to reading the story of Noah's drunkenness:

In Lev. xviii 7 we find the specific reference to such relations [a son seducing his father]: "The nakedness of your father and the nakedness of your mother,, you shall not uncover: she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness"... it is much more natural to understand Lev. xviii 7a in its present form as prohibiting sexual relations with one's parents... it is clear that it is not merely the immodest act of looking upon the sexual parts of the father which is prohibited, but actual physical relations. (39-40)

It is important to note that Phillips' analysis does not diminish the abhorrent act of literally seeing one's father's nakedness. He acknowledges that this act is "immodest," and while this characterization may seem relatively innocuous to modern human beings, modesty was of paramount importance for the ancient Hebrews: "Modesty was expected to characterize the people of the covenant Lord" (Robertson). Actions that transgressed this boundary were roundly condemned (cf. Satlow). Phillips does assign more weight to the sin of "actual physical relations," a position that many other commentators share. Consider O. Palmer Robertson's analysis:

The phrase "looking on a person's nakedness" could refer by way of circumlocution to a sexual sin of a graver nature. Other passages in the Pentateuch use virtually identical language as a way of referring modestly to a sexual sin... in these verses from Leviticus, "to uncover the nakedness" of someone apparently serves as a circumlocution for having sexual relations with that person... the phraseology of these prohibitions in Leviticus concerning sexual relations approximates very closely the language used to describe the sin of Ham. "Looked on the nakedness of his father" parallels "look on (a woman's) nakedness" or "uncover (a woman's) nakedness." By that action Ham committed a most grievous sin. He discovered his father in a state of drunkenness and apparently initiated a homosexual relationship with him.

Each of these analyses demonstrates that nakedness itself is not condemned in the Biblical text. One salient reason for this interpretation is that the devastating curse visited on Ham seems unwarranted by the simple offense of looking: "Some rabbis cannot accept that this curse was the result of Ham's simply seeing his father's penis: actually, they suggest, he either penetrated or emasculated him. These

⁵⁷ Even among those commentators who accept the model of sexual transgression, the precise nature of Ham's offense is subject to debate. In addition to the most obvious possibility of homosexual intercourse, some popular interpretations include castration (cf. Bassett 232, 236-7) and maternal incest (cf. Bassett 234-5).

rabbis do not see nakedness alone as justifying the curse” (Satlow 437-8). W. Gunther Plaut argues that “the punishment meted out to Ham seems harsh in the extreme, and this harshness suggests that the Bible was referring to a transgression far more serious than seeing one’s father naked and in a drunken stupor... the story of Ham and Noah should be read, therefore, as one of sexual perversion” (85). Finally, even while Basset acknowledges that “as it stands now, the text pictures the offense as nothing more than an accidental case of Ham’s viewing his naked father,” he notes that “Ham’s action hardly seems sufficient grounds to justify the curse of Canaan which follows. Thus, both Jewish tradition and modern interpretation understandably indicate that more than this was involved in the original story” (232-3).

Some commentators, however, do not believe that Ham’s offense constituted anything more than *literally* seeing the nakedness of his father. John Skinner argues that “there is no reason to think that Canaan was guilty of any worse sin than the *Schadenfreude* implied in the words” because Hebrew “morality called for the utmost delicacy in such matters, like that evinced by Shem and Japeth in v.23-24” (183). Skinner is right to acknowledge the importance of “delicacy” where matters of nakedness are concerned--indeed, this paper has already presented abundant evidence that nakedness was horrifying to the ancient Israelites⁵⁸--but his analysis fails to acknowledge the sexual connotations of the Biblical author’s words and is, therefore, less compelling than the analyses that support a sexualized reading.

But Umberto Cassuto argues similarly, and somewhat more convincingly, that

no evidence can be adduced from the expression, *and [Ham]... saw the nakedness of his father* (v. 22), which is found elsewhere in the Pentateuch in connection with actual sexual relations... for of Shem and Japeth it is said, in contradistinction to Ham’s action: their faces were turned away, *AND THEY DID NOT SEE THEIR FATHER’S NAKEDNESS* (v. 23), from which we may infer, conversely, that Ham’s sin consisted of seeing only. (151)

Cassuto’s close reading is compelling, and its great strength is its acknowledgment of the juxtaposition of the phrase “saw the nakedness of his father” with its immediate textual counterpart--a careful attention to detail that some other commentaries do not exhibit so obviously. He continues to use this strategy to bolster his case as he writes that “furthermore, the statement, *and covered the nakedness of their father*, supports this interpretation: if the covering was an adequate remedy, it follows

⁵⁸ Cf. Satlow, Smith, Vawter, Von Rad, Wilder.

that the misdemeanor was confined to seeing" (151).⁵⁹ This analysis, of course, relies on his prior assumption--that to see *the nakedness* of a person, in this story, is a literal, not metaphorical, description of activity. Moreover, Frederick Basset suggests that this apparent parallelism is actually a simple mistake:

It would appear, therefore, that the redactor, or perhaps a later editor, has missed the idiomatic meaning of the tradition that Noah's son saw his father's nakedness and has added the reference to the brothers' covering their father's nakedness with a garment. (233-4)

If Basset is correct, then Cassuto's analysis cannot be valid, and because there is likely no way to verify either of these accounts, the ambiguity of the text must remain--at least for now.

Cassuto's final analysis is somewhat paradoxical; he contends that "the primary sin of Ham was his transgression against sexual morality, the disrespect shown to his father being only an aggravation of the wrong" (152). His inclusion of the important familial hierarchy is a welcome addition to his interpretation, but his use of the phrase "sexual morality"--even though he intends it to mean only the limited act of seeing one's father naked--does seem to attribute at least a marginally metaphorical quality to the phrase saw the *nakedness of his father*.

Even if Cassuto is right to argue that Ham's sin is "seeing only," however, he fails to acknowledge that "seeing only" could itself be metaphorical. For example, in Genesis 3.7, the phrase and *the eyes of both* were opened almost undoubtedly has a symbolic meaning that refers to the achievement of knowledge rather than a literal achievement of sight. Moreover, the metaphor of seeing/sight is used frequently in the rest of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament to describe knowledge or understanding, and that meaning may very well be at work in Genesis 9. Cassuto attempts to excuse himself from the responsibility of considering the context of the story by arguing that "irrespective of the content of the ancient tradition preceding the Torah, we must not read into the Pentateuchal narrative more than it actually states, taking the words at their face value" (152).⁶⁰

⁵⁹ O. Palmer Robertson briefly entertains this possibility: "If Ham's sin was of a sexual nature, the actual transgression could be understood in various ways. It could be understood simply as a blatant gazing on the nakedness of his father, in contrast with the respectful modesty of his brothers. This interpretation may be favored by other passages in the Law of Moses that forbid looking on another's nakedness... this understanding of the nature of Ham's sin also is supported strongly by the countertreatment of Noah by Ham's two brothers. Shem and Japheth move backward into the tent with a cloth in hand to cover their father's nakedness. As they inch backward within the darkening folds of the tent, they are most careful not to gaze on their father's shameful nakedness." Unlike Cassuto, Robertson ultimately concludes that the more likely interpretation is that Ham's sin was more than "just seeing."

⁶⁰ Before analyzing the text closely, Cassuto acknowledges that Genesis 9.20-27 may reflect or reinterpret other myths of the ancient Near East: "It is in truth difficult to determine what was the original form of the narrative concerning the three sons of Noah in the tradition preceding the Torah. But it may be surmised that at first the story about Ham's deed had a coarser and uglier character than the Biblical tale... it may be that the original tradition from which our narrative emanated described an episode of this nature or possibly an even more sordid act" (150). Ultimately, he is unwilling to entertain the idea that these meanings are integral to the Torah's story; despite his concession that "it is possible that the recollection of an ancient tale about an extremely vile deed survived among the Israelites throughout the generations, and that it is reflected in rabbinic legends," he maintains that "this is not the meaning of the Pentateuchal story according to its simple sense" (151). This seems somewhat a *priori*.

This is, of course, simply not true; if we could indeed “take the words at face value,” we would have no need of commentators like Cassuto.

Whatever the nature of Ham’s grievous sin, the fact remains that it would not have been committed had Noah not been naked, and this simple detail may contribute to subsequent formulations of nakedness as inherently ‘immoral’ or condemnable: if nakedness can lead to such degradation, such abhorrent behavior, then to decry it is understandable. It is important to remember, however, that nakedness itself is *not* the sin in this story; instead, it is the human failures to treat nakedness responsibly. Noah is never punished for his nakedness (except, arguably, by what Ham does to him--whatever that may be), which suggests that his physical nudity is not a particularly egregious offense; indeed, its effects are ameliorated by Shem and Japheth’s dutiful action to cover their father. Perhaps, then, it would be possible to interpret this story as a tale about the importance of respect, of moderation, and of basic human dignity, rather than of the inherent vulgarity of nakedness.

Indeed, because my project is to reclaim nakedness for theology--to recuperate the fundamental condition of being human into a less shameful sense of self--I want to place these various understandings of human nakedness in conversation with, and consider the ways they may have affected the development of, modern thought.

Michael L. Satlow rightly observes that nakedness does not refer only to the condition of being unclothed, but also carries a host of complex cultural and social connotations. He suggests that, in rabbinic literature, “social superiors should not appear naked before their inferiors... only the necessity of serving a social superior can annul the prohibition of seeing him naked... Leaders should not expose themselves to their subjects because it will cause their followers to lose respect for and fear of them” (438, 439-40). The rabbinic emphasis on nakedness, then, seems to be less an interpretation grounded in scriptural interpretation or exegesis than in ideology. Provided that it is not in a sacred context, nakedness is not condemned because it is inherently sinful or undesirable; instead, it is condemned because such exposure threatens the maintenance of social order.⁶¹

But this understanding of nakedness is problematic: rabbinic interpretation is

⁶¹ Satlow does observe that “these two rabbinic understandings of male nakedness--an obscenity before God and conveying messages about social hierarchy--are almost certainly linked” because human hierarchical relationships can be “mapped analogously to the relationship between men and God” (440); similarly, “the relationship between a Jewish king or priest is, at least when it comes to nakedness, mapped out analogously to the relationship between God and the people” (453). He is right to acknowledge the mutually informative relationship between ideology and theology, but the relative emphases he places on these concerns suggests that rabbinic prohibitions of nakedness are primarily invested in maintaining ritual and social structure--not explicating existential conditions.

partially sociocultural and partially theological, and this sometimes uneasy union may imply the existence of a particular social hierarchy that has been designed and legitimated by God. This sinister insinuation is related to the potential danger implied in theological interpretations of nakedness: their potential to reproduce social and cultural inequalities. One particularly salient framework in which these processes are at work is gender. Satlow observes that rabbis understand female nakedness in a completely different way than they understand male nakedness: it “is not seen as an offense against God. Nor does female nakedness make any statement about relative social hierarchy... rather, female nakedness is understood by the rabbis entirely within a context of female modesty or propriety before men” (440).

If Satlow’s observation is not meant to be ironic—and the tone of his article suggests that it is not—then he has failed to grasp and obvious, and truly insidious, implication of these interpretations. To understand female nakedness “entirely within a context of modesty or propriety before men” is *hardly* an asocial interpretation; indeed, it absolutely does make a “statement about relative social hierarchy.” Similarly, Satlow uncritically describes a story in which a rabbi advises a man “to die rather than to see a woman naked or, indeed, even to hear her voice: the point is to protect her modesty” (441). This formulation seems ludicrous to the modern reader; it is, of course, radically patriarchal to assume that women must be kept invisible and inaudible *for their own good*. Perhaps most egregiously, Satlow describes the interpretation of female nakedness “as a marker of moral character [that] rarely has significance vis-à-vis the sacred” (444) without recognizing that these formulations reproduce a discourse of destructive essentialism. I do recognize that it is anachronistic to expect the texts and worldviews of the ancient Near East to reflect any concern for gender equality, but it is intellectually and socially irresponsible that Satlow does not address the impact that these understandings have exerted on the development of theology and social thought more generally.

Satlow’s elision is somewhat ameliorated by his subsequent observation that “rabbinic literature is androcentric...thus, it is not surprising to find female nakedness interpreted within this literature entirely within the context of its (perceived) effects upon men” (440). This understanding is clearly related to some interpretations of Gen. 3 that portray Eve—the woman—as the primary guilty party. Satlow acknowledges and, more importantly, argues against this problem when he writes that although “rabbinic sources understand female nakedness as a sign of sexual and moral dissoluteness... such a view is only hinted at in the

Bible" (454). This attention to the text is crucial if we are to reclaim theology from ideology.

There may also have been a nationalistic component to ancient rabbinic interpretations of nakedness. Satlow suggests that "aversion to male nakedness in the sancta appears to have been to a large degree unique to the Israelites and Jews" (450), while Jonathan Z. Smith draws an even clearer distinction, writing that "Judaism, in the main, did not share with its Hellenistic neighbors the notion of sacral nudity; indeed, it was prudish to the highest degree. The cultic 'horror of nakedness' (Exod. 20:26) was extended, in rabbinic literature to a whole series of rabbinic prescriptions against praying, reading the Torah, wearing the *tefillin*, etc. while nude" (219). This uniqueness is obviously related to the need that many Jews felt to differentiate themselves from cultural majorities, particularly in Greco-Roman societies of which public baths (where nakedness was clearly abundant) and gymnasiums were important sites of communitarian identifications. To survive as a distinct religious and cultural community in this context, then, the importance assigned to nakedness is intelligible as both a marker of social hierarchy within the Jewish community and a signifier of membership in that minoritarian group.

Despite all these potentially destructive ideo-theological understandings of nakedness, however, it does also seem to have been interpreted in some more positive ways. In an article exploring logion 37 of *The Gospel of Thomas*, Jonathan Z. Smith suggests that early Christian baptismal rites--which were notable in part because they, unlike much Jewish ritual practice, allowed and, indeed, required physical nakedness--should be interpreted as "a typological return to the state of Adam and Eve before the fall" (237). For many Christian communities, baptism signifies (or may literally be) the removal of sin, a restoration that grants access to God's divine grace, so the fact that this important ritual involves nakedness is not insignificant. Nakedness is central to the redemptive value of baptism: "the disciple is called upon to transfigure himself, to appear naked and unashamed; to transcend himself, trampling on the fleshly sinful garments of the Old Man; and to become reborn, to be as a little child" (234). The association of physical nudity with rebirth, salvation, and love clearly suggests that nakedness is not inherently immoral or to be avoided; rather, nakedness is virtually next to godliness.

Some contemporary understandings of nakedness have adopted this more recuperative position as well. For example, Mark E. Biddle, a professor at Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, suggests that nakedness should not engender shame because it represents not just "mere humanity" but "the nobility and autonomy inherent in their status as bearers of God's image" (362).

If human beings are, in fact, created in the image of God, then to have “shame over one’s being denies one’s worth as one created in” that image (363). While ancient rabbinic interpretations of nakedness do, as Smith suggests, seem to reflect cultural/nationalistic aversions to nakedness, Biddle manages to distance himself from his own ideological positions (at least insofar as this can be done) and evaluate the effect of those positions on contemporary interpretations. His argument seems to take Gen. 2.25 as evidence that God *did* create human beings as naked, and therefore, that “the church must reject its historical discomfort with the fact that God fully and wholeheartedly embraces human creatureliness and corporeality with all its limitations and functions” (366). Indeed, for Biddle, a rejection of nakedness is a rejection of God’s created goodness: he describes a “need to reaffirm that being human—no more and no less—is to be what God intended” (367) as crucial for contemporary understandings of the Bible and lived experiences of its stories.

It seems that emphasizing the importance of human life is the most useful way to make sense of the always ambiguous and constantly contradictory representations and interpretations of Biblical nakedness. John H. Hewett suggests that both Genesis 3 and 9 should be understood as attempts “to answer the obvious questions attendant to the advent of human life upon the earth” (237). But, like most of the stories of Genesis, neither of these texts provides obvious answers to these “obvious questions.” This frustrating ambiguity, however, does not necessarily imply that the Biblical authors or their subsequent interpreters have somehow ‘failed’; instead, it accurately represents the frustrating ambiguity of human life. Devora Steinmetz agrees that these stories reflect, and help illuminate, our reality:

Noah’s world is our world. While not necessarily the Bible’s vision of the best of all possible worlds, it is the world in which the rest of biblical history and human history take place... this small vignette [of Noah’s drunkenness] serves to demonstrate the new role of the human beings in this world, and the new relationships between the human being and nature, God, and human society. This brief story, and not only the blessings and curse with which it ends, sets the stage for the entire drama of the Bible’s vision of human history. (Steinmetz 207)

Both Genesis 3 and Genesis 9.20-27 partially illuminate how the Biblical authors and ancient Israelites attempted to make sense of human life, in all its glorious beauty--and its astounding moral failures. Most importantly, these stories do not *condemn* the created nakedness, both physical and psychic, that fundamentally

characterizes human life; instead, they *affirm* it: “The *zelem* in its original form may be lost, but the dimmer reflection of this form is extant in the physical body, which may still be spoken of as *zelem*” (Gottstein 188). This suggests that nakedness, even imperfect nakedness, is an integral part of the created human condition that God so consistently affirms, protects, and loves without condition. On this point, the Biblical authors are unequivocally clear: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen. 1.31 NRSV).

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