

# "Have You No Shame?" An Overlooked Theological Category as Interpretive Key in Genesis 3

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**ABSTRACT** | Contemporary interpretations of the Genesis 3 narrative either view the passage as depicting a negative event (the classical *fall* understanding) or a progressive evolutionary stage in human development, the development of a moral consciousness. In both cases, interpreters have generally taken as their point of departure the forensic categories of guilt and sin. While guilt and sin concepts may be implicitly present within the passage, comparatively little discussion has centered around the ideas of shame and fear, which appear explicitly. We propose that the deliberate framing of the narrative in terms of shame and fear provides the interpretive key to this passage and thereby provides a way forward for the fall question. In particular, we will demonstrate that Gen 3 not only names shame as the primal and foundational reaction to transgression, but uses shame as a means to portray the complex effects of transgression on the human condition: a shift in identity from divinely ascribed to humanly acquired, leading to a fear of personal inadequacy in the eyes of the other, and hence an interpersonal self-consciousness and the desire to manage one's self-disclosure. We conclude that if these are indeed aspects depicted in the fall narrative, then soteriological and anthropological investigation must engage more deeply with shame and its consequences.

**KEYWORDS** | Genesis 3, fall, shame, fear, anthropology

There has been recurrent discussion within Hebrew Bible scholarship as to whether Gen 3 constitutes a "fall."<sup>1</sup> That is, does the story describe something

1. See, e.g., Bernard F. Batto, *In the Beginning: Essays on Creation Motifs in the Bible and the Ancient Near East*, Siphrut 9 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 76.

ultimately negative—something akin to the Christian concept of *original sin*, a degeneration of humanity—or instead something evolutionary progressive, the acquisition of wisdom or moral and ethical knowledge, as suggested, for example, by Immanuel Kant?<sup>2</sup> Or, to frame the question in another way, does Adam and Eve's eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil really describe fall into sin and guilt?

Ziony Zevit, a recent scholar who has questioned a paradigmatic negative reading of Gen 3, has pointed out that the Hebrew prophets do nowhere refer to Adam and Eve's deed as primordial sin.<sup>3</sup> Further compounding the issue is an immediate textual problem. The word "sin" (*chata*) appears for the first time only in Gen 4:7;<sup>4</sup> clearly after the fall narrative. Likewise, the word *'ašam*, the Hebrew root that is commonly translated as "guilt" in English, occurs in Genesis only in 26:10 and 42:21.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the lack of certain abstract terminology does not mean that sin and guilt *concepts* are absent in the account, or that we are necessarily wrong to interpret them this way, especially considering the reception history of the passage. Evidently the Jewish exegete Paul interpreted this account as pivotal to the understanding of sin and death, especially in Rom 5:12–21, as did many

2. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 211; Immanuel Kant, "Conjectural Beginning of Human History," in *Immanuel Kant: Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. Günter Zöllner and Robert Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 160–75.

3. Ziony Zevit, *What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 19–22.

4. It has been argued that even this is a later interpolation, in which case Gen 13:3 is the first occurrence of the word "sin." See Carly L. Crouch, "חַטָּאת as Interpolative Gloss: A Solution to Gen 4:7," *ZAW* 123 (2011): 250–58.

5. The Hebrew root חָשַׁם (*'ašam*)—which in English translations is almost always translated as "guilt"—is rendered in the Septuagint (LXX) by 10 different roots, πλημμέλεια (49x, 32 are in Lev), πλημμέλησις (2x: Lev 5:19; Ezra 10:19), ἄγνοια (5x: Gen 26:10 [the first occurrence of *'ašam*], Ezek 40:39; 42:13; 44:29; 46:20), ἀγνοέω (1x: Hos 4:15), βάσανος (4x: 1 Sam 6:3, 4, 8, 17), ἀφανίζω (6x: Hos 5:15; 10:2; 14:1; Ezek 20:26; Joel 1:18; Prov 30:10), ἁμαρτία (3x: Gen 42:21; 2 Kgs 2:14; Isa 53:10), ἁμαρτάνω (3x: Lev 5:4, 7; 2 Chr 19:10), ἀδικία (1x: Jer 51:5/28:5 LXX), ἐξιλιάσκομαι (1x: Hab 1:1), μεταμέλομαι (1x: Zech 11:5), τίθημι (1x: Hos 13:1), κρίνω (1x: Ps 5:11). None of these terms equate to the Western forensic concept of guilt (the closest is Gen 42:21 and Ps 5:10[11]), nor do they refer to a subjective feeling of remorse. In Leviticus, where the term occurs most frequently, it denotes a cultic purity offense (and its related offering), in most cases *unintentional* or *unbeknownst* (!) to the affected person (see, e.g., Lev 5:17–19), which is probably why the term in LXX Ezekiel is translated by ἄγνοια, that is, "(offense/offering of) ignorance/unawareness." Since the LXX translators could see a variety of nuances in the term, "guilt" is perhaps too generous a translation for *'ašam*, especially when applied so indiscriminately in English.

others before and after him.<sup>6</sup> But we equally need to notice that the narrative does not conceptualize itself using sin and guilt terminology.<sup>7</sup> For those who maintain a negative reading of the narrative, these issues can be mitigated in various ways, for example by focusing on the couple's disobedience, or by proposing an order/disorder paradigm,<sup>8</sup> or alternatively by stressing an intimacy/loss of intimacy (alienation) dichotomy.<sup>9</sup>

We propose that the text itself offers another, more overt, interpretive guide. As we will argue exegetically, the narrative itself repeatedly emphasizes the concepts of *shame and fear* as interpretive framework. This aligns with the rabbinic interpretation of the passage, which has always stressed the nakedness of Gen 2:25 and subsequent clothing as key to Gen 2–3.<sup>10</sup> However, unlike the Jewish interpretation which centers on God clothing Adam and Eve in garments of light (or alternatively with the skin of the snake), we will focus on what is sequentially prior, their shame and fear of being exposed. It will follow that the story is indeed portraying shame as a fundamental and universal human problem. Moreover, this more negative evaluation arises from the text itself and is not dependent on any subsequent forensic interpretation or terminology, and while not precluding any such reading, it anchors the issue on a broader and more universal, even experiential foundation.

### Some Key Themes in Genesis 2 and 3

The second creation narrative weaves a tight tapestry of concepts (highlighted in the following in italics). God forms man from the *ground*, and “alivens” him, blowing into him the breath of *life* (2:7). This is not an abstract or metaphysical activity, but is given location within the ancient Near East, and more specifically in a garden (2:8–14). This *life*, this very *good* creation of chapter one (1:31; cf. 2:9a), then is juxtaposed with two *evils*. First, planted next to the tree of *life* (2:9), we encounter the tree of the knowledge of *good and evil* (2:9, 17), the first occurrence of the word “evil” (*ra'*) in Genesis.

6. For a recent overview of the history of interpretation see Igal German, *The Fall Reconsidered: A Literary Synthesis of the Primal Sin Narratives against the Backdrop of the History of Exegesis* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 34–78.

7. John H. Walton recently has put the spotlight on a whole number of traditional interpretations of the first chapters of Genesis. See his *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

8. E.g., Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, 140–48.

9. George W. Coats, “Strife and Broken Intimacy: Genesis 1–3; Prolegomena to a Biblical Theology,” in *The Moses Tradition*, JSOTSup 161 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 151–69.

10. See esp. Friedhelm Hartenstein, “Und sie erkannten, dass sie nackt waren . . .” (Gen 3,7): Beobachtungen zur Anthropologie der Paradieserzählung,” *EvTh* 65 (2005): 277–93.

Secondly, we learn that it is “not good” for the man to be alone; isolation and independence are flagged as something negative (2:18).

Then, at the seam between the second creation account and the so-called fall narrative in Gen 3, a new concept is explicitly introduced and weaved into the tapestry: *shame* (2:25). As the psychologist Michael Lewis has shown, the narrative then depicts the genesis of shame and furthermore accurately describes its symptoms.<sup>11</sup> First, the fall account is bracketed with an *inclusio* which explicitly mentions shame (2:25) and links it to one of its manifestations, bodily exposure (3:21). The narrative then repeatedly evokes common shame reactions by referring to feelings of nakedness and exposure (2:25; 3:7, 10, 11, 21), fear and the desire to hide (3:8, 10), self-reflexive awareness and self-perception (3:6, 7; cf. the “opening of the eyes” in 3:5, 7a), scapegoating behavior (3:12, 13), and annihilation (2:17; 3:3–4; cf. 3:19).<sup>12</sup> The reader is given a full phenomenological depiction of the shame experience.

In other words, the story invites us to interpret Adam and Eve’s eating of the fruit in terms of shame and fear, not initially along the lines of sin and guilt. Moreover, shame, nakedness, and fear are themselves not free-floating in the story, they are intrinsically linked to the eating from the tree of the knowledge of *good* and *evil*, which would lead to *death*, the antithesis of *life* (2:17; 3:3–5). Importantly, this *death* is initially experienced by the couple in terms of disgrace *shame* phenomena—which consequently is describing something neither positive nor progressive.<sup>13</sup>

For various reasons, however, shame has been largely overlooked by Bible interpreters. In Christian interpretation the sin-and-guilt narrative has cast a long shadow, as a brief glance at any selection of Genesis commentaries will demonstrate. In fact, shame is most often not even recognized at all; where it is, it becomes interpreted along pseudo-psychological lines, for example as awakened sexuality.<sup>14</sup> We would argue, however, that shame is a central theological category in Gen 1–3, and one worth examining.

11. Michael Lewis, *Shame: The Exposed Self* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 1, 84–86.

12. For the “thanatal drive-aim” of annihilation as a shame symptom, see Günter Seidler, *In Others’ Eyes: An Analysis of Shame* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 2000), 218.

13. Wellhausen understands the shame of Gen 3 as a *discretionary* form of shame, the origin of the nudity taboo, and consequently as a positive development, and this line of argument has been followed by Gunkel, Westermann, and others (see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Continental Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994], 1:250–51). However, we will go on to demonstrate that the shame described is not discretionary but rather disgrace shame; for the distinction, see Robert Albers, *Shame: A Faith Perspective* (London: Psychology Press, 1995), 8–15.

14. See, e.g., the brief discussion of Franz Delitzsch’s assertions about the “puzzling phenomenon” of shame by Westermann (*Genesis*, 1:235–36). Note also the survey in Dan Lé, *The Naked Christ: An Atonement Theory for a Body-Obsessed Culture*, DDCT 7 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 90–117.

## Shame in Genesis

Shame is a well-studied and widely discussed human phenomenon. It features in psychological and sociological thinking, and it is very much in the limelight of the contemporary discourse of public and online behavior.<sup>15</sup> Biblical studies and missiology have rediscovered the topic in recent years,<sup>16</sup> yet in terms of theological reflection, more work remains to be done.<sup>17</sup> In fact, shame rarely features in systematic theological treatments, and one of our concerns here is to make the case that Gen 3 makes shame central, rather than incidental, to anthropology and consequently also to soteriology.<sup>18</sup>

The mere fact that shame (*boš*) is already explicitly mentioned in the first chapters of the book of beginnings (2:25) ought to alert us to the fact that we are dealing with an important phenomenon. Shame is introduced at a pivotal

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This (Western?) tendency to see shame (primarily?) in terms of sexuality is also evident in philosophical discussions of the topic, e.g., Max Scheler, “Shame and Feelings of Modesty” [Über Scham und Schamgefühl], in *Person and Self Value*, trans. Manfred S. Frings (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 1–85.

15. Note, e.g., Jon Ronson, *So You Have Been Publicly Shamed?* (London: Picator, 2015), or Monika Lewinski and her much seen TED talk: [https://www.ted.com/talks/monica\\_lewinsky\\_the\\_price\\_of\\_shame](https://www.ted.com/talks/monica_lewinsky_the_price_of_shame). See also the introduction to T. Mark McConnell, “From ‘I Have Done Wrong’ To ‘I Am Wrong’: (Re)Constructing Atonement as a Response to Shame,” in *Locating Atonement: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 168–88.

16. See, e.g., David A. DeSilva, *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009); idem, *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2008); idem, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000). See also Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998); and “‘Despising the Shame of the Cross’: Honor and Shame in the Johannine Passion Narratives,” *Semeia* 68 (1994): 113–37.

17. As argued by Stephen Pattison, *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 190–228. See also Timothy C. Tennent, “Anthropology: Human Identity in Shame-Based Cultures of the Far East,” in *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 77–103. Regarding shame he argues that “systematic theology must be challenged to reflect more adequately the testimony of Scripture” (p. 92). Exceptions are Christina-Maria Bammel, *Aufgetane Augen—Aufgedecktes Angesicht: Theologische Studien zur Scham im interdisziplinären Gespräch*, *Öffentliche Theologie* 19 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005); Regine Munz, “Zur Theologie der Scham: Grenzgänge zwischen Dogmatik, Ethik und Anthropologie,” *ThZ* 2/65 (2009): 129–47; and Elenore Stump, *Atonement*, *Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), whose work centers on the category of shame and will undoubtedly influence theological work in the near future.

18. A similar case has been made, e.g., by Brad A. Binau, “When Shame is the Question, How Does the Atonement Answer?” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 12 (2002): 89–113.

location in the narrative, at the threshold between the second creation account and the narrative about humanity's altered state: "And the man and his wife, both of them, were naked and were not ashamed." At the end of the narrative, in 3:21 we read: "And YHWH God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them." This *inclusio* provides the hermeneutical framework for the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience (cf. 2:17; 3:3). What might otherwise be easily mistaken for, and often is treated as, an incidental detail—a means of a narrative transition—is clearly much more than that. At the beginning, the narrator explicitly tells us about the presence of nakedness and the absence of shame; at the end, nakedness has been covered to mitigate shame. The fact that shame is explicit and was used to introduce the narrative should mark it out as a major interpretive guide of the Eden account.

We must also notice that an omniscient narrator tells us this. That is, by referring explicitly to the absence of shame before, the narrator demonstrates its present experience, and intimates that the hearer also understands it as such. In other words, the narrator assumes that shame is a universal experience of the audience.

Furthermore, it is well known that there is a thematic wordplay in Genesis, part of which also features in Jewish exegesis,<sup>19</sup> which is intrinsically tied to the theme of shame: Adam and Eve are naked; they are *ʿarummim* (root *ʿerom*), "yet they are not ashamed." The antagonist of the narrative, the snake, in the next verse (3:1) is shrewd or clever, it is *ʿarum*. When the very same snake is cursed by God, it is *ʿarur* (3:14). This is a deliberate wordplay that effectively links nakedness and with that shame, the desire for the knowledge of good and evil, and the curse.<sup>20</sup>

More than that, shame is not only seen at the beginning and end of the fall narrative. It is also behind the first response of humankind after the act of disobedience. In Gen 3:7–8, we read:

and the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked (*ʿerummim*), and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings. And they heard the sound of YHWH God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid

19. Hartenstein, "Und sie erkannten, dass sie nackt waren . . .," 277–78. Rabbinic interpretation has made much of the similarity of the word skin (*ʿor*) in Gen 3:21 and "light" (*ʿor*), which sees the couple dressed in a garment of light, similar to God (cf. Psalm 93:1, 104:2). This is why the Rabbinic interpretation can go in a more positive and progressive direction, in contrast to the fear and shame reaction described in the text.

20. E.g., Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 66; David W. Cotter, *Genesis*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 34.

themselves from the presence [literally: face(s)] of YHWH God among the trees of the garden.

While shame is not explicit here, the behavior, the attempt to hide nakedness, clearly is meant to be an indicator that shame and fear are present. The text explicitly highlights this by employing the superfluous term “both of them” in 2:25 and 3:7 (שניהם). By introducing the issue of shame in 2:25 as a preliminary to the narrative, the narrator creates the expectation that we recognize shame as an explanation for humanity’s behavior. Norman Kraus calls shame a “primal anxiety reaction,”<sup>21</sup> and it is this anxiety reaction to being seen that the current narrative wants to be understood as *boš*, regardless of what the term might denote in other passages.<sup>22</sup> Shame is therefore a phenomenon which is tightly linked to perception and the fear of being seen, and it is this that constitutes the human predicament.

Note also that the first question in the narrative is linked with the phenomenon of shame, indicative of humanity’s fall.<sup>23</sup> Adam and Eve are hiding because of their shame, and God calls them out.

We therefore conclude that shame cannot be a peripheral issue to this narrative. The feeling of shame is the first response and marker of our “fallen,” altered anthropology, and therefore shame should be considered as primary to the exegesis of this passage.

### Shame is Related to Perception

The story does not turn on the issue of nakedness so much as on Adam and Eve’s perception. The language of perception permeates the narrative. In the first creation account in Genesis, we already hear seven times that “God saw” and that it was “good” (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). What is being repeatedly

21. See Norman Kraus, “The Cross of Reconciliation: Dealing with Shame and Guilt,” and “Jesus’ Vicarious Identification with Us,” in *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciple’s Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1990), 205–17, 218–28 respectively. The quote is on p. 215.

22. See the summary in Hartenstein, “Und sie erkannten, dass sie nackt waren . . .” 287–88; but esp. Kunio Nojima’s in-depth study, *Ehre und Schande in Kulturanthropologie und biblischer Theologie* (Wuppertal: Arco, 2011), 303–35, who notes that in the Psalms (and Isaiah) *boš* and its related terms are rarely linked to individual guilt or to glory/honor (*kābōd*).

23. See Frank Crüsemann, “Was ist und wonach fragt die erste Frage der Bibel? Oder: das Thema der Scham als ‘Schlüssel zur Paradiesgeschichte,’” in *Fragen wider die Antworten: Festschrift für Jürgen Ebach zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Kerstin Schiffner et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2010), 63–79. Crüsemann similarly argues for shame as a key to understanding Genesis and human anthropology. He furthermore proposes that the snake in 3:1 does not give a real question, so that 3:9 becomes the first question in the Bible, see esp. 64–65.

emphasized is not merely *observation*, but *observation paired with evaluation*. Then, humanity is created in the *image* and *likeness* of God (1:27). It is in this context that we read in 2:25 that Adam and Eve, who would have looked at each other physically (and/or metaphorically), “were naked, yet they were not ashamed.” So, why should they be ashamed afterwards? How did ‘naked but not ashamed’ become ‘naked but ashamed’? Clearly their nakedness did not change (cf. 2:25 to 3:7); what changed was their perception of each other.

In v. 5, the serpent claims that Adam and Eve’s “eyes will be opened.” Eve, having been directed by the snake to look at the tree, “saw that the tree was good to eat” and “a delight to the eyes” (3:6)—observation is again paired with evaluation. Having eaten, the serpent’s prediction appears to come true: “the eyes of both of them were opened” (3:7a)—note the emphasis on *both their eyes* in Hebrew (עיני שניהם). Immediately they “knew that they were naked.” They gained a different kind of knowledge, a certain perception, revealed by now feeling ashamed. In context, this is found to be the knowledge of *good* and *evil*, the forming of evaluative judgments and distinctions.

As we shall subsequently argue, their fear is the fear of being seen by one another, which is why they immediately cover themselves from the eyes of the other. Fully cognizant of the other’s gaze, they are now aware that the other perceives them as exposed (cf. 3:8).<sup>24</sup> This change of perception is in some sense metaphorical. In the end, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil leads them to a different kind of knowledge, but this knowledge is manifest as a kind of deficient self-knowledge or self-consciousness. Genesis identifies shame as the symptom of an altered, dysfunctional perception.<sup>25</sup> As such it is shame that is the indicator of an ontological shift in the human condition that has taken place, one that remains to this day.

While the narrative simply states that their “eyes were opened,” must we understand this to mean that they now can identify previously unknown evil? They were awakened to their nakedness, but is their nakedness necessarily something *negative* that needs to be hidden now because it is unbecoming (and always was and will be), or is there another element at play? And do we not in the end implicitly agree with the serpent’s statement that we know “good and evil” (Gen 3:5) when we agree that nudity is something to be hidden? And yet

24. Cf. Pattison, *Shame*, 72, who quotes the psychologists Michael Lewis, Gershen Kaufman, and Andrew Morrison, and summarizes that they note that this seeing means “to be judged or assessed.” What we would emphasize is that it is the other person’s perception (and of course also our own) that is the ultimate issue, for this gaze is identity-giving. In that sense, shame is really not the issue; it is only the symptom.

25. Much of this is already found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM, 1955), 3–11; Pattison, *Shame*, 191–93.



God designated the *naked* human as “good” and enjoyed fellowship with him. Our aim is not specifically to advance nudist ideology, but rather to advance the claim that it is not creatureliness or corporeality but the perception of the other and the resulting shame on experiencing this perception that are the interpretative keys to this narrative. This is especially the case if the early chapters of Genesis were to depict Adam and Eve as (naked!) priests and/or divine images in a sacred temple garden precinct, as some have argued.<sup>26</sup> In other words, human nakedness is not covered because nakedness in itself is something problematic, but because covering nakedness removes the shame and anxiety caused by the awareness of the perception of the other.

The point of the entire narrative comes to this: Human perception has changed; their eyes are open. Man and woman now feel exposed; they seek to hide and cover themselves; they seek to manage the image they project, fully aware that what they project is lacking. From a dysfunctional perception comes a dysfunctional intra-human relationship (emphasized in 3:16). Henri Blocher comments that “shame is already the fear of the alien look.”<sup>27</sup> People now look at each other and are aware that the other is looking, and they respond with shame and fear. And this has obvious links to everyday experience.

### Shame is Horizontal

In fact, as the story presents it, shame is first experienced as a horizontal issue; the Hebrew verbal form “they were naked and not ashamed” (*yitbošašu*) is reciprocal, which is the only occurrence of this form.<sup>28</sup> Originally, the relationship was harmonious and untainted.<sup>29</sup> It means Adam was not ashamed to be seen by Eve, and Eve was not ashamed to be seen by Adam. They were not ashamed in front of each other or, as one could also translate, they did not embarrass/shame each other. This, then, refers predominantly to a sense of shame *in the eyes of the other*. When they were not aware of their nakedness, the other person’s gaze was not seen as something to be feared or avoided.<sup>30</sup> Shame operates initially in the horizontal direction.<sup>31</sup> This is also apparent in the narrative itself: In Gen 3:7 Adam and Eve made for themselves fig-leaf coverings *before*

26. E.g., T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

27. Henri Blocher, *In The Beginning* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 177.

28. J. M. Sasson, “*welō’ yitbōšāšū* (Gen 2,25) and Its Implications,” *Bib* 66 (1985): 418–21.

29. On this point see esp. Hartenstein, “Und sie erkannten, dass sie nackt waren . . .” 286–88.

30. This horizontal relationship is also alluded to in Gen 2:18, 20, in close proximity to 2:25, where God makes a “suitable” (כנגדו) helper for Adam, on “eye level” as it were.

31. As, e.g., also noted by Blocher, *In The Beginning*, 173.

God appeared on the scene. Their eyes were opened, and they felt the desire to cover themselves up. Given that the narrative has already linked nakedness and (lack of) shame in the context of their relationship with one another, it seems reasonable to read this shame reaction to nakedness in exactly the same context. One does not need to hypothesize that they reacted pre-emptively in anticipation of their exposure before God; when their eyes were opened, what they initially saw was one another, which, combined with an awareness of their own nakedness, left them exposed and ashamed.

Shame, seen in the desire to hide and (unsuccessfully) cover one's nakedness from the gazing eye of the other, is strongly linked with one's perception of self as seen by another. In particular, shame derives from having one's inadequacies revealed by the perceptive gaze of the other. It is perceiving that another perceives,<sup>32</sup> resulting in a desire to control or manage that perception.<sup>33</sup> In that regard, it is trying to "save face."<sup>34</sup> Hence the immediate desire to cover from the eyes of the human other. At issue is not nakedness so much as the eye of the other self-consciously seeing it as nakedness.

Initially that meant the human other, but as soon as God comes into the garden, Adam and Eve, who perceive him audibly (emphasized in vv. 8 and 10), promptly take flight into the bushes, even though they had covered their nakedness with fig-leaves. Only now does shame begin to operate on the vertical dimension. We now hear Adam: "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid myself" (3:10; cf. 3:7–8).

This is also why it is highly problematic to project the human predicament of shame onto God, for instance by arguing that Adam's disobedience made

32. Crüsemann, "Thema der Scham," 73.

33. Jean-Paul Sartre discusses some of the dynamics of what we have called "horizontal shame" and its link to perception and self-recognition (identity), see idem, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992). He writes: "Shame is by nature recognition. I recognize that I am as the Other sees me. . . . This shame is shame of oneself before the Other. . . . But at the same time I need the Other in order to realize fully all the structures of my being" (pp. 302–3, in "The Existence of Others"; emphases original). See also Notger Slenczka, "'Sich Schämen': Zum Sinn und theologischen Ertrag einer Phänomenologie negativer emotionaler Selbstverhältnisse," in *Dogmatik im Diskurs*, ed. Cornelia Richter, Bernhard Dressler, and Jörg Lauster (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2014), 241–61; and Bammel, *Aufgetane Augen*, 112, who also discusses the relationship of shame and perception.

34. There are obvious and meaningful links to Gen 3:8 ("they hid themselves from the face of YHWH"); Gen 4:4 where God did not "look at" (š<sup>h</sup>) Cain's offering; Gen 4:5 ("Cain became very angry and his face fell . . . 'Why has your face fallen?"); Gen 4:14 ("from the face of the earth and from your face I shall be hidden"); and Gen 4:16 ("Then Cain went out from the face of YHWH"). All these are still within the same *toledoth* (Gen 2:4–4:26). See Ulrike Wagner-Rau, "Scham: Blickwechsel zwischen Theologie und Psychoanalyse," *Pastoraltheologie* 100 (2011): 184–97, esp. 193, who draws out the links of shame to the account of the first murder.

God “lose face,” or that shame affected God’s nature somehow ontologically.<sup>35</sup> Genesis makes abundantly clear that shame is firstly a human problem (2:25; 3:7–8, 10, 21; 4:5b, 6); humanity has changed, not God. God in fact seems quite unaffected by it, and without any apparent embarrassment he comes looking for the couple hiding in the bushes (3:8–9).

The reason why we can be sure that shame operates primarily between humans, or rather that it first plays out on the human horizon, is 3:21, where God made for Adam and Eve skin coverings. Are we to believe that God was so shocked by the naked human form or that nakedness was somehow an abomination to him? Can God not endure the naked body he himself created? If not for himself, then for whom does God give them coverings? Why help them out with their pathetic fig skirts?

Bonhoeffer suggests that God “does not compromise them in their nakedness before each other, but he himself covers them. God’s activity keeps pace with man.”<sup>36</sup> God gives them a temporal covering that graciously would allow them to live with each other. They do not have to constantly face their shame.

### Shame is Related to Human Identity

With the eating of the fruit, a new situation has come about. This is qualified in the account as *death* (2:17; cf. 3:3–4) and as having *open eyes* (3:5–7), which immediately leads to the experience of a primal anxiety to be seen exposed (3:7b). What then is the connection between forewarned death and the experience of shame, that is, the revealing gaze of the other?

Man and woman, who were created in the image of God, now cannot look at each other’s image. Surely this is more than significant; in fact, the narrative composition explicitly recapitulates this theme at the beginning of chapter 5, the second book of generations (*toledoth*, cf. 2:4):

This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day when God created man, He made him in the *likeness of God*. He created them male and female, and He blessed them and named them Man in the day when they

35. See Jackson Wu, *Saving God’s Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University, 2013). Of course, it is easy to see how the honor/shame gospel matrix can be aligned with Reformed thinking on God’s glory, but if shame is primal and therefore universal, then we should perhaps be careful to not press shame into a system indebted to what Stendahl coined the “introspective conscience of the West.” See Kirster Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *HTR* 56 (1963): 199–215.

36. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax (New York: McMillan, 1959), 90.

were created. When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in *his own likeness*, according to *his image*, and named him Seth. (Emphases ours.)

The original reference point for humanity was the likeness of God, but post-Eden, the narrative depicts a shift in the image-bearing nature. The *imago dei* has become the *imago adami*. This is not to say that the image of God has been totally lost, but we are now “one step removed . . . Seth and his heirs are a strange unresolved mixture of the *regal* image of God and the *threatened* image of Adam.”<sup>37</sup> Bonhoeffer writes:<sup>38</sup> “Instead of seeing God, man sees himself (Gen 3.7). Man perceives himself in disunion with God and with men . . . Shame is man’s ineffaceable recollection of his estrangement from the origin . . . *Man is ashamed because he has lost something which is essential to his original character.*”<sup>39</sup>

A fundamental reorientation has taken place, and it is this reorientation that is manifested by shame.<sup>40</sup> And, not surprisingly from the divine point of view, this means *death*. Accepting the serpent’s offer to “be like God” and gaining an independent source of moral judgments changed both humanity’s destiny and its source of self-evaluation. Ultimately it seems that identity is something that comes to us externally as creatures; it is always received from another. When the vertical relationship was severed, the horizontal stepped in its place.<sup>41</sup> But deriving one’s identity from horizontal relationships is a process that is constantly fraught with status anxiety and doubt, leading to a universal dissatisfaction.

37. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1982), 68.

38. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 6.

39. Emphasis ours. In this context it is interesting to note that the first time we hear the long form of the first person pronoun in Hebrew (אניכי), it is in the mouth of Adam in 3:10, confessing that “I am naked,” the next time we hear the pronoun it is on the lips of Cain after the murder of his brother in 4:9: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” As such, human self-consciousness and self-awareness comes to the fore in aftermath of a pivotal transgression.

40. See here the important observations by Marguerite Shuster, *The Fall and Sin: What We Have Become as Sinners* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 62–63.

41. It is our tentative hypothesis that what separates so-called individualistic cultures from communal cultures is where they look *first* for identity. Non-Western cultures that were not fully exposed to human rationalism (*cogito ergo sum*) look first “outside,” deriving identity from the group, while Western cultures first look “inside” and only then to the other to confirm one’s self-understanding of one’s identity. Non-individualistic cultures have retained the notion that identity immediately is derived from the gaze(s) of the other, and as such it is the community, the tribe, the family, that determines one’s identity. Theologically speaking, both ought to “look up” first, before they can look at each other without shame.

## Shame Remains

One last point about Genesis: in a final creative act, God protects his creation before the expulsion (3:21).<sup>42</sup> But although God graciously provides coverings for Adam and Eve, this itself does not take care of the problem. It is merely temporally mitigated. God does not deal with the problem here; he literally just covers over it; he dresses it up. The pathetic dress of fig leaves (3:7b) is replaced with something less see-through. Yet their altered perception remains, and their eyes are still “opened.” As soon as the tunics come off, they once again feel ashamed and would have to run off into the bushes. Humans remain afraid to be seen by other humans and afraid to be seen by God (cf. Exod 20:26). No clothes can change that. Shame has arrived, and shame remains.

God’s provision of clothing offers a temporal solution, but it does not take care of the problem. In like manner, any soteriology based on concepts of honor bestowal does not take care of the core problem, as it does not remove the gazing eyes of the other or replace the other as the source of one’s self-identity. This is why we take the position on theological grounds, *contra* treatments of shame in contemporary missiology, that honor cannot be the ultimate antithesis to shame. “The dialectic of concealment and exposure is only a sign of shame. Yet shame is not overcome by it; it is rather confirmed by it.”<sup>43</sup> To deal with shame, much more drastic measures had to be applied: Jesus’s most shameful death on the cross that brings shameful existence to death; see, e.g., Heb 12:2. Like in many cultures of the world, shame is dealt with through death, not through concealment.

All of these observations should have significant ramifications for our understanding of Gen 3, for theology (and missiology)—in particular—anthropology and soteriology. According to Gen 3, sin, as the failure and human inability to meet a divine standard (image),<sup>44</sup> is expressed through the existence of shame, and although culturally and historically colored, the universality of the phenomenon is a most striking element of the human experience. The narrative recognizes and explains this, even “recruits” this universal human experience, while theology often has not. This is also why reducing the gospel to only forensic categories has proved to be insufficient: it does not take account of one of the most primal human experiences, shame.

42. Westermann, *Genesis*, 1:269.

43. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 147–48.

44. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (London: T&T Clark, 1985; repr. 2004), 289, cf. 293.

## Summary and Outlook

We believe that we have made a sufficient case for the need to take shame more seriously in our theological reflection, especially when it comes to the anthropology of Gen 3. In particular, when shame and fear are taken as the interpretive key, as emphasized by the text itself, the story speaks to a universal human problem. Furthermore, if our understanding of shame as the primal and universal experience is correct, then there is a need for a corresponding paradigm of soteriology that interprets the kind of disgrace shame depicted in this narrative on its own terms. This is something we will address in forthcoming publications.<sup>45</sup>

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45. See especially Simon Cozens, *Looking Shame in the Eye: A Path to Understanding Grace and Freedom* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2019); and Simon Cozens and Christoph Ochs, "Putting the Shameful Body to Death: Some Critiques and a Way Forward in the Soteriology of Shame," *Transformation* 36 (2019): 233–45.

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