

“Nakedness” in the Old Testament

A Word Study on *Ervah*

Introduction

The Old Testament—while formally replaced by the “New Covenant” in Christ—is still part of the “Scriptures” which Paul affirmed are “profitable” for our instruction in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). Furthermore, we find in the OT the account of the creation of mankind and we can learn much there about God’s view of humanity. The OT laws reveal to us God’s character and His holiness. They also show us much of God’s standards for righteous human behavior.

Consequently, when examining the issue of nakedness from a biblical perspective, we should expect to learn something of God’s view of nakedness from how He addressed it in the OT Scriptures.

Before that can be done, however, it is pertinent to first examine the words God used in the OT in reference to nakedness in order to correctly discern their definitions, for if we assume that they mean exactly what our English words for nakedness mean in the 21st Century, we could potentially come to erroneous conclusions.

We also do not want to be guilty of “proof-texting” on any biblical issue, for that error reveals a motivation to find Scriptures to support one’s preconceptions rather than to investigate the Scriptures only to understand what they really mean, even if it requires us to reject our previously held positions.

Scope

This paper is written to explore the definition of only one of the words used in the OT regarding nakedness: *ervah* (H6172).

The reason for limiting the scope to this one word comes from the fact that it is only Hebrew word describing the unclothed state which is ever associated with sin in the Bible. The clarity of its definition is therefore crucial to our correct understanding of Scripture’s teaching on nakedness.

This paper is not a challenge to the translation of this word, for that is not in dispute. However, it will demonstrate that sometimes the word is translated in ways that are in stark contrast to the word’s natural meaning. These instances will be particularly scrutinized to discern the word’s true meaning.

I make no claim of being a Hebrew expert at all; I have only used the King James Version (KJV) and New American Standard Bible (NASB) as my Scripture texts, along with standard English based tools such as Strong’s Concordance and online Scripture study tools (primarily BlueLetterBible.org).

Purpose

I will readily admit that I have come to the conclusion through my study of Scripture that God’s Word does not confirm the nudity-taboo generally presumed by today’s church to be God’s moral standard for mankind by most of the church today. However, the primary purpose of this paper is not to promote or defend that conclusion. My purpose is to expose the true meaning of *ervah* in the Bible so that God’s

Word can be understood correctly. If our understanding of this word is wrong, then certainly any conclusion based on that faulty understanding will also be in error.

A secondary purpose of this paper, however, is to document the understanding that I reached regarding the word **ervah** so that others will see why—at least in part—and how I came to my current biblical understanding regarding nudity, even if they do not agree. I strongly assert that my conclusions in this word study were *not* driven by my change of views regarding nudity, but rather *my views changed as a result of this study*. Consequently, I am open to any challenge regarding the accuracy or objectivity of this paper's content.

I apologize for the lengthy introduction, but given the very emotionally charged nature of this topic, I felt it was necessary.

In *Part 1 – The Natural Meaning*, I examine the usage of **ervah** throughout the OT Scriptures to see if the natural meaning of the word makes sense wherever it is used.

In *Part 2 – the Connotations*, I look for and suggest a consistent definition for the word **ervah** which relates substantially to the natural meaning, but also satisfies the context wherever it appears. I also discuss why I feel that this is a better solution than attempting to discern two or more distinct definitions.

In *Part 3 – New Understanding*, the revised definition will be tested in the context of the passages where **ervah** is used—especially the more confusing passages—to see if it can clarify the meaning of these passages and perhaps even provide a richer interpretation.

Ervah

Part 1 – the Natural Meaning

Etymology

Word Study resources tell us that ***ervah*** (noun, H6172) is based upon ***arah*** (verb, H6168) which means “to be bare, be nude, uncover...” Out of the 54 times that ***ervah*** appears in the OT, it is translated “nakedness” all but four times in the KJV, and the NASB does so all but six times.

This is sufficient for me to conclude that the natural meaning of this word is exactly as it is typically translated; it simply means “nakedness” and is the state of a person “*without clothing*.” Etymologically, there is no basis to suggest that the word means anything more or less than that. Therefore the starting point for this study is to accept that natural meaning as accurate.

However, as in all languages, the etymological foundation of a word often tells us how the word came into usage, but does not give us a clear understanding of what the word came to mean in *common* usage. Therefore, before we can conclude that ***ervah*** simply describes a person “without clothing” in the Bible, we must first examine its usage in the Scriptural text to confirm that in each instance, the natural meaning truly makes sense and we can clearly understand God’s intended message in the passage. If this is not the case, then one of the two following resolutions must be discovered (or a combination of the two):

1. We must discern an adjusted meaning for ***ervah*** based on contextual usage.
 - We would then review all the passages where the word is used to confirm that the modified definition works wherever it appears
 - We would also reexamine our understanding of those passages where the word appears to discover if the new understanding has enriched or clarified the meaning of the passage.
2. Otherwise, we must conclude that the word actually has more than one meaning. That is, at times it would carry the natural meaning, and at other times, a different though possible related meaning.
 - We would then review all the passages where the word is used to ensure that the context clearly indicates which of the two (or more) definitions to use.
 - We would also reexamine our understanding of those passages which use an alternative definition to discover if it has enriched and/or clarified the meaning of the passage.

Word Usage

Here I will examine how the word ***ervah*** is used in the OT to see if its natural meaning renders a clear understanding wherever it is used. Scripture quotations are from the NASB except as noted.

A. Natural meaning makes sense:

In many of the places where ***ervah*** is used, the natural meaning makes plain sense. For example:

- **Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the *nakedness* of his father, and told his two brothers outside.** (Gen. 9:22)
- **And you shall not go up by steps to My altar, so that your *nakedness* will not be exposed on it.** (Exodus 20:26) (Notably, this is a slight departure from the natural meaning, for it seems to restrict its meaning to certain body parts which might be exposed while ascending stairs, even while the person is otherwise clothed.)
- **...so I spread My skirt over you and covered your *nakedness*.** (Ezekiel 16:8)
- **I will also take away My wool and My flax Given to cover her *nakedness*.** (Hosea 2:9)

In each of these cases, the natural meaning of the word “nakedness” can be understood in the context without any difficulty.

B. Natural meaning doesn’t make complete sense:

Of the 54 total usages of this Hebrew word, relatively few fall squarely in the previous category. Many more seem slightly confusing or unclear if we presume only the natural meaning of *ervah*. For example:

- **None of you shall approach any blood relative of his to uncover *nakedness*; I am the LORD.** (Lev. 18:6)
 - It makes sense as stated, but it doesn’t quite make sense that we are only forbidden to uncover the nakedness of blood relatives. God’s intended meaning is not quite clear.
 - There are a number of other similar verses in Lev. 18 which also invoke “blood relative” as the reason uncovering nakedness is forbidden (compare verses 6, 12, 13, & 17).
- **You shall not uncover the *nakedness* of your father's wife; it is your father's *nakedness*.** (Lev. 18:8)
 - The word here appears twice. The first time, it makes enough sense, but the second time confuses the meaning because the passage equates the two as synonymous even though it’s in reference to two different people. The words, “...father’s nakedness” in this passage cannot simply mean the father is unclothed.
 - Several other verses in Lev. 18 have a similar structure and lack of clarity (compare verses 8, 10, & 16).
- **If there is a man who takes [marries] his sister, his father's daughter or his mother's daughter, so that he sees her *nakedness* and she sees his *nakedness*, it is a disgrace; and they shall be cut off in the sight of the sons of their people. He has uncovered his sister's *nakedness*; he bears his guilt.** (Lev. 20:17)
 - This seems to make sense as it reads, “...sees his/her nakedness...” except that the context is within marriage. Why should it be forbidden to see the nakedness of your spouse?
 - The key to understanding the verse must be that when a man marries his own sister (full or half) he’s still “uncovering her nakedness.” This would strongly suggest that at very least, that phrase, “uncovering the nakedness of” must mean more than simple exposure to an unclothed body (this will be discussed later).

- **Then Saul's anger burned against Jonathan and he said to him, "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you are choosing the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother's *nakedness*?"** (1 Sam. 20:30)
 - The words make sense, but what could Jonathan's kindness towards David possibly have to do with the nakedness of his mother?

In these passages, the natural meaning of the word makes sense as used, but it does not seem to provide clarity of meaning within the context. Instead, it leaves us pondering other unanswered questions. These questions should cause us to dig deeper for a more precise definition of the term according to its actual usage.

There were other passages that might have been included in this list, but because the word is often used metaphorically in reference to a nation's infidelity, I chose not to include them here. Metaphorical usage does little to help us find a clear definition of the word in its common usage. Rather, a clearer understanding of the common usage definition will add clarity to the meaning of the word when used metaphorically.

C. Natural meaning makes little or no sense:

Beyond the passages referenced above, there are also passages that make little or no sense when read with the natural meaning of *ervah*. It is clear that this was evident to the translators, for in most cases, they didn't use the word "nakedness" to translate the word, but instead used a different English word in their attempt to reconcile the word's usage with the immediate context.

For the purpose of demonstrating that the natural meaning of *ervah* doesn't make sense in these verses, I'm going to use "nakedness" in place of whatever other word was used by the translators.

- **Joseph remembered the dreams which he had about them [his brothers], and said to them, "You are spies; you have come to look at the [*nakedness*] of our land."** (Gen. 42:9, see also v. 12)
 - Here the term *ervah* is used to describe the land of Egypt. This seems significantly out of character with the natural meaning of the word, for how can a "land" be "naked" and how would that be of interest to "spies."
 - In the effort to find some sort of related meaning which would make sense with the context, the NASB translators used the phrase "undefended parts" instead of "nakedness."
 - This is a significant departure from the natural meaning of *ervah* and from every other usage of the term throughout the Scriptures. Even other metaphorical usages of *ervah* in reference to nations do not use it this way.
- **When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some [*nakedness*] in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce...** (Deut. 24:1)
 - When a man marries a woman, it is to be expected that he would see her naked thereafter. Yet this verse tells us that if he finds that "nakedness," he might reject her as

a wife (the passage doesn't actually give permission, but rather regulates the situation if it does happen).

- The Translators again could see that the natural meaning of *ervah* was not the intent of this passage, so they instead translated it “indecent” in this passage. This is also quite a departure from the natural meaning of the Hebrew word.
- **...so the king of Assyria will lead away the captives of Egypt and the exiles of Cush, young and old, naked and barefoot with buttocks uncovered, to the [nakedness] of Egypt.**
 - The passage describes the actual naked condition of the captives of war, but it uses the term “nakedness” (*ervah*) to describe not the individual captives, but rather the *nation* of Egypt.
 - The translators used the word “shame” in place of the word “nakedness” in this case. Once again, the natural meaning of the word was not used, but a dissimilar word was chosen based upon the interpretation of the context.

One more needs to be mentioned, but it is slightly different because the word is rendered as an adjective instead of a noun. This time, I'll use the KJV's rendering:

- **...and you shall have a spade among your tools, and it shall be when you sit down outside, you shall dig with it and shall turn to cover up your excrement. For the LORD thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp, to deliver thee, and to give up thine enemies before thee; therefore shall thy camp be holy: that he see no [nakedness] thing in thee, and turn away from thee.** (Deut. 23:13-14 - KJV)
 - Human feces were to be buried rather than left on the surface of the ground. But the excrement was described as a “nakedness thing.” Perhaps this makes some sense because some measure of nakedness is required for such elimination.
 - The translators used the adjective “indecent” as an appropriate description of fecal matter, but this again is quite distinct from the simple unclothed state of a person.

Conclusion to Part 1

The purpose of Part 1 was to examine the natural meaning of the word *ervah* to discern if its natural meaning adequately satisfies the various passages where the word is used. In my opinion, the natural meaning of *ervah* (meaning “nakedness” or simply being “without clothes”) does not sufficiently satisfy the usage of the word in many of the passages where it appears in the Hebrew text.

Therefore the word must have connotations beyond the natural meaning, or else it must have two or more distinct definitions.

In *Part 2 – the Connotations*, I will examine the possibility that there are consistent connotations in the Scriptural usage of *ervah* in order to craft a more clear and biblical definition of the word. If such connotations can be discerned, then it can and should inform our interpretation of any Scripture where it appears.

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Part 2 – the Connotations

Words in every language drift from their original and natural usage when used frequently in common speech for generations. Consequently, in such cases, the true definition of a word is determined by its usage, not simply by its etymology.

We've already conducted a survey of the word's usage in Part 1, concluding that the natural meaning does not provide an adequate understanding wherever it is used. We can now begin to consider candidate definitions based upon the observations made there.

Candidate Definition #1

When I first conducted this study personally, I observed that of all the words which referenced a person in an unclothed state, only ***ervah*** was ever used negatively or was associated directly with sin and shame. Particularly in light of some of the passages in section C. of Part 1, my initial assumption was to conclude that ***ervah*** included the connotation of sin, or more specifically, sexual sin. Indeed, many have reached the conclusion that simple nakedness itself is shameful and sinful because of the consistent association of this word to sin found in the Bible.

So, let's begin with a definition such as ***"shameful and sexually sinful nakedness."***

In this definition, the connection between nakedness and sexual sin or shame is so strong that they can virtually be considered synonymous. To use the word ***ervah*** ("nakedness") is to connote sin or shame in every instance.

Initially, this definition seems to fit several the various contexts in which it is used, particularly in verses such as:

- **Your *nakedness* (sin) will be uncovered, your shame (i.e. nakedness) also will be exposed; I will take vengeance and will not spare a man.** (Isa. 47:3)
- **therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, even all those whom you loved and all those whom you hated. So I will gather them against you from every direction and expose your nakedness (sin) to them that they may see all your nakedness (shame).** (Eze. 16:37)

In the verses above, I have added the sin and shame concepts in parentheses to demonstrate that the contexts seem to strongly support such a definition.

However, if we survey how this definition fits with other passages, we find that it is simply too strong. Not every passage which uses the term ***ervah*** uses it in a way that demands a negative or sinful interpretation. In fact, some require a neutral understanding of the word in order to be faithful to the clear meaning of the context. These would argue against such a categorically negative definition. For example:

- **And you shall not go up by steps to My altar, so that your nakedness (sin/shame?) will not be exposed on it.** (Exodus 20:26)
 - If someone is coming to an altar of the Lord with shameful sexual sin in their lives, the avoidance of steps will do nothing to hide that sin from being “exposed” before the Lord.
 - The passage is forbidding the use of steps at an altar to avoid literal exposure of certain body parts. *ervah* cannot connote sexual sin in this case.
- **You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness.** (Lev. 18:8 and in Lev. 18:10 & 16 with similar construction)
 - The sexual uncovering of a person’s step-mother is a sinful and shameful expression of nakedness, because her sexual nakedness belongs to her husband alone; with him, however, *that sexual expression is righteous, without shame, and blessed by God!*
 - This passage contains both a negative and a positive expression of *ervah*. This means that we cannot assume only negative and shameful connotations when the word is found in the OT text.
- **“Then I passed by you and saw you, and behold, you were at the time for love; so I spread My skirt over you and covered your nakedness. I also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine,” declares the Lord GOD.** (Ezek. 16:8)
 - God describes his relationship with the nation of Israel by invoking the picture of a baby girl who, in spite of rejection, was caused by God to survive until her pubescent years. It is at this point that God notes her coming of age and enters into a marriage covenant with her. In that process, He “covers her nakedness” for the first time in her life.
 - There is no shame or sin *at all* in her nakedness in this part of the account (that comes later, well after she was clothed). Instead, This describes the tender and loving picture of a man taking a poor girl in and making her His bride.
 - The use of *ervah* in this passage connotes no sin or shame. Therefore, sin and shame must not always be implicit with the use of the word.

As we already learned, a completely natural meaning of the word *ervah* (i.e. simply being unclothed) is not viable for the usage of the word wherever it is found.

But these passages above demonstrate that neither is the word always an expression of sinful, shameful, sexual nakedness.

Possibly two definitions?

If we can’t find a single definition or range of meaning that works wherever the term is found, then there must multiple definitions of the word.

Would it be acceptable to conclude that in some places, the nakedness of *ervah* is simply a state of being unclothed, free of sin or shame, and other times that nakedness is shamefully perverse and sinful?

This may be the case, but we have not yet concluded that one definition cannot be found, and I have several reasons to believe that a single definition should be preferred over multiple definitions.

1. Having multiple definitions means that rather than having a clear understanding of **ervah**, we would be forced to determine instance by instance which definition to use. However, this only works reliably when the two definitions are so distinct that there's no question which is which (consider the word "bat" in English... you can tell from the context if someone is speaking about baseball or a winged cave-dwelling mammal).
2. The two potential definitions of **ervah** that we've considered so far really have so much in common that the selection of which definition to use in a given passage could easily be influenced by whatever interpretation someone is biased towards. This is not a reliable way to interpret Scripture. Using a single definition mitigates the error of such subjectivity.
3. The extended passage in Lev. 18 & 20 cannot realistically use two distinct definitions of **ervah** because we would be forced to use both definitions within a single verse. This goes against the entire sense of the passage and is not a dependable way to interpret Scripture.

Consequently, I consider the option of determining two or more distinct definitions to be an undesirable and unreliable solution. It should be used only if a single consistent definition of the word **ervah** cannot be discerned.

Seeking Another Definition

It personally took me a long time to arrive at the definition which I believe most completely and naturally satisfies the context of the word **ervah** wherever it is found in the OT Scriptures. But once found, it seemed to make all of the passages using the word much more clear, and sometimes much richer in meaning.

From the passages that we've already considered in this discussion, it should be clear that two things must be true of a satisfactory definition:

1. The connotations extend beyond the natural meaning of the word.
2. The connotations must not be considered only sinful, but neutral, allowing for the rest of the context in each instance to determine the morality of its expression.

Perhaps this dual requirement for the definition is most clearly seen in Leviticus 18. We have already considered several of the verses from that passage. Taken as a whole, we can make some important observations:

- The oft-repeated phrase, "uncover the nakedness of..." must mean more than simply removing someone's clothing. The use of the term **ervah** (as we've discussed) requires that it has further connotations, and the entire passage doesn't make sense unless it is understood to be a euphemism for sexual intercourse.
- Recognizing this, many new translations use a different phrase altogether to express its meaning, such as the NIV's rendering, "have sexual relations with..."
- There is no Hebrew word for "incest." Yet it's obvious that the entire purpose of Leviticus 18:6-18 is to define and prohibit incestuous sexual relationships (as clearly stated in verse 6).

- Within the passage, there are verses which use the term **ervah** in a way that is *not* forbidden or sinful (Lev. 18:8, 10, & 16). In other words, there are both appropriate and inappropriate contexts for “uncovering” **ervah**.

Consider again Lev. 18:8...

- **You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness.**

It is abundantly clear from the immediate context that this “nakedness” includes a sexual component. This is true of the entire passage, each time the term “nakedness” is used. Consequently, it is appropriate to understand this verse as declaring something like this:

- Do not expose/engage *the sexuality or sexual expression* of your father’s wife. Her *sexual expression* belongs to your father.

This rendering spells out the clear connotation of the way **ervah** is used in the passage, but without relegating all expressions of sexuality (and the use of **ervah**) to the realm of sin. There is an appropriate place for a person’s sexual expression, and it is with that person’s spouse, not another family member.

Candidate Definition #2

Given the observations we’ve made throughout the Scriptures and particularly in Lev. 18, I believe we can suggest that the definition of **ervah** is:

“Nakedness in active sexual expression.” Or more simply, **“sexual nakedness.”**

This is the definition that I settled upon after a long time of consideration of **ervah** and its usage throughout the Scriptures. I believe that it adequately satisfies the contexts each time it is used.

I will now explore the impact of this definition on our understanding of the passages we’ve already considered, for if it is an accurate definition, it should fit logically wherever it is used. Furthermore, it should also enhance and clarify the meaning of passages that might have previously been a little puzzling. This exploration will be discussed in **Part 3 – New Understanding**.

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Part 3 – New Understanding

If the Hebrew word ***ervah*** connotes “***Nakedness in active sexual expression,***” then we should be able to substitute some rendering of this phrase in place of the actual word wherever it is used in the Scriptures. If this definition is accurate, then that understanding of the word should also make reasonable sense in all the passages where it appears.

We will most likely discover, however, that adjusting our understanding of a word will also adjust our understanding of the passage where it appears. This is both natural and right. In every passage of Scripture, the better we can understand the true definition of the inspired words, the clearer our understanding of the inspired text will be. My reason for pointing out this reality is that we cannot judge the accuracy of a definition based upon whether the new definition supports what we previously thought the passage to mean. Rather, we must consider only if the new definition makes reasonable sense in the passage. If it is reasonable, then we cannot use that passage as evidence against the definition. And, if the definition proves true, our understanding of the passage *should* change according to the true meaning of the word.

That said, we will now consider how the adjusted definition stated above fares when used in the interpretation of the passages that we’ve already looked at in this paper. I will start with the passages quoted in **Part 1 – The Natural Meaning** where we considered how the simple and natural meaning of ***ervah*** made sense as used.

A. Passage where the Natural meaning made sense:

Do the following passages which made fine sense with the natural meaning of ***ervah*** still make sense if we apply the adjusted definition given above? I believe they do:

- **Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the [*nakedness in active sexual expression*] of his father, and told his two brothers outside.** (Gen. 9:22)
 - The use of the definition immediately suggests a component to the story that perhaps we would not have otherwise considered, but it does not contradict the context and it does make sense.
 - The new definition implies that Noah was being sexually active (with his wife or alone) when Ham saw him and told his brothers. This would further suggest that the other brothers were seeking to protect their father’s conjugal privacy.
- **And you shall not go up by steps to My altar, so that your [*nakedness in active sexual expression*] will not be exposed on it.** (Exodus 20:26)
 - The definition here may indicate that God did not want the altars built to His name to be places where sexual expression or activity was observed or practiced.
 - This understanding is at least reasonable, especially in light of the fact that so many of the false religions of the Canaanites included orgiastic worship of false Gods. This passage is in many ways similar to Exodus 28:42-43, which I will address in more detail at the close of this paper.

- **“Then I passed by you and saw you, and behold, you were at the time for love; so I spread My skirt over you and covered your [*nakedness in active sexual expression*]. I also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine,” declares the Lord GOD.** (Ezek. 16:8, the entire verse)
 - The passage draws a picture of God selecting the young woman (representing the nation of Israel) as His bride. Only in the context of that marriage covenant is the term ***ervah*** invoked, even though the narrative describes the girl as completely naked up until this point in her life.
 - Our new definition of ***ervah*** may suggest that the “spreading My skirt over you” is an act of laying claim to the girl’s sexual expression of nakedness, which would be a completely righteous and normal consummation of a marriage covenant.
 - This understanding may find corroboration in an event described in Ruth 3:8-9 *“It happened in the middle of the night that the man was startled and bent forward; and behold, a woman was lying at his feet. He said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative.”*
 - Ruth was literally asking Boaz to fulfill the role of “kinsman-redeemer” ... and take her as his wife.
 - This seems to confirm the “covering” the woman with the man’s skirt as a symbolic commitment to marriage, and therefore the sexual connotation of ***ervah*** makes sense, and in a completely pure way.
- **I will also take away My wool and My flax Given to cover her [*nakedness in active sexual expression*].** (Hosea 2:9)
 - In speaking metaphorically of Israel’s unfaithfulness to God by means of Hosea’s marriage to a harlot, God declares that it was He, not her “lovers” that gave her the garments to cover her nakedness (she claimed it was the lovers who gave it to her... see v5).
 - This passage may also hint at the skirt-covering of the marriage covenant which God described of Israel in Ezek. 16:8. However, even if that is not the case, the passage is not in conflict at all with the connotations of sexual expression suggested by the definition of ***ervah***. The entire passage in Hosea is about the woman’s sexual activities.

I conclude that in each of these cases, the adjusted definition of ***ervah*** meaning “***nakedness in active sexual expression***” can be understood in the context without any difficulty. Naturally, the meaning we find in the text as a result has changed somewhat, but as I said before, this is to be expected and even welcomed, provided the definition proves accurate.

B. Where the Natural meaning doesn’t make complete sense:

If the suggested definition of ***ervah*** is accurate, then we should find that passages that didn’t make complete sense before will be clarified. If the new definition doesn’t help us understand these passages more clearly and sensibly, then it would argue that that definition is not correct.

- **None of you shall approach any blood relative of his to uncover [*nakedness in active sexual expression*]; I am the LORD.** (Lev. 18:6)

- This clarifies that this passage really has to do with sexual contact between relatives, or *incest*. Obviously, the definition works here. All ambiguity in meaning is gone.
- Since there is no Hebrew word for “incest,” it is completely natural to expect a phrase such as “uncover the nakedness of” to serve as a euphemism for the concept.
- **You shall not uncover the [nakedness in active sexual expression] of your father's wife; it is your father's [nakedness in active sexual expression].** (Lev. 18:8)
 - Like the previous example, the passage is forbidding the sex with one’s mother or step-mother.
 - The use of *ervah* twice in this verse, once calling it the woman’s nakedness, and once the father’s actually makes more sense with the adjusted definition of the word. *The sexual expression of the wife actually belongs to her husband*. He alone can lay claim to her sexual expression. I believe that this is the meaning of this phrase construction in both Lev. 18:8 and 18:16.
- **If there is a man who takes [marries] his sister, his father's daughter or his mother's daughter, so that he sees her [nakedness in active sexual expression] and she sees his [nakedness in active sexual expression], it is a disgrace; and they shall be cut off in the sight of the sons of their people. He has uncovered his sister's [nakedness in active sexual expression] he bears his guilt.** (Lev. 20:17)
 - This passage is obviously not just talking about seeing the unclothed body of one’s wife, but rather it is really talking about sexual union with one’s sister. Our definition of *ervah* makes this even clearer.
 - However, the passage declares that sexual intercourse with one’s sister is still incest— forbidden in Lev. 18:9. Marrying her does not change that fact.
- **Then Saul's anger burned against Jonathan and he said to him, "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you are choosing the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother's [nakedness in active sexual expression]?"** (1 Sam. 20:30)
 - Saul is trying to insult and shame Jonathan. Jonathan’s mother has nothing to do with it except for the fact that she bore him.
 - In this passage however, if we remember that—very literally—Jonathan is the *fruit* of his mother’s active sexual expression, then it still does make sense.
 - Looking back at another passage out of Lev. 18 we find a similar concept in verse 10, **“The nakedness of your son's daughter or your daughter's daughter, their [nakedness in active sexual expression] you shall not uncover; for their [nakedness in active sexual expression] is yours.”**
 - Here again, using the natural meaning of *ervah*, this passage makes little or no sense. But if we consider the fact that a man’s children are literally the fruit his own active sexual expression, then the revised definition still retains reasonable sensibility in the passage.
 - While this usage is slightly different than what we’ve found in the other passages, it still does not contradict the definition that I have given. Rather, it suggests that the word may have an expanded range of meaning—that it can reference not only the active sexual expression of nakedness, but also the fruit of that sexual activity, as determined by the context. In both cases, the active sexual expression component is still present.

I find that the adjusted definition does indeed make these slightly confusing passages clearer in their meaning. In some cases, the understanding it brings to the passage reinforces the interpretation that we have already made. This is most evident in the Leviticus 18 passage where the sexual connotation of **ervah** is so clear that the NIV translators consistently used the phrase “have sexual relations with” in place of more literal “uncover the nakedness of.”

C. Natural meaning makes little or no sense:

Here now is the most significant test of the new definition. If it can help us make sense of passages which make little or no sense with the natural meaning of **ervah**, then it will have demonstrated its accuracy. We should not be surprised, however, if the “sensible” understanding leads us to an interpretation that is considerably different than the one we had accepted before. This should actually be welcomed in a context where we have not been able to understand **ervah** very well and have only settled for an approximation of its meaning or have translated the word with an English word that has a significantly different meaning.

- **Joseph remembered the dreams which he had about them [his brothers], and said to them, “You are spies; you have come to look at the [nakedness in active sexual expression] of our land.”** (Gen. 42:9, see also v. 12)
 - When the adjusted definition is inserted in this passage, immediately a very different interpretation is evident. Joseph may well have been accusing his brothers of being voyeurs or peeping toms.
 - Such an interpretation would warrant a deeper look into the context, for we must be careful not to abandon our previous understanding without corroborating evidence in the text.
 - Our English bibles also record the fact that Joseph called them “spies.” However, as I examined the Hebrew usage of the root word **ragal** (H7270), I discovered that it does *not* have the military connotation that we so quickly associate with the word “spy” in English. More literally, it refers to one who walks around looking at things, generally with malevolent intent. Here again, this understanding fits very well with the notion that Joseph’s accusation was of voyeurism rather than espionage.
 - I also believe that historical research demonstrates that erotic art and sexuality were very open in Egypt. If this is so, then Joseph’s accusation would very easily fit into the cultural setting where he was when he made it.
 - Finally, as Hebrew men who feared and served the LORD (Yahweh), the accusation of sexual perversion would be much more insulting to them than accusing them of having intentions of military conquest.
 - In short, I find this newly suggested interpretation very compelling. At very least, it is tenable, and consequently, the passage does not argue against the adjusted definition of **ervah**.
 - Embracing this interpretation allows us to use a consistent definition of **ervah** and avoid acceptance of a definition which is unique to this passage in all of the OT.

- **When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some [*nakedness in active sexual expression*] in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce... (Deut. 24:1)**
 - When a man marries a woman, he would expect to see her naked. In Hebrew culture, he also had the right to expect her to be a virgin. This definition of *ervah* helps us make sense of this passage because it underscores the fact that what he's finding in her is not simply her nakedness, but rather the evidence that she had been sexually active before she married him.
 - The Translators used the word "indecent" because it is obvious that the man is finding something unacceptable. Using this new definition, we satisfy the context and even give clarity to what the "indecent" actually is. In other words, the new definition confirms the translators' understanding of *ervah* in this passage.
- **...so the king of Assyria will lead away the captives of Egypt and the exiles of Cush, young and old, naked and barefoot with buttocks uncovered, to the [*nakedness in active sexual expression*] of Egypt.**
 - As I pointed out previously, the word *ervah* is used here to describe a nation rather than a person. Since the natural meaning was clearly not applicable to a nation, the translators used the word "shame" based more upon the context than the Hebrew word itself. However, it is a departure in meaning from the word, *ervah*.
 - As I read this passage with the new definition in mind, I noted that since it describes a military conquest, the literal and metaphorical nakedness that was experienced by the Egyptian people was forced upon them. It follows then that *ervah* was imposed upon the nation by force.
 - In English, we use the word "rape" to describe forced sexual activity. Also, in English, we can use the word "rape" both literally and figuratively.
 - When I substitute the word "rape" for *ervah* in this passage, I read this: **"so the king of Assyria will lead away the captives of Egypt and the exiles of Cush, young and old, naked and barefoot with buttocks uncovered, to the rape of Egypt.**
 - I find this a very colorful metaphor that enriches the passage, giving it much more emotional impact than the word "shame" does.
 - Here again, I find that the definition that I've offered helps give clearer and deeper meaning and understanding to the passage.

This last one presents the strongest challenge to the definition that I suggested above, for it is obvious from the context that there is nothing sexual about its usage.

- **...and you shall have a spade among your tools, and it shall be when you sit down outside, you shall dig with it and shall turn to cover up your excrement. For the LORD thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp, to deliver thee, and to give up thine enemies before thee; therefore shall thy camp be holy: that he see no [*nakedness in active sexual expression*] thing in thee, and turn away from thee. (Deut. 23:13-14)**
 - This time, the word seems to be used in adjectival form. This may indicate that its meaning and usage could be slightly different than the noun form.

- Obviously, the insertion of the definition above does not work. But let me offer another related definition and discuss it:

...For the LORD thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp, to deliver thee, and to give up thine enemies before thee; therefore shall thy camp be holy: that he see no [nakedness in active bodily function] thing in thee, and turn away from thee.

 - To me, this now works. I have essentially substituted one bodily function (performed while naked) for another.
 - As we discussed previously, the use of *ervah* to reference that which is the *fruit* or product of the bodily function is also consistent with the meaning here.
 - This would suggest to me a valid expanded range of meaning for the word, *ervah*, but one that is still closely related to the definition we're working with.
- While this is the most difficult passage to reconcile with the definition that I've offered, I still believe that it gets us closer to a consistent meaning than any other single definition could.

Final Test

One final passage needs to be explored. I referenced it earlier and here it will serve as my closing test passage on the revised definition of *ervah*.

The passage is Exodus 28:42-43. It comes at the end of Exodus 28, and the entire chapter describes in surprising detail exactly how Aaron and his sons (see Exodus 28:1, 24) were to be dressed when they served in the tent of meeting or before the altar in the Holy Place.

42"You shall make for them linen breeches to cover their **bare flesh** ["nakedness" – *ervah*]; they shall reach from the loins even to the thighs.

43"They shall be on Aaron and on his sons when they enter the tent of meeting, or when they approach the altar to minister in the holy place, so that they do not incur guilt and die It shall be a statute forever to him and to his descendants after him. (Exo. 28:42-43 – NASB)

We've considered three different definitions of *ervah*:

- The natural meaning : being "**without clothing**"
- Candidate definition #1: "**shameful and sexually sinful nakedness.**"
- Candidate definition #2: "**nakedness in active sexual expression.**"

If we examine each of these three definitions within this passage we will find that only the final definition above leads us to a satisfactory understanding of the passage. We'll examine them one at a time.

Does the natural meaning (being without clothing) make sense?

- In verse 42 alone, it does make some sense, because the breeches would keep a man from being completely without clothing.

- However, the full context of the entire chapter describes in great detail all of the clothes which Aaron and his sons were required to wear in the tent of meeting and before the altar. They would be far from naked whenever they were there. The “breeches” must have been for something different than simply ensuring that Aaron didn’t approach the altar stark naked.
- Like underwear, the breeches were intended to cover the genitals. If we are to understand that the breeches’ primary function was to hide the genitals, then this would suggest that God may have an aversion to human nudity in general and the human genitals in particular.
 - Yet, how could this be when He personally crafted Adam from the dust – including his genitals? To this day, God blesses the conjugal use of those genitals by allowing humanity to participate with Him in bringing forth new life. Obedience to God’s pre-Fall command to “be fruitful and multiply” requires the active sexual use of the genitals for procreation. They were and are an essential part of God’s “very good” creation.
 - The God (who does not change) walked and talked with a naked Adam and Eve in the Garden before the Fall. There was no issue with God accepting Adam’s worship and fellowship while he was fully nude. If God did not reject Adam’s uncovered genitals in His presence in the Garden, God cannot be rejecting uncovered genitals in His presence in Exodus 28 simply because they were genitals. Consequently, there must be some other reason for His requirement that they be covered for Aaron and his sons. Until we can discern that reason, we do not understand this passage correctly.
 - We who are in Christ are all now a holy priesthood, and the “holy place” is now in our hearts, if this passage means that God will not accept our worship while our genitals are exposed, then we cannot pray or worship the Lord while in the shower or on the toilet.
 - If indeed God finds uncovered genitals sinful in His sight, then why is this command only given to “Aaron and his sons” (this is specifically stated in both the first and last verses of the chapter)? The Scriptural text does not require any of the specified clothing for anyone other than the Aaronic line within the tribe of Levi.
 - Hermeneutical principles require us to observe carefully to whom a command was given and not to wholesale apply the command to all people unless there is contextual basis to do so.
 - There are three clear observations which compel us to the conclusion that this literal requirement for breeches is not for us today:
 - This law is clearly within the context of ceremonial law. Under the New Covenant, we have no obligation to follow ceremonial law from the Old Covenant.
 - At the time this law was given, it did not apply to non-Jews. Therefore, it cannot presume that it applies to non-Jews today.
 - At the time this law was given, it didn’t even apply to all the Levites, let alone all of the Jews. It applied only to the house of Aaron.

Clearly, the use of the natural meaning of *ervah* does not fit the context of Exodus 28 and it raises reasonable questions and logical problems that are very difficult or impossible to answer or resolve.

Does Candidate Definition #1 (“shameful and sexually sinful nakedness.”) make sense?

- If the Aaronic priests were coming to serve before the altar and in the Holy Place with sexual sin in their lives, it would be ludicrous to suggest that God would be satisfied with their service in His presence provided they were wearing the breeches under their priestly robes.
- If we consider this idea in light of 1 Samuel 2:22-25, we see that the sexual immorality of Eli's sons while they were serving as Levitical (and presumably Aaronic) priests resulted in God's judgment upon them and they both were slain the same day. The breeches that they undoubtedly wore for their priestly duties could not protect them from God's wrath against their sexual sin.

There is no need to discuss this definition any further within the context of Exodus 28; it simply and utterly fails to provide a plausible explanation of God's requirement for the breeches.

Does Candidate Definition #2 ("*Nakedness in active sexual expression,*") make sense?

- At first consideration, the idea that there would be any "active sexual expression" to be covered while the priests were serving at the altar seems a little unlikely. Such a place would not seem to require a prohibition of sexual expression... but that initial reaction is more informed by our 21st century perspective than the cultural realities of the day when that requirement was given.
 - The Israelites were preparing to enter the Promised Land, a land occupied by the wicked Canaanites, whom God had judged and who were to be utterly destroyed. The Canaanites worshiped Baal who was a god of "fertility." Orgiastic worship was commonplace in the land the Israelites were about to enter.
 - God's word is clear that Canaanite worship practices were to have no place in the worship of Yahweh. The Israelites were not to worship Baal nor adopt orgiastic worship for the worship of the true God.
- Given the context of the day when the law as given for Aaron and his sons, God's requirement makes perfect sense. The genitals of the Priests before His altar were to be completely bound up, even under all the ornate priestly raiment; God wanted it to be visibly evident to His people and all nations that His worship was vastly different than that of the people who had previously occupied the land. There was to be no hint of "*active sexual expression*" in the House of the Lord or at His altar. Failure to abide by that requirement meant that they would "*incur guilt and die.*"
- We today might have real difficulty comprehending that this could be God's intended message to the people in requiring the breeches. But in like manner, we have difficulty comprehending how and why Israel's national history in the Bible is riddled with times that they actually *did* leave the worship of Yahweh to worship Baal. The omniscient God of Israel knew what His people were capable of doing and what they would do. This law, I believe, reflects that truth.
- This understanding of God's intent for giving the clothing requirements in Exodus 28 adequately answers the questions we bring to the text and it does not raise logical problems. It makes adequate sense within the cultural and religious context of the day.

Conclusion

Ervah, as it is used in the OT Scriptures, consistently carries the implication of nakedness in active bodily function, and in all but one case, that function is sexual.

- The sexual function implied by **ervah** is not always sinful or shameful; our sexuality is a God-given gift to us to fulfill our mandate to multiply.
- In every case, the immediate Scriptural context is sufficient to determine if the sexual expression represented by **ervah** is sinful or not.
- Because **ervah** connotes sexual activity, we cannot use the contextual condemnation of “nakedness” [**ervah**] within the pages of Scripture as a condemnation of simple non-sexual nakedness.

This revised definition has proven its validity. It allows us to understand the Scriptural meaning of **ervah** in each occurrence without resorting to divergent definitions in an attempt to make sense of its usage in any particular passage.

I have personally found that reading the Scriptures with this definition in mind has helped clarify and enrich my understanding of the passages where **ervah** appears.

This definition also helps us clarify that God’s perspective towards a person is *not* determined by the simple lack or presence of clothing. We are not commended to God by what we wear, nor are we unacceptable in His sight when we are unclothed.

Finally, the scope of Scriptural usage of **ervah** with the definition I’ve presented here underscores how much our sexual conduct matters to God. The active expression of our sexuality according to His design and will is much more important to Him than the amount of fabric we have draped on our bodies.

- Simple nudity (described by any term other than **ervah**) is never condemned in the Bible.
- The proper and godly expression of **ervah** (within marriage) is never condemned in the Bible.
- However, the improper expression of nakedness—that which uses or flaunts the body for immoral passions—is indeed shameful and sinful. The Bible makes this abundantly clear.

I pray that this paper and its contents will honor the Lord by its pursuit and presentation of truth. I pray also that it will support and promote true righteousness by repudiating false standards of righteousness so that they may be replaced with God’s true moral absolutes.