

## **The Big Three:**

**Answering the Three Most Common  
Biblical Objections to Naturism**

## Defining Our Terms

Many Christians (myself included) are fond of the internal criticism that Christians have their own jargon that outsiders tend not to understand. Naturists have their own jargon – nudist-ese, if you will. So, in case some of you are not naturists, this brief explanation will help clarify what I mean by certain terms. (Bear in mind that these are the North American terms. Using these terms elsewhere in the world may bear different connotations. I'm an American, so this is how I use the terms.)

“Nudist” refers to people who enjoy doing life without their clothes, to one extent or another. This especially applies to swimming and sunbathing, but can include literally any other activity, whether mundane or exciting – everything from doing dishes to skydiving. Many nudists are actually content to wear clothes much of the time, while others prefer to remain nude as often as possible. Nudism can be practiced indoors or outdoors, socially or solitarily.

“Nudism” refers to the practice or movement of nudist people and nudist behaviors.

“Naturist” refers to a certain subset of nudists. All naturists are nudists, but not all nudists are naturists. Naturists are nudists who typically take nudism more seriously than a mere *nudist*. Naturists also emphasize that nudity is a way of deepening one's connection and affinity with the natural world, hence the term *naturism*. Naturists also tend to emphasize the real benefits of naturism – physical, spiritual, psychological, and social. Like nudists, naturists can wear clothing to varying extents without threatening the applicability of the term *naturist*. Not all naturists shun clothing completely, but many do, to whatever extent is feasible and practical. Naturism, in contrast to nudism, is an indoor *and* outdoor practice, and is highly encouraged as a social practice rather than solitary.

“Textile” is a nudist term that refers to non-nudists.

Since the major struggle between Christians and nudism in America seems to center on naturists rather than nudists in general, and since I am myself a naturist, I will tend to use the term “naturism” to refer to the practice of social nudity.

With those terms clarified for our textile readers, let's move on to the three most common Biblical objections!

## Introduction

Roosters crow in the distance. Mist rises above the mountains as rich, golden sunbeams warm the tropical canopy. Strange, beautiful trees rise above the roof of the jungle, stretching their long, angular branches high into the air to crown the sky with their greens and reds and blacks. Strange bird calls whir and honk in the humid, morning air. The sun is rising, and so am I. I'm all of seventeen years old, alone on a massive Nicaraguan fruit farm owned by American missionaries. Well, almost alone. My mom and I have been tasked with the maintenance of the farm in the missionaries' absence. "We've got a family emergency back home," the woman had said. "We just need three days, and we'll come back and take over for you." She'd said that a month ago, and the missionaries still showed no sign of returning anytime soon.

I slip on my sandals and pad up the concrete steps from the men's dormitory to the tiled porch, then into the hulking double doors at the front of the main building. There are no glass windows, only steel bars painted rust red to keep visiting Americans from tumbling over the railings to the tropical slope below. I walk past the medical storage and out into the common dining area, where the little laptop awaits.

It's the year 2012, so the laptop is concrete gray, thick, and heavy. I pull it open, the plastic exterior cool under my fingers, and watch the screen flicker to life as the Windows XP logo pops up. That same corny Windows jingle caws at me. Yes, you remember it, don't you? Feel old yet?

Back home in the states, cracking open a laptop was a much sweatier occasion. I've become desperately attached to a certain type of internet content (shall we say), and it has consumed my life. Here, there's no internet, and the outside world is deemed unsafe for *gringos* until mid-morning, so I have a couple hours all to myself with no one to talk to except my mother, who's often busy with other tasks on the farm. So, here I am, morning and evening, alone, with this little gray rectangle with no internet.

Just before the two-week mission trip (at least, that had been the *plan*), I had decided it was time for me to base my own beliefs directly on the Bible. No more "Bro. Youth Pastor said," no more "Mom said," no more "Dad said" – it was time for "it says in Romans," "it says in Matthew," "it says in Genesis." And now, here I am with this laptop, and the only interesting thing the little machine has going for it is this 'digital bible software' someone had installed on it. It had a word search feature and everything!

So, one day, I sit down and give it some thought. What should I look at first? The Trinity? No, too complicated. Soteriology?<sup>1</sup> No, too deep. I need something simpler, something more straightforward, something more obvious. Beyond the railings, the avocado tree just out of reach drops one of its black fruits to the distant ground below with a dull *thud*.

I sit up, eyes wide, fingers twitching. Modesty! That's it. It's so obvious, right? Nice and simple, and clear as day, right? ...Right?

So, I start searching words. I search the terms "modest," "modesty," "cover," and a few other words. But when I get to 1 Timothy 2, I read the whole passage for the first time and I'm disappointed – not to mention confused. Paul wasn't telling women to cover their skin up, he was telling them not to dress like queens to a church potluck. I go to Genesis 3, but can't find any rules about what to cover. Then, to my increasing dismay, I can't even find a passage that says *why* modesty was so important.

Panicked, I search every single word my teenage brain can think of: naked, nakedness, nude, nudity, cloth, clothe, clothes, clothed, garment, garments, raiment, attire, expose, and more. And still, nothing. A big, steaming pile of *nothing*. The Bible has nothing to say about what to cover up or why. It's like the question of modesty doesn't matter at all to God.

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<sup>1</sup> The theological study of the nature and processes of salvation

I shut the laptop and just sit there for a while, staring at that stupid, gray rectangle. Nothing. I can't believe it. I refuse to accept that. Chills run up my arms and make my ears feel funny. I'm angry. I'm hurt. I'm scared. Disillusioned. All my life, I've been led to believe in "modesty," in its rules and its rationale, but... it wasn't there. How could it not *be* there?

I try confiding in my mom early on in this process, by sharing my shock at my first troubling discovery: that the Bible had nothing to say about whether or why to cover the female breasts. But she got angry (which, for the record, I don't blame her for – *huge* shock). She challenged me, "So you're saying that if a bunch of girls were just walking around here *topless*, you'd just be *fine* with that? All hunky dory?!" And I stupidly said, "The Bible doesn't say it's wrong, so... I guess, yeah." The conversation ended very abruptly and loudly immediately after, and in the weeks that follow, my study only confirms to me that the Bible says nothing directly or explicitly about this issue – not for breasts, not for anything. No part of the body is directly forbidden to be uncovered. But that just can't be right... can it?

One day during the early days of the mission trip, I'm helping pass out Gospel tracts at a mobile clinic day with the mission team, because I don't speak a lot of Spanish. It's a boring task, walking from folding chair to folding chair, putting a tract in a hand or an empty chair, and on to the next. But suddenly, as I turn to the next chair, I'm confronted with a sight I'd never expected, one that I would have sworn would end me: a bare breast. A girl about my own age, late teens, is sitting eighteen inches from my face with her infant in her arms. The baby has just detached his wet little face from her gleaming nipple, which is now staring me right in the face. I offer her the tract, but when her reaction time exceeds my 0.2 second window, I slap it down on the chair next to her and bolt! To my horror, I then encounter many such breasts that week.

It's our last week. We've gotten word that we can finally go home, and now we're on our goodbye tour. A young family who's befriended us cooks us dinner, and as we're reminiscing and saying our goodbyes, the family's toddler waddles over to his mother, who plops him into her lap, opens up her shirt and puts her breast in his mouth, all without missing a beat in what she was saying to my mom. By then, breasts were just a fact of life. I barely even noticed that she had taken her breast out at that point. So in just a few weeks' time, I had completely adjusted to the sight of women's bare breasts, to the point that seeing them in everyday life was mundane. Now, I'm still a teenage boy – I could really *look* if I want to and get myself going, but it's not a shocking sight and certainly not an automatic hairpin-trigger reaction. It's just regular life.

Three months into our two-week mission trip, we finally fly home. I'm still chewing on this issue, and my mom is still fuming. Then, I get access to the internet back, and my search goes wild. I'm finally able to Google commentaries, interpretations, articles, videos – information to my heart's content. But nothing I'm reading from mainstream Christian textiles makes any sense of the Biblical data. It's sort of like believing the sky was blue all my life, only to look up at the sky for myself and find it striped and polka dotted in greens and reds. As I read these textile Christians explain the issue from Scripture, either they admit there's no hard-and-fast rule on the issue, or they raise inverted pyramids of grand, eisegetical interpretations that butcher the texts in question.

But ironically enough, my parents have raised me to believe that morality has good and bad consequences for the user: good behavior is healthy, and bad behavior is harmful – not just to the receiver of that behavior, but also the doer. So, armed with that conviction (which, twelve years later, I would still hold to and would find to be substantiated by good logic and evidence), I go abroad, looking into different models of modesty to find the one that promotes the best mental, physical, and spiritual health.

What I found was twice as troubling and disturbing as what I'd found (or rather, what I'd *not* found) in the Bible: nudism. Nudism, of all things, was *super* healthy.

Time to sit back and stare at the screen again. That can't be right, can't be true! Can it? I have to know. But to my dismay, these Christian naturists have naked pictures all over the place! How can I read their materials while keeping my eyes off all the nudity? Luckily, as I thumb

through the settings on my browser, I figure out how to turn off all images. Now, just solid color backdrops and typed text will be all that my browser can display. With the new settings in place, I return to the Christian naturist articles, and I learn a lot in short order.

I learn that Christian women are finding great joy and emotional healing in naturism, and that men are, too. More than that, though, I read the shocking testimonials from many Christian naturist men who claim that experiencing naturism had enabled them to turn their backs on their (again, shall we say) internet problem. As you can imagine, that claim catches my eye *immediately*. These men were claiming that naturism has been deeply healing for them. Almost as shocking, they claim that they can hang with both men and women (no one clothed) without lust. At first, that strikes me as bordering on absurd. And yet... I would have said the Bible not condemning casual nudity was absurd, and yet here I sit.

So, I have some contemplation to do. I can test this myself, I realize. All I have to do is find pictures of people on the internet, pictures where the people aren't wearing clothes, and if I can look directly at them without lusting or focusing on certain regions, then that proves it's possible... right? But I can't just go and *do* that. I have to square it with my conscience first. So, I ask the two important questions:

- 1) Does the Bible condemn what I'm proposing I'll do to test this?
- 2) Does my own spirit, my conscience, cringe at the thought?

Well, the first question is easy. After months of looking and looking... at this point, it's obvious the Bible doesn't condemn *seeing* nudity, or even looking. It's *lust* it condemns. So, Biblically, I'm fine. And to my surprise, rather than feeling future-oriented guilt and doubt, I'm actually kind of excited to try this! So, with my conscience clear (but definitely nervous), I set about finding those pictures.

I shouldn't use dirty pictures, pictures of people *doing* things, or even posing in certain ways. They have to be casual, like regular photos you'd see on a family wall. I find plenty of those and compile them on my computer. Then, one day, I start flipping through them. To my dismay, I immediately find it nearly impossible not to look at the... *anatomy* of it all, and my body starts to react the way I (and every other Christian textile I know) expected. But I shake my head and focus. I slow down and make myself hold eye contact with the next picture. And suddenly, it's not a picture of a naked person: it's a picture of a person. That's a real face, with real eyes, with a real soul. That's a person. She looks happy, like she's having fun, kind of like when my friends' families would gather for a barbeque. Over the next few pictures, my physical response dissipates, and the pictures just look like people.

I did it. I really did it...! I'm doing it! I can see nudity and not lust. I can't explain what a revelation, a paradigm-shattering, life-changing realization this is.

It's not until five years later, two years into my marriage and now living out from under my parent's roof, that I'm finally able to drive (with my wife's blessing) to a nudist campground for the first time. That's a whole other *long* story I could tell. But suffice to say it goes well, and confirms all the hopes I've reluctantly carried from reading about naturism. But now it's not a pleasant theory on some screen – it's reality. Not long after, I leave my internet problem behind and find healing. Now, not only am I free, but that kind of video is like trying to eat a bowl of carrion.

I'm free.

That was my introduction to naturism. Needless to say, it's been a bumpy ride ever since – not because of naturism itself, but because of the intense resistance I've encountered from my fellow Christians. Textile Christians insist I'm sinning, and sinning *big time*, that I'm somehow endangering myself. When Christian textiles take issue with my participation in naturism, it

always boils down to “What does the Bible have to say about this?” I’ve had that conversation *many* times now, and I’ve made some observations.

- 1) None of the Biblical arguments against naturism really hold any water.
- 2) There are really just three most common arguments, and these are the strongest ones.
- 3) Most people mean well.

I’ve looked at *lots* of Biblical arguments against naturism, and there’s not a single one that makes sense of the Biblical data and demonstrates that the Bible condemns this. That being said, not all of the arguments are created equal. A few (three, to be precise) are used way more than the others, and these are really the most powerful arguments Christian textiles have.

But as naturists, we should always remember that most of our opponents have the purest of motives. They mean to help and protect other Christians from harm. I think that’s not just noble, it’s heroic and should be praised. That being said, I think their arguments fail and that they’re missing out on the amazing beauty of God’s design for human life.

So, let’s dive in and consider the three most common and most powerful arguments from the Bible against naturism.

## Genesis 3

Many textiles will cite Genesis 3 as condemnation of social nudity. The two verses cited for this are verses 7 and 21. In verse 7, Adam and Hava (Eve), having eaten from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge, realize they are exposed and vulnerable, and cover themselves with fig leaves. In verse 21, Yahweh (the “LORD”) himself gives them hide clothing to wear. The argument, then, goes something like this: “Once Adam and Eve had eaten the fruit, their consciences absorbed the knowledge of good and evil and they realized it was immoral to be naked around each other and they began to feel ashamed of their bodies, and so, on account of their shame, they put clothes on. Their clothes were only half a solution, though, so in support of their conclusion (that nakedness was now immoral), Yahweh himself clothes them with something far more permanent and sustainable.” You and I will now look at the passage for ourselves and see if the textiles’ interpretation stands.

But since the interpretation makes four distinct claims, let’s subdivide this section into four parts.

### The Epiphany

Let’s start with verse 7. The first problem with the textile interpretation is that Adam and Hava are nowhere said to feel shame – not in Genesis, not anywhere in all of Scripture. So, this is speculation. Speculation is a valid thought process, but speculative claims are not something we should accept unquestioningly or dogmatically. The text doesn’t mention shame. That’s not to say that they *certainly* felt no shame. But it’s certainly bad practice to state dogmatically what the text does not mention. I personally feel it’s likely Adam and Hava were indeed ashamed... of their *actions*. (We’ll talk more on shame later...)

But it’s also interesting (and far more important) to note that this verse does not mention a rule. The author could very well have taken an aside here, but he didn’t. “And their eyes were opened, and they knew they were naked. Therefore, man and woman are to wear clothing, for to expose one’s nakedness in the eyes of the people is sin.” The author isn’t afraid of taking these asides, either, as we see in Genesis 2:24, so the absence of a stated mandate is a deafening silence in the context of this debate. This silence raises its own interesting question, which we’ll address at the end of this PDF.

So, what we’re left with is a record of two people having an emotional experience. A person’s emotional experience being recorded in the Bible is not a rule. Other people in the Bible are described as hating people in their hearts (Genesis 27:41, 2 Samuel 13:15, etc) or even hardening their resolve against God (Exodus 8:32; Matthew 13:15; Acts 28:27). Are these also mandates? Clearly not. (And we’ll see in a moment why the fig leaves are less than exemplary.) So, this epiphany in and of itself cannot stand on its own as a moral mandate for all mankind.

### Naked Around Each Other

If the realization experienced by Adam and Hava was indeed that it was immoral for them to be naked around each other, and if this realization is a mandate for all mankind, then it seems like the most certain application of this mandate would be to prohibit husbands and wives from seeing each other’s naked bodies. Now, to comfort my textile readers, let me point out that at no point in this passage or any other are Adam or Hava said to be motivated to hide from one another’s bodies, or to hide their bodies from one another. The only motivation we hear of from Adam (and we get none from Hava) is that he was terrified of meeting Yahweh after having eaten the fruit (v.10), so it’s uncertain at worst and highly improbable at best that they were hiding from *each other*. The entire passage, Adam and Hava act as a unit. They do

everything else in the passage *together*, so I think it's almost undeniable that when they ran to hide, short of any qualifiers from the author, that they're hiding together, rather than hiding from one another. Again, Adam says he hid from God (v.10), but makes no mention of hiding from Hava. Now, does that mean he *definitely* didn't hide from Hava? No. But again, given the context, it seems extremely likely that they did stay together.

And even if they *had* hidden their from one another, those actions wouldn't have constituted a rule, either, any more than the epiphany would. In the Bible, experiences are not rules, and actions are not rules – *rules* are rules.

### The Fig Leaf Problem

Now, let's look at the leaves themselves. Dr. David Falk, PhD. has pointed out that it would have been obvious to the original readers of Genesis<sup>2</sup> that fig leaves make terrible clothing, and not for the reasons typically supposed by textile readers. It's usually supposed that fig leaves are fragile and extremely transient – they don't last long, and they are not very protective. But Falk points out that fig leaves have another, more pressing problem: phytophotodermatitis. "It's a bit like shoving a cactus down your crotch," says Falk in the video linked above. "Ouch!"<sup>3</sup> The rash (if such a small word can really describe phytophotodermatitis) is extreme, destructive, and very painful. Having read up on phytophotodermatitis, I've begun describing it as: "jalapeño cactus poison ivy." Not fun. This pain and suffering would have been about as obvious to the original readers as "they rubbed poison ivy and ghost peppers on their crotches" in a modern book would be to us. It doesn't get further explanation. It doesn't *need* further explanation. The reader and the listener both pause and cringe, and then the reading goes on.

So, in a passage where Adam and Hava hear the deceiver out without seeking counsel from Yahweh, disobey Yahweh by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, hide from all-seeing God, and then argue with all-knowing God, it's easy to see that their actions here are not the... wisest of courses. Their behavior here is just plain stupid. It's the opposite of what would be intelligent or wise. It's just stupid. And do we think for one second that the ancient Bronze Age original readers of Genesis would have believed it was anything less than stupid to wrap one's body (especially the genitals, if the textiles are to be believed) with jalapeño cactus poison ivy? Of course not.

So, far from being the first act of post-Fall virtue from mankind, the fig leaves represent another step of stupidity down which our first two parents tumbled in this catastrophe of a chapter.<sup>4</sup>

### And God Gave them Garments of Skins

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<sup>2</sup> This is because they would have lived around fig orchards, which were commonplace and an everyday part of Ancient Near Eastern commerce, so they would have been very familiar with figs and fig leaves... as well as their effects.

<sup>3</sup> Falk's video discussing this issue: <https://youtu.be/2n2E35nsWxs?si=J5C4djUwcs2u7SNe>

<sup>4</sup> For further reading on fig leaves and phytophotodermatitis (though, I warn you, the visual aids get gnarly), check out these articles:

- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6340245/#:~:text=Furocoumarins%20in%20sap%20of%20fig,potent%20parts%20causing%20irritant%20reaction.>
- [https://www.jpeds.com/article/S0022-3476\(21\)00790-3/fulltext](https://www.jpeds.com/article/S0022-3476(21)00790-3/fulltext)
- <https://www.anndermatol.org/Synapse/Data/PDFData/0140AD/ad-29-86.pdf>



Near the end of the chapter, Yahweh gives Adam and Hava animal hides to wear. Textiles take this to be a sweeping mandate for all mankind to wear clothing as opposed to being naked, but it's not at all clear why the giving of a gift – even a divine gift – constitutes a moral mandate for the entire species.

God also gave Adam a wife. Must every man marry?

God gave Hava (Eve) a son. Is childlessness a moral failure?

God gave Abraham a land. Is it immoral to not own land?

God gave David a kingship. Is it immoral to not rule a nation?

God gave Šlomoh (Solomon) and Yov (Job) great wealth. Is it immoral to be poor?

The list could go on and on. The giving of a gift does not make that gift mandatory. Gifts are not rules. *Rules* are rules.

And again, the author is not afraid to take asides. If this gift carries a mandate with it, then the author could easily have said: “And Yahweh gave them garments of skin to wear. Therefore, man and woman must wear clothing to this day, to conceal their bodies from the eyes of all.” But he doesn't.

But this raises an interesting question, especially in the minds of textiles: If Yahweh wasn't giving them the clothes on account of modesty, then why *did* he give them the clothes? Textiles often ask me this question very pointedly, as if there simply is no other possible reason. But first, the absence of a stated reason in the text does not mean people just get to dogmatically impose things into the text that it does not say. It means that there are things the text doesn't specify. Secondly, there is definitely another possible reason, and it's a big one.

Yahweh pleads with us as his people to clothe the naked. Why? Yahweh mandates this many times in the Bible, and yet none of these mandates mention sexuality or lust as reasons to clothe the naked. Rather, the rationale is always to assuage the physical and social suffering associated with poverty (Job 31:19-20, Revelation 3:18). (We'll talk more about the poverty-nakedness connection in a later section.) The rationale given is *never* a moral one, but always a means of alleviating the suffering of the poor.

But in addition to this rationale, we have a very interesting context to go on here, which is the fact that immediately prior to Yahweh clothing Adam and Hava, he notified them that the world outside the Garden would be blanketed with thorns. The next thing he does is immediately shroud the two of them with animal hides. In the ancient world, there was no better protection against thorns than animal hides. Even today, when preparing to pull thorny weeds from flowerbeds, we ourselves wrap our hands in animal skins (leather gloves) on account of their effectiveness in blunting the effect of thorns. So, while both interpretations speculate on the rationale for Yahweh giving the clothes (because none is given in the text), only this interpretation pulls in the immediate context of the thorns and makes sense of Yahweh's actions in the greater context of Yahweh's concern for the poor across Scripture. So, what Yahweh's actions here represent is his compassion for Adam's and Hava's pain and suffering. Yes, justice demanded that he blanket the world with thorns – but love seems to have driven him to shield them from those thorns. This seems to be a type of gospel: Yahweh makes things good, humans make a mess of things, and Yahweh issues punishment mingled with gracious loopholes.

So, contrary to the usual understanding of this passage, Yahweh's gift of clothing seems less motivated by some kind of moral stricture and more by his overwhelming, compassionate love for his children.

But most importantly, a gift is not a rule, and the author does not give us any indication that this gift is to be held as morally binding for anyone, including Adam and Hava. So, while this verse clearly doesn't mean nakedness is *good* (we would turn to Genesis 1:27, 31; 2:25 for that), it certainly provides no support whatsoever for the notion that nakedness is *immoral*.

## The Two Questions We're Left With

The two questions we're left with are:

- If the mandate to wear clothes didn't come from Genesis 3, then where *did* it come from?
- Why do the textiles insist on using this passage as proof of a clothing mandate when nothing in the passage even seems relevant to that question?

As to the first question, all I'll say for now is "not from the Bible." It's become clear to me after more than a decade of study that the Bible was never the source of this mandate. The absolute clothing mandate came from later theologians imposing their own sensibilities onto the text.

As to the second, I think it's a case of prooftexting. A person needs to find support for a given belief somewhere, anywhere in the Bible, and in the absence of clear statements, the moment anything appears to even remotely resemble relevancy, it's cited as a clear and undeniable proof for the unfounded belief.

These are Christians we're talking about. Many of them are genuine, good people with the best of intentions. From their point of view, social nudity is toxic to society and to human nature itself, so it's clearly immoral, they'd say. So, of course the Bible argues against social nudity. The problem, though, is that in order to find that Biblical support, they have to fabricate it. From their point of view, it doesn't seem to them like that's what they're doing, so I can't altogether blame them, but it *is* what they're doing, all the same.

## 1 Timothy 2

In my conversations with Christian textiles, this is nearly always the first or second passage cited. This one puzzles me, sometimes more so than Genesis 3, because whereas Genesis (although it makes no rules on the issue) actually mentions nakedness and the application of clothing, 1 Timothy 2 doesn't mention either one. Let's take a look.

### The First Problem

When textiles cite this passage, they nearly always say, "Paul told women to dress modestly," but in all the conversations with textiles I've ever had wherein they cite this passage, no textile has ever mentioned the second half of Paulos' (Paul's) sentence here. From the way the passage is usually introduced, one would think that all Paulos said was: "also, the women are to dress themselves in modest clothing..." (1 Timothy 2:9a, CSB), whereas Paulos' entire sentence reads thusly:

Also, the women are to dress themselves in modest clothing, with decency and good sense, not with elaborate hairstyles, gold, pearls, or expensive apparel, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess to worship God.<sup>5</sup>

So, if we just read the text for what it actually says, Paulos does not even mention nakedness or skin exposure of any kind, or sexuality, or lust – not one word on any of that. Rather, Paul's contrast is humility and simplicity versus vanity and ostentation.

I personally take a two-pronged approach to this passage. First, I show the cultural context of this command, and second, I grant the textile interpretation for the sake of argument and show why even then, the passage is irrelevant to naturism.

### The First Prong

Textiles often act as if wearing *more* clothing in this passage represents the immodesty of Paulos' time, the sexual acting out of the women of his day. The problem with that reading of this passage is that we *know* why First Century Greco-Roman women dressed in this manner at social engagements.

Second, Paul addresses more specifically how the women have been presenting themselves and how he desires them to present themselves instead. Paul names the specific ways women were dressing that were a problem: braided hair, gold, pearls, and expensive clothing. All of these are related to the "new Roman woman" and are signals of wealth. Paul is clearly not addressing all women, but only certain wealthy women, who were likely a minority in the church community. Therefore, this is in no way a mandate for all women everywhere to dress in a certain way to combat sexual promiscuity; this is a critique against flaunting wealth or dressing in a way that does not reflect one's Christian values. ... Paul is imploring wealthy Christian women not to pridefully display their wealth. Instead, he urges the women to have a modest view of themselves and to present themselves "with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God" (2:10 NIV).<sup>6</sup>

Greco-Roman women of this period dressed this way to impose social power over the women around them by flaunting their superior socioeconomic status. It was a prideful, vindictive, controlling, power-hungry way to dress. Being the best-dressed woman in the room

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Timothy 2:9-10, CSB

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/pauls-concern-for-ephesus-a-survey-of-1-timothy-28-15/>

won that woman the right to order lesser women around, provided her with first pick of sexual and economic suitors, and a host of other social benefits. Notice that Paulos begins by addressing strife between men – men striving with other men – and then addresses these women. He is addressing the male-male strife of Ephesus *and* the female-female strife of Ephesus. Culturally, this could hardly be clearer. The passage has absolutely nothing to say about nudity, modesty (as we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would use the term, at least), skin exposure, sexuality, or lust. It is entirely irrelevant to the question of the basic morality of nakedness.

Paulos' message here has nothing to do with sexuality and everything to do with power. The worshipful gathering of God's people is no place for vanity and power struggles – it is a place for harmony and sisterhood.<sup>7</sup>

## The Second Prong

Whenever I discuss 1 Timothy 2 with a textile in the context of a conversation about the Bible and naturism, I always try to include both prongs. The second prong is to simply grant the textiles' interpretation for the sake of argument, because even then, the passage does not work against naturism. Here's why.

"Well, gold and pearls and stuff were the sexy clothes of their day," the textile often protests. "So, that was what Paul prohibited. But if we translate that into our own culture, it's skin exposure that we need to get rid of, because that's what men are so visually tempted by in this culture." Okay, let's completely grant that interpretation for the sake of argument.

Naturist men are not visually tempted by mere nudity. A naturist man can sit down and have a nice, pleasant chat with a naked woman without temptation or arousal. So, even if we grant the textile interpretation, all it means is that women should dress according to the moral capabilities of the men around them. So, if the men can easily handle complete nudity, then complete nudity is A-Okay.

At this point, I think many textiles will protest that naturist men are lying about this, because everyone knows men can't actually do that. Allow me to point you to the Middle East, where the average Muslim man believes men are virtually (or perhaps entirely) incapable of resisting sexual temptation when faced with a hatless woman. Yes, you read that right. A *hatless* woman. If a Muslim man can see a woman's hair, that's considered such a flagrant temptation that if he *rapes* that woman, he will not be held responsible. Because what was he supposed to do, resist the irresistible? I hope this attitude sounds as absurd to you as it does to me, because I grew up here in America, where women go about hatless all the time, 365 days of the year. I can tell you for a fact, from experience, that men do not get overcome with irresistible lust and temptation when they see women's heads. Frankly, that's laughable. Any American can see that this is simply a matter of how these men are culturally conditioned from birth. It's not ingrained into what human males intrinsically are – it's cultural. It's not nature, it's nurture. But the moment a naturist suggests to an American Christian textile that naturist men are capable of seeing a breast or a buttock or a vulva without lusting, a very similar attitude emerges. But one's own culture always seems universal, innate and self-evident, so it's very difficult to help these textiles see outside their own cultural spheres.

Ask any doctor or nurse or anyone who has to provide full care for the elderly: nudity is not an automatic, irresistible turn-on. To go beyond this, I always challenge people who insist that men are incapable of seeing naked women without lusting: does every single husband get aroused every single time he ever, ever, ever sees his wife naked? Even when he's an hour late for work because the power outage killed his alarm clock, and he's trying to get out the door, and

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<sup>7</sup> It's a place for brotherhood, too, obviously. "Sisterhood" just had more *umph* to it in that context, you know?

he's tripping over his wife as she gets out of the shower, naked, steaming, and dripping wet? Does that really *always* get him going? Or (as I think we can all admit) do stress and other things often prevent us from becoming aroused, or even tempted? Any parent can attest that nudity is not an irresistible force. Fathers change their daughters' diapers or give their daughters baths all the time without the first sexual thought. Even typing that sentence makes me gag, frankly, because parents just hold this to be obvious and self-evident: we don't automatically lust after our children simply because their pants are off. So, doctors and nurses can see their patients naked and not lust, adults can bathe their elderly parents without lust, husbands can see their wives naked and not be aroused, and parents can see their children naked without lust.

I call this the Off Switch. Every man has one, and when pressed, every man can see that. We all have one, and we all use it – especially parents and doctors. But suddenly, when we're talking about modesty, no one seems to have an Off Switch anymore.

But there's more. Contrary to what some may currently know, you will find there is a staggering cultural and geographical variety of cultures across the globe and throughout history that tolerated public nudity with a yawn. And believe it or not, the public was not in a constant state of... handsy rioting, let's call it.

These cultures include topless or even naked cultures in coastal North America, especially along the Gulf Coast.<sup>8</sup> Peoples like the Miami (sound familiar?), the Choctaw, and the Timucua are just a few of these North American cultures. Christians are generally familiar with the idea that the ancient Greek and Roman cultures had commonplace nudity in certain contexts, so we won't delve into those. The natives of the Hawaiian Islands were all either naked or nearly so when Europeans first arrived on those shores. When Captain Cook landed on Tahiti, the natives there were also completely naked. We can throw in all the Pacific Isles and Australia, because even Christian textiles know how scantily those natives were clad in the old days prior to European involvement in the region. Amazonian tribes, as we call them, were naked or nearly so prior to contact. Casual nudity is also clear across ancient Africa. Christian textiles will likely already know about the extensive skin exposure of ancient Egypt. And contrary to what Christian textiles may currently know, public nudity was also commonplace across ancient Asia and even the Ancient Near East... including Israel. (When commenting on the norms of ancient Israel, Wolfgang Zwickel remarked: "...naked people were evidently a part of daily life."<sup>9</sup>)

These cultures went (or presently go) about their ordinary lives without resorting to (as we called it before) handsy rioting. As one author put it: "[In these naked cultures,] the naked body was no more sexual or otherwise improper to them than a naked tree or a naked stone..."<sup>10</sup> While it may seem fantastical to a modern, American, Christian textile that anyone could function in such a naked society and retain not only sanity but sexual purity, let me again point you to the Muslims of the Middle East, who would wonder the same thing about our hatless-women culture here in America. Different people experience different levels of temptation from various parts of the body, based on how they've been conditioned over the course of their lives. It's easy for us to look at other cultures and see that their modesty standards (however innate and self-evident they may seem to natives of that culture) are cultural and arbitrary, but far more difficult for us to critically evaluate our own. I'd encourage the reader to do just that. I think you'll find that not only do modesty standards vary wildly across time and culture, but that humans can live quite comfortably, sanely and morally in a society of far more skin exposure than even modern America sees today.

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<sup>8</sup> I considered adding images or links here for all these cultures, but I thought it might be poor taste to put that in front of textiles' eyes who might not be ready for that. That being said, the key terms in this paragraph should be enough to find whatever needs finding online.

<sup>9</sup> Wolfgang Zwickel, "Fabrication, Functions, and Uses of Textiles in the Hebrew Bible," *Clothing and Nudity in the Hebrew Bible*, pgs. 187-188

<sup>10</sup> Aaron Frost, *Christian Body*, pg. 168, referring to John Hawkeswoth, *An Account of the Voyages*, vol. 2, pgs. 52-55.

Alrighty. All that to say: even if we take the “whatever tempts you to lust” textile interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-10, it still doesn’t apply to naturists because nudity simply does not tempt naturist men to lust.

## Shame

The first thing that needs to be said about “shame” in the Bible is that the Bible is not talking about what you feel when you remember that awful thing you did in elementary school. It doesn’t even mean the feeling you get when you imagine what life would be like if you committed some atrocity and tried to hide it and its horrors from the people around you. It doesn’t mean that feeling you get when you remember the irresponsible choices you made with high school sweethearts. And it certainly doesn’t mean the feeling you get when you imagine finding yourself in the middle of the shopping mall with no clothes on your skin. It’s a different thing entirely.

The difference lies in the nature of one’s host culture. Western culture (the English-speaking and/or the Euro-cultured world) tends to operate on a guilt-innocence axis, whereas eastern cultures (like Japan, China, India, or ancient Israel) tend to operate based on an honor-dishonor axis.<sup>11</sup> The familiar moral axis designates a behavior good or bad based on its own moral merits: is it good or evil? But an honor axis asks how the behavior will impact the doer’s standing in the community: is it honorable?

In the West, the easiest example to use is Japanese culture. Many of us have seen films or TV shows depicting samurai or some similar Japanese warriors (fictional or otherwise). If a samurai loses his honor, then his people will shun and shame and despise him – even if he’s committed no immoral act himself. If his behavior has badly impacted his honor status, then it won’t mean a hill of beans if it was morally right or wrong. If he saved his enemy’s wife from a burning building against the express orders of his *shogūn*, the samurai would lose everything. A Westerner would praise the man’s selflessness and compassion, but the man’s contemporaries would shun him forever because he lost his honor.

One excellent illustration of the honor axis (and one very accessible here in the West) is the popular Nickelodeon cartoon, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. One of the main characters of the show is Zuko, the prince of a burgeoning empire, the illustrious (but often cruel) Fire Nation. In his young teens, Zuko spoke out against the proposed sacrifice of innocent lives for military gain, which a Westerner would immediately see as a virtuous thing to say. But criticizing the leadership of the Fire Nation was considered dishonorable, so Zuko was forced to fight in a duel as the dishonored man defended his own honor status against Zuko’s criticism. To Zuko’s dismay, however, he entered the duel to find it was his own father, the emperor and Fire Lord, who was to duel him. Zuko was terrified to face his father, so he pled for mercy, only for the Fire Lord to mock Zuko’s cowardice and mutilate him. The Fire Lord then banished Zuko from the lands of the empire until such a time as he could redeem himself and regain his lost honor.

Now, to a Westerner, Zuko is a virtuous boy in this tale. First, he spoke out in defense of the innocent, and then he refused to strike his father. What more could you ask of him? But according to the honor axis of his culture, these were grievous crimes that cost him everything he held dear. So, despite the moral virtue of his actions, they were dishonorable.

Ancient Israel operated on an honor axis, which is deeply alien to the modern American mind. It is of vital importance to bear this in mind when one finds the words *honor*, *shame*, and *ashamed* in the Bible, or a Western reader will get carried away on the currents of his own cultural assumptions.

A good example of this (which is tangentially relevant to the topic at hand, as it happens) is Michal’s criticism of King David in 2 Samuel 6. David danced wildly in the presence of Yahweh’s covenantal ark, which apparently exposed a bit more of his skin than was considered befitting of a dignified nobleman. So, his wife, Michal, chastises him fiercely when he returns home. But notice *how* she criticizes him. Michal is furious that David has *dishonored* himself

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<sup>11</sup> Some refer to this as honor-shame, but with “shame” standing in as a Western emotion, I don’t think it’s the best way to refer to this concept.

(and by extension, therefore, Michal herself) with this behavior. Her entire criticism aimed at David is charged with honor-dishonor language, not moral language. She never condemns his actions as immoral or evil – only as dishonorable. David’s response is also loaded with honor language – again, with no moral language to see. Let’s read their conversation with this in mind. (I’ve put the honor language in bold letters.)

When David returned home to bless his household, Saul’s daughter Michal came out to meet him. “How the king of Israel **honored** himself today!” she said. “He exposed himself today in the sight of the slave girls of his subjects like a **vulgar** person would expose himself.”

David replied to Michal, “It was before the Lord who chose me over your father and his whole family to appoint me ruler over the Lord’s people Israel. I will dance before the Lord, and I will **dishonor** myself and **humble** myself even more. However, by the slave girls you spoke about, I will be **honored**.”<sup>12</sup>

Remember, the honor axis does not ask if a behavior is merely good or evil – it asks what the social ramifications will be. So, Michal insinuates that David has lessened his honor status to that of an “empty man” (v.20). In other words, she’s furious that David has damaged his household’s status among their people. David replies resolutely, insisting that all Israel loved and appreciated his humility and zeal for Yahweh and would therefore bestow him with good treatment (“...by the slave girls you spoke about, I will be honored.”), rather than the harsh treatment Michal would have expected. This also should not be taken as a criticism by David of the honor system. On the contrary, David’s entire argument is that Michal has fundamentally misunderstood the ramifications of David’s actions. He defends himself not by saying that honor is meaningless and morality is supreme, but by insisting that the honor ramifications of his actions will be glowingly pleasant rather than harsh.

Now, let’s talk about shame and nakedness.

### The Many Faces of Shame

American, Christian textiles are quick to point out that the Bible associates nakedness with dishonor (or what Westerners usually quote from the Bible as “shame”). Their assessment, as far as it goes in that short sentence, is correct. But every single American, Christian textile I’ve ever discussed this with has come into the conversation with deep misunderstandings about two things:

1. Ancient Israel operated on an honor axis, not a moral axis, so the association between nakedness and dishonor has to do with eastern honor, not directly with morality.
2. The Bible also associates a host of other things with dishonor.

We’ve already talked about the honor axis, so let’s not dwell on that. It’ll suffice to repeat that the distinction between honor and dishonor does not necessarily equate to *moral* and *immoral*.

The second point is the more important for getting through to American Christians on this question. Here’s a brief list of other things the Bible associates with “shame”:

- Childlessness (Genesis 38; 29-30; Deut. 25:5-6)
- Beardlessness (2 Samuel 10:4-5)
- Being a victim of rape (2 Samuel 13:13)

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<sup>12</sup> 2 Samuel 6:20-22, CSB



- Suffering a military defeat (2 Chron. 32:21; Ezra 9:7; Psalm 6:10, 25:2, 31:1, 35:4, etc; Isaiah 22:17-19; Jeremiah 2:26, 36, 48:20, etc; Ezekiel 32:24-30)
- Demotion in social class (Isaiah 22:17-19, 47:1-5)
- Mourning the dead in the face of victory (2 Samuel 19:4-5)
- Long hair on men and short hair on women (1 Corinthians 11:6, 14-15)

For the purposes of this kind of conversation, it's very, very interesting to note that God ordered three men in Scripture to grow their hair out indefinitely (Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist). This doesn't seem to be a command to live a life of sin, so apparently, "shame" doesn't equal morality. I think any honest Christian must admit this.

Modern, American, Christian textiles will immediately agree with us that the things in the list above do not necessarily equate to immorality simply because of their negative status in the honor axis. However, many seem quick to use said honor axis against nudity without any other support. This simply does not work, as shown above, because if mere nakedness is immoral on account of the honor axis, then so are all the others above. And if that's true, then we Christians need to get to work excommunicating rape victims and beardless men.

### Nakedness and Poverty

In the modern West, we are rich beyond ancient belief. The poor among us have indoor plumbing, three square meals a day (including delivery!), internet, climate controlled living spaces, automobiles, smartphones, jobs that pay over \$800/mo (71% of Earth's current population lives at less than \$10/day, or about \$300/mo)<sup>13</sup>, a 1,000 sq/ft home for just one nuclear family, factory-produced clothing that costs pennies, and an obesity problem. The average life in the ancient world looked very, very different.

There was no internet, obviously. There was no indoor plumbing (at least if you weren't royalty), no automobiles, no phones, no obesity. Starvation and disease were rampant, and most of the population lived on the brink of death from hunger, thirst and exposure. Slavery was not just legal, it was ubiquitous.

In the context of this impoverished ancient setting, let's imagine what clothing was like. Absolutely every single garment in the ANE was a hand-made, custom piece. There were no factories – only Uncle Bubba, his bronze sickle, and Grandma Tota's loom. A proper garment could take days to make, even if you could make one at home, and those were precious, precious hours that the clan needed for work, and work meant food and a warm house – provided bloodthirsty, raping pillagers didn't break your door down that weekend. Just to make linen (a very common clothing material in the Ancient Near East, which is where ancient Israel was located), the flax stalks have to be cut and then beaten within an inch of their lives to produce long, weavable threads. Then, the threads had to be twisted together to make stronger yarn for weaving, and then they could be put in the loom. Now, this was no "push button, get shirt" machine. The threads had to be attached to each and every part of the loom by hand, tying careful knots. Then, a thread had to be woven in and out of the parallel threads from one end to the other (*one* thread, mind you!), and then the loom would be reversed to add a single new thread. Even a simple garment in the ancient world could cost weeks or months of wages. Imagine if your shirt and jeans cost as much as a used car. Yeah.

So, I like to tell people that in the ancient world, buying clothes was a lot more like what buying a car is like for us today. Because we can grab a garbage bag and stuff it full of all the clothes we can carry out of the thrift store today and spend a couple dozen dollars, but back in

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/09/23/seven-in-ten-people-globally-live-on-10-or-less-per-day/>

the days of ancient Israel, in the Bronze Age (or even the Iron Age of the New Testament), buying even one shirt was a backbreaking expense for most families. In the ancient world, having a walk-in closet was the equivalent of having a warehouse to hold your thirty custom-built cars.

Why do you think ancient fishermen (and many other professions) commonly took their clothes off to work? To put it into perspective, that would have been like going mudriding in your brand-new Mercedes or chopping trees down in an Armani suit. No, thank you. If you had to pick between driving a new car down that muddy, rocky trail with all the scratchy tree limbs or just walking down there on foot, which would you choose? And if you were dirt poor and had to pick between chopping trees down in your Armani suit (which is the one and only outfit you own, and it's all one piece) or working in your birthday suit, which would you choose? Yeah. Exactly.

In Job, we get clues about poverty in the ancient world. Job indicates that someone is extremely rich who can make a pile of his clothes, whereas the average American loves to joke and laugh about the mountains of socks and shirts on their couches. He lists this beside the tendency of the very rich to make piles of silver, by the way, because both were signs of wealth (Job 27:16). Job writes eloquently of the plight of the poor in his day:

Behold, like wild donkeys in the desert  
the poor go out to their toil, seeking game;  
the wasteland yields food for their children.  
They gather their fodder in the field,  
and they glean the vineyard of the wicked man.  
They lie all night naked, without clothing,  
and have no covering in the cold.  
They are wet with the rain of the mountains  
and cling to the rock for lack of shelter.  
(There are those who snatch the fatherless child from the breast,  
and they take a pledge against the poor.)  
They go about naked, without clothing;  
hungry, they carry the sheaves;  
among the olive rows of the wicked they make oil;  
they tread the winepresses, but suffer thirst.<sup>14</sup>

Job weeps and laments over the poor who inhabited the rocky clefts near his home. His heart breaks for them, because they are suffering. Now, why might these starving, homeless workers have been perpetually naked? To the modern mind, that can often sound bizarre. Let's run that question as a thought experiment.

Imagine you're a young father with five children. A famine has struck the land, and you can't sell your crops to support your family. So, you start selling things off. Your tools, your heirlooms, your furniture. It's not enough. Your family is soon starving again, so you sell your goats, then your south field, then the north field, then your house. Now, you're homeless, so you wander around looking for work, but there is none. You walk to the next town, and your daughter has to be carried because she's now too weak to walk. Still no work. A merchant is going by, so you offer to care for his donkeys. He says he already has too many mouths to feed, but he has need for a few more tunics. So, you sell him your clothes – each one winning you several months of income. But before long, two of your children have starved, and a third will soon follow, and you're all naked still looking for work. The rains finally return, but only in fits. You and your family are left huddling under small trees or rock outcroppings for shelter. You sweat in the day and shiver through the night. Then, a kindly old man in a fine linen tunic and wool cloak happens upon you and unloads a wagon of food and wool and tunics for you and your family, and offers you work tending his camels. (In modern terms, this would be like showing up

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<sup>14</sup> Job 24:5-11, ESV

with a semi-truck full of brand-new items to furnish a house.) The man's name is Job, and you'll never forget him (Job 31:16-22).

Now let's examine how this nakedness would have fallen on the honor axis. In another section of *Clothing and Nudity in the Hebrew Bible*, another author, Kessler, examines the social impact of impoverished nakedness (pgs. 331-341) in his chapter entitled "When You See the Naked, Cover Them!" (Isaiah 58:7)."

The Ancient Near East (ANE) was both tribal and theocentric. It was tribal in that the primary responsibility for the good of the individual lay with the family. An individual was part of a family, the family was part of a clan, and the clan was part of a tribe. There was no military, no police force, no welfare programs, no government aid or tax breaks – there was only the cold, cruel world without and the tribe within. Let's look back to our young, naked, homeless father. What if he'd had an adoring tribe all around him? They could have banded together and watched out for him, fed him, housed him, helped him get back on his feet. But he had none.

The ANE was very theocentric. Everything revolved around faith and the gods. The gods cared for the people and the land. If the crops had a bad year, then the gods must be angry! If the crops had a great year, then the gods must be pleased! The idea is that good befalls the good and bad befalls the bad. (If you want to know what Yahweh thinks of that notion, read the Book of Job sometime, but I digress.) This is very pagan thinking, and the ancient Israelites should never have incorporated it. But they did. Like a great many things in Israel's history and Christian history, things that should not have been believed were believed.

If a starving, naked man showed up on the outskirts of town, the reaction a modern, American Christian would be to gather people and resources and do whatever one could to help the man. But in the ANE, the reaction would have been one of hesitancy and suspicion. Where is this man's tribe, and where are his gods? What has he done, what dishonor must he have wrought, to be so wholly abandoned by his people and his gods? (And if he cannot provide for his own family, then what could he possibly have to offer our community? Again, social ramifications.) If his own tribe and gods won't touch him, then I don't want to associate with him, lest my honor become infected with his bad honor. Again, the moral axis and the honor axis are at odds. Add to this the fact that clothing cost an arm and a leg, and you have a humanitarian crisis on your hands.

It's no surprise, then, that "naked" is often code in Scripture for "totally destitute" and full of implicit dishonor. If you owned clothes, then you probably weren't starving. But if clothes were the last thing you owned, then you'd sell them to save yourself from starving in a heartbeat. And if you had been completely abandoned by your gods and your tribe, then it was easy for ancient near easterners to assume that nakedness (via poverty) meant dishonor.

So, Yahweh has to step in, over and over and over again in Scripture, pleading with ancient Israelites to put their own interests aside and *help people* (Isaiah 58:7).

These people weren't naked because they were nudists. They were naked because they had to be. They were naked because the economy had failed them and they had no other choice. They were suffering – cold and wet and starving and diseased. The calls to clothe the naked are not calls for modesty and an end to promiscuity – they are calls for humanitarian aid, for the help of the starving and miserable among God's people.

So, the three deep misunderstandings modern, American, Christian textiles have are when they miss these:

- 1) Nakedness in the Bible is measured on the honor axis, not the moral axis.
- 2) Clothing was extremely expensive.
- 3) Ancient poverty was deep and widespread.

But to add one final point to this section before we wander too far, let me also add that, historically, it's very clear that ancient conquerors stripped their captives naked.<sup>15</sup> By this point, I probably don't need to explain why greedy conquerors did this, but let's take a brief look anyway.

Conquerors stripped their captives for two main reasons: 1) the money, and 2) the honor. Clothing was expensive and often hard to come by, so soldiers who could just snatch clothes from their captives could either make a quick buck or save a lot of money getting clothes for their families. (Imagine a world where custom cars are the only cars, and you just took over a whole town, and your commanding officer tells you to go pick three cars and take them home. Yeah.) It was also a way of mocking the defeated and completely breaking their morale, since forced nakedness (whether economic or violent) was a great dishonor. The conquerors could kill two birds with one stone, so to speak: they immediately gained wealth, but they also got to humiliate their prisoners to deter further rebellion.

For true filth like the Assyrians, I'll add a third reason: the maximization of torture and pain. The Assyrians stripped their captives (taking both clothing and shoes; shoes were also expensive) and then marched them across the desert naked and barefoot. Those that survived would be beaten and enslaved. The Assyrians were also known to skin their prisoners alive for sport or for deterrence.<sup>16</sup>

So, when Yešayah (Isaiah) is made to walk naked and barefoot as a symbol of how the Assyrians will treat their African captives (Isaiah 20), we can have no doubt that Yešayah was totally naked, "stripped and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered" (v.4). To say otherwise is to make light of the true cruelty of the Assyrians.<sup>17</sup> And when one considers again the distinction between the moral axis and the honor axis and the lack of any Biblical prohibition against mere nudity, Yešayah's actions here come into sharp focus. Yešayah here apparently sacrifices his own honor among his peers to save his honor in Yahweh's eyes. Of course, we should also note that his obedience is also very favorable on the moral axis.

### Naked and Unashamed

While we're talking about "shame," let's take a brief look at Genesis 2:25 and 3:7. Many textiles seem to take "naked and unashamed" in Genesis 2:25 coupled with Adam's and Hava's decision to cover their bodies in 3:7 as bonafide proof that Adam and Hava became ashamed of their nakedness after having eaten the fruit. There are several problems with this (the lack of a Biblical record of them ever feeling shame at all, for one), as I'm sure the reader has already begun to see.

First of all, the honor axis was likely not even in play at all in Adam's time. After all, there was no community with whom to maintain general honor standing.

Second, the reason an ancient reader would have associated nudity with dishonor would have been because the reader had already associated *poverty* with dishonor. So, when the author mentions that the first humans were completely naked in Eden, he has to take an aside to make sure his readers understand that this nudity is *not* to be associated with dishonor. Had he failed to qualify this nakedness, it would have left the original readers with the conclusion that Adam and Hava were created in a state of utter dishonor, which they clearly were not.

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<sup>15</sup> Kessler, *Clothing and Nudity*, pgs. 332-333

<sup>16</sup> Harvey, Austin. "Inside The Disturbing History Of Flaying, The Centuries-Old Practice Of Skinning People Alive." AllThatsInteresting.com, October 6, 2022, <https://allthatsinteresting.com/flaying>. Accessed October 1, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Andrea Beyers, *Clothing and Nudity in the Hebrew Bible*, "Nudity and Captivity in Isa. 20 in Light of Iconographic Evidence," pgs. 492-498

When we approach the Biblical text, we must take care not to carry in our own cultural presuppositions into the text. It is very easy as modern Americans to walk into Genesis 2 and read “they were naked and were not ashamed,” and come away thinking, “Oh, being naked wasn’t wrong, they didn’t mind if people saw them naked in the mall.” No. This is not at all what “not ashamed” would have meant to the original readers. What this would have meant was: “The man and his wife were both completely destitute, but no one held it against them. All was harmonious. There was no dishonor in this situation.”

The Bible associates nakedness with dishonor because nakedness was already associated with poverty, which was directly associated with dishonor by the contemporary cultures for tribal and theocentric reasons. So, nakedness was not considered dishonorable on its own merits, but on account of its intersection with poverty, which was definitely associated with dishonor.

When you look at Genesis 2:25 through the eyes of poverty and the honor axis, it becomes one of the most beautiful declarations in all of Scripture. Adam and Hava were totally destitute, and yet not in dishonor. They owned nothing, not even clothing, and yet their honor was intact. They and their world had been declared abundantly good (Genesis 1:31), and Yahweh would not let them suffer starvation or exposure. They were completely cared for, completely loved, completely provided for. There was no abandonment, no unmet need, no dishonor. This is my personal favorite Bible verse, because “naked and unashamed” does not mean “they didn’t mind if people saw their butts” – it means they were totally and completely provided for, needing nothing, and living in perfect harmony with all because their whole reliance was directly on Yahweh and him alone. The verse is a banner over our lives, flying proudly and asking, “Is Yahweh enough for you? Do you really trust him to provide for your needs? Do you rely on your possessions for your honor?”

So, if the honor status of nakedness was only mentioned for the benefit of the original Bronze Age readers (which seems to be the case), it makes sense that it wouldn’t be mentioned again in Genesis 3, because Adam and Hava seemingly had no fear of ill treatment on account of some violation of an honor axis.

And if they did indeed feel the allegedly exemplary shame described, mirroring the lack of shame in Genesis 2, it seems a rather glaring omission on the part of the author. Scripture loves its parallels and symmetry. If Adam and Hava felt no shame before the fruit, and then did feel that exact same shame previously absent upon eating the fruit, one would think it would occur to the author to draw that parallel. Besides this, if this shame indicates how later humans are expected to respond virtuously to nakedness, then it seems odd at best that the author omits any mention of this shame.

Now, I have heard it said that Adam’s and Hava’s decision to immediately wrap themselves with fig leaves implies the sort of shame modern, American, Christian textiles would expect, to the point of making such shame virtually undeniable.\* But given what has been said hitherto, I find this explanation of obvious implication, at best, very weak. At worst, it seems like outright eisegesis. The reason for this is that the textile interpretation\* just mentioned demonstrates utter ignorance of the honor axis and the dire economic straits of the lower classes in the ANE. Even *if* Adam and Hava could be shown to have felt some kind of shame in this tale, it would likely be related to the honor axis rather than the moral axis, provided it was unqualified. But besides this, even if it was a moral shame, shame itself as an emotion is not morally binding for other people (as we saw in our [Genesis 3](#) section previously), let alone the entire species. Emotions are not rules. *Rules* are rules.

## Conclusion

So, we've looked at our three most common objections. We've examined the Scripture passages involved and seen what the passages say and what they meant to the original readers in their own time. Let's recap.

- Genesis 3 records Adam and Hava having an epiphany and covering up, and Yahweh giving them hide clothing. But epiphanies and gifts are not rules, so the passage cannot be used to mandate clothing for all humans.
- 1 Timothy 2:9-10 is a charge for women to pursue godliness and harmonious unity instead of leveraging cruel social power over one another, not a call to conceal the body.
- "Shame" in the Bible deals with the honor axis, not the moral axis.

This PDF has shown that these arguments do not succeed in showing a Biblical condemnation of social nudity as morally wrong. But this PDF has not shown that social nudity is morally *right*. Nudity is a fact of life, though less so now than in ages past. Naturism is not mandated in Scripture, and not everyone is ready to leap directly into social nudity. Clearly, humans were created and designed for a form of naturism, since that was the state in which Adam and Hava were made, but there are significant barriers between the average American Christian and naturism. So, each should pursue this issue with compassion and due attention to one's own conscience. As Paulos writes in the New Testament, "All things are lawful to me, but not all things are beneficial" (1 Corinthians 10:23), and "the one who doubts [the participated behavior in question] is condemned" (Romans 14:23).

The aim of this PDF is not to *convert* people to naturism, but rather to raise the caliber of dialogue on this issue above the usual eisegesis from which it too often suffers.

## Appendix 1: The Big Question

After more than a decade of studying this question in Scripture, I've been left with a question I now call The Big Question. The question is this:

- Considering the ubiquity of public nudity in the ancient world, if such nudity is really so egregious and harmful and evil as modern, American, Christian textiles claim, then why, the millennia of writing Scripture, did Yahweh never once explicitly condemn it?
- Or, put in simpler terms: "If social nudity is so bad, then why doesn't the Bible condemn it?"

Let's look at this section by section. In the Torah, Israel is coming out of Egypt, a land swarming with naked and half-naked people. Topless women are the *least* of your worries in ancient Egypt, if you have a problem with public nudity. From there, Israel alights in the Levant, where public nudity was commonplace on account of work and poverty, to say nothing of battle and conquest. Then, in the New Testament, a Roman gymnasium (from the Greek word *gymnos*, meaning *naked*; so a gymnasium is by definition a place of nakedness) stands in Yerušalayim (Jerusalem) and Israel is surrounded by Greco-Roman culture all across the Mediterranean. Decades later, during the early years of the Christian movement in the Empire, Christians are surrounded and inundated with Greco-Roman culture, which as even textiles know, was suffused with casual nudity. And yet, throughout all these contexts and more, it somehow slips Yahweh's mind over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over again to mention that social nudity is a vile, heinous, sexual sin and that clothing is the cure.

If social nudity were really so morally wrong, then why doesn't the Bible ever condemn it?

## Appendix 2: Love Your Neighbor

Given my support for naturism, my opponents could easily suppose that I support the throwing off of all concern for our fellow humans. Freedoooooooooom!!

But while I think there is room for an eventual state of affairs in which clothed and unclothed people can once more share public spaces as they have for millennia across human history, I do think there's cause for caution and compassion here.

No, there is no Biblical rule against public nudity. But there *is* a rule that says we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. So, while Yešua (Jesus), the Rock (Peter) and Paulos engaged in a great deal of shocking, unpopular, offensive behavior from the perspective of their contemporaries (and indeed, often their immediate onlookers), they also urged people “as much as lies with you, live peaceably with all people” (Romans 12:18) and “give no offense to Jew nor Greek nor the church of God” (1 Corinthians 10:32). So, shock value and deliberately offending the people around us has its place in the Christian repertoire, but it should not be the first tool we reach for in practical disagreements with our fellow men, believers or otherwise.