



June 2007

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Gadd, Mike. "A New Look at an Old, Subtle Serpent: Naked in Genesis 3:1." *Studia Antiqua* 5, no. 1 (2007).
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol5/iss1/13>

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A New Look at an Old, Subtle Serpent: Naked in Genesis 3:1

Mike Gadd

THE creation and fall story concerning Adam and the woman, starting in Genesis 2:4b, has been used as textual evidence to further the arguments of everything from feminist criticism to the Newer Documentary Hypothesis. The story highlights doctrines of agency, accountability, fall, and atonement. Opinions concerning the meaning of the pericope vary widely. Exegesis is difficult on this passage because so many questions remain unanswered. Authorship is disputed. Audience is disputed. It remains difficult to determine when the text was first constructed. The geographic location is equally unknown and cannot be readily ascertained any more specifically than the near eastern region at large. Knowing so little makes exegesis tenuous. Despite the difficulties, commentators have built upon previous assumptions in an attempt to see the intended meaning. This paper discusses the merits and exegetical contributions for an alternate translation of ערום in Genesis 3:1, rendering it as *naked*.

Status Quo

E. A. Speiser, in his commentary, translates עָרוֹם as the superlative *sliest*.¹ He does not write a comment on his choice of words. Almost without exception, modern English translators translate עָרוֹם as *crafty*, *sly*, *subtle*, or a synonym.² Many English translations follow the precedent set from earlier translations.³ For example, much of the KJV is a reworking of William Tyndale's earlier translation.⁴

Why People Use Subtle

Julius Wellhausen's Newer Documentary Hypothesis, widely accepted among scholars, posits the J source using word play as a signature of its style. Pauline A. Viviano, referring to the J source writes, "they employ word plays: adam (humanity)/ adamah (ground), issah (woman)/ is (man), arummim (naked)/ arum (cunning). . . . Such clever word plays hold the interest of the hearer or reader."⁵ Here עָרוֹם is used as evidence of word plays. Viviano sees J as a storyteller who is interested in keeping and captivating the attention of the hearer.

1. E.A. Speiser, *Genesis (ABS)* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 21.

2. See Gary A. Anderson, Micheal E. Stone, "The Life of Adam and Eve: The Biblical Story in Judaism and Christianity" University of Virginia, n.p., [cited 01 Nov. 2005] online: <http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/anderson/bible/gen1-3/genv3.1.html>. Also see John R. Kohnlenberger III, ed., *The NIV Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 6. Additionally, the BDB renders the translation as "crafty."

3. Douglas Stuart discusses the hesitancy felt by translators to defy tradition in *Old Testament Exegesis* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 40–41.

4. The choice of subtle or cunning has ancient roots as well. That is the idea expressed in the LXX and this topic is covered by Ephrem the Syrian. See Andrew Louth and Marco Conti, *Genesis 1–11 (ACCS)*, Thomas C. Oden, Downers Grove, eds.; IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2000), 74.

5. Pauline A. Viviano, *Source Criticism*, in Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, eds., *To Each Its Own Meaning* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 43. I have left off original pronunciation marks for the transliterated words.

Subtle also finds support theologically. If the translators hold the position that the woman was tricked or hoodwinked by the serpent they have no issue casting the serpent as subtle, wise or sly.⁶ Yet good exegesis requires the reader to suppress and guard against preconceived notions of what the text means.

Alternate Reading: Naked

On the hermeneutical periphery other translations appear for עָרוֹם.⁷ *Naked*, meaning “not wearing, covered by, or protected with clothing; NUDE,”⁸ represents a viable translation for עָרוֹם when we look in the verses both before and after Genesis 3:1. Despite having a modern chapter break between Genesis 2:25 and 3:1, Speiser sees the latter verse as a continuation of the former so he includes Genesis 2:25 with 3:1 in the same thought unit.⁹ The significance of the author’s word עָרוֹם in describing the snake as well as the man and woman follows that the serpent shows up in a more naked form than the naked man and woman.¹⁰

David Cotter comments that chapters 2 and 3 are linked together by *naked* and *subtle*, homonyms in Hebrew stemming from different roots.¹¹ Since the two roots look similar to each other, the intention of the words, translation into the versions, and later pointing all become suspect. While both proto-Masoretic and MT transmitters especially did remarkably accurate work, a quick glance at the critical apparatus in the BHS shows the final form is not without flaws.

6. For example, see Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, The New American Commentary 1A (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 225, 232.

7. Thanks to Donald W. Parry for first pointing out to me this inconsistency in translating עָרוֹם.

8. Philip B. Gove, ed., *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc, 1993), 1500.

9. Speiser, *Genesis*, 20.

10. See below for a discussion of “more naked.”

11. David W. Cotter, *Genesis*, Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 33–34.

ערום is found in the MT 29 times, in 28 different verses.¹² If the verse in question, Genesis 3:21, is omitted from the findings, the entire Pentateuch and all of the Prophets use ערום as meaning *naked* nine times out of eleven. The Wisdom Literature is divided between *naked* and *subtle*. Notably, Proverbs alone uses ערום eight times, all of which are *subtle* or a synonym. However, since the entirety of the Torah and Prophets use ערום as naked (9 occurrences) the reader should consider using naked in Genesis 3:1.

Even if a reader determines to substitute *naked* for *subtle*, the literal aspect of *naked* does not make sense in comparative or superlative form. As with much of Genesis, the literal does not always hold the complete meaning the author is attempting to convey to the reader. If read symbolically, *naked* often carries with it a connotation of lack of status, especially in ancient Near Eastern texts.¹³ If we are to assume, as Speiser and others do, that the text is influenced by its ancient Near Eastern surroundings this connotation becomes very significant.¹⁴ Here, the man and woman carry more status than the snake since the snake exists more naked than all.

Paul's Use of Naked, Clothing and Mortality

Paul provides a symbolic interpretation of nakedness. In our present culture, as in Moses', and Paul's, nakedness relates to physical bodies. Paul, speaking symbolically, shows how nakedness relates to not having a mortal, physical body, and thus being reduced to a spiritual body only.¹⁵ In 2 Corinthians 5:1–4, additional light is shed on this meaning of *naked*.¹⁶ In verse one Paul recalls that if our mortal,

12. I reached these calculations using Accordance, a biblical software program.

13. M. Niehr, "arom; erom," *TDOT* 11:349–54.

14. See Speiser, *Genesis*, 26–28, for examples of incorporating knowledge of ancient Near Eastern texts into his interpretation of the fall pericope.

15. Thanks to Dr. Parry for providing the first clues toward this interpretation and for referencing 2 Corinthians 5: 1–10 in class.

16. Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotes are from the KJV. I use Paul here without reservation due to his background in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish law prior to conversion.

physical bodies die we still remain as spirits with spiritual bodies. In the spiritual state, i.e. disembodied state, we desire to be “clothed” with a heavenly, i.e. an immortal, physical body. The phrase “eternal in the heavens” points to this heavenly body as an immortal body. The use of the term “clothed” in verse two highlights the *naked* theme. Verse three implies that being a spirit with an immortal, physical body places one under the category of “not naked.” By direct inference, the category of *naked*, or unclothed, means without a mortal, physical body, so long as the context remains earthly, as in the Garden story.

The Hebrew Bible shows the superlative preposition **כִּי** next to **עָרוֹם**.¹⁷ This means the snake, man, woman and animals compare with one another on a gradient scale.¹⁸ It remains possible for all the animals, the man and the woman to fall into the naked category and yet still see the serpent in the more or even in the most naked category.¹⁹

Mortality in Genesis 3

The subtle difference between the man and woman having physical bodies and being mortal concludes in Genesis 3. They were not yet mortal. This explains how, after receiving physical bodies in chapter 2, the man, woman, and animals still qualified as naked. After eating the fruit, the naked couple receives an insightful (to the reader) reprimand from God. God expels the couple from the garden, but before the expulsion, God makes the couple clothing to wear (Gen 3:21). The clothing symbolizes mortality and un-nakedness. Putting on the clothing symbolically marks the change to mortality. The author

17. For a treatment of the superlative preposition straight out of Genesis 3:1, see Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001): 54.

18. Paul uses *naked* and *clothed* in a total binary sense. Either you are one or the other, but never both naked and clothed. Applying Paul's use of naked to that of Genesis 3:1 presents a catch: Paul uses the term in the binary sense, while Genesis 3:1 has **עָרוֹם** in a continuous sense. This discrepancy between uses seems marginal in importance for our exegesis, but deserves notice.

19. The term “most” is used by Pratico and Van Pelt, *Hebrew Grammar*, 54.

marks this change to mortality by showing the reader Adam giving the woman a name: Eve, which connotates living and life. The change precedes any childbirth, a sign of mortality, and in the next chapter conception occurs, also showing the change to mortality occurred sometime before that point. Indeed, God himself marks the couple's change to mortality by noting that Adam and Eve will mortally die (Gen 2:17).

Synthesis

The man and women receive physical bodies as do the animals. The woman encounters a serpent with less status than herself, the man or any of the animals.²⁰ After temptation from the serpent, the woman and man eat the fruit. They are reprimanded by God, given clothing, and kicked out of the garden. They become mortal.

By translating ערום as *naked* in addition to *subtle*, *crafty* or *sly*, the reader is better able to see the full intention of the author. Despite the J source using frequent word plays and the precedent of translation, items which are not mutually exclusive, naked, the translation of choice for both the Torah and the Prophets, is an equally correct translation. *Naked* highlights the mortality theme in this story, thus enriching the meaning of the text to the reader.

20. Latter-day Saint theology similarly teaches that having a body is favored over not having a body (see D&C 138:50).