



"He jests at scars who never felt a wound."
—William Shakespeare

22-May-26

Tearing One's Clothes (Part One)

The Bible mentions individuals tearing or rending their clothes as a sign of [mourning](#), [repentance](#), distress, and rage. Depending on the translation, the Bible contains 48 to 50 occurrences of rending garments, including the actions of both individuals and groups. It is a profound metaphor, yet [this world](#) treats it mostly without the seriousness it deserves.

[Amos 4:1-11](#) describes such superficiality perfectly in a section following the "Cows of Bashan" passage of his book, but honest men know that it applies to us equally. Superficiality deals with a person's lack of seriousness, empathy, remorse, and repentance. Tearing one's clothes without really meaning it is a superficial act.

Israel treated God's warnings to repent with superficiality. Five times in this section, [God](#) says, "[I brought disaster on you;] yet you have not returned to me." For example, verse 11 says:

"[Y]ou were like a firebrand plucked from the burning;
Yet you have not returned to Me,"
Says the LORD.

A red-hot cattle brand is pulled from the fire before it completely melts. It is a vivid metaphor for God's people to consider, yet those He addresses are completely unrepentant. Thinking God's warnings apply to others, they do not take them seriously and show no remorse.

Traditionally, tearing one's clothes has been closely associated with self-humiliation or expressing humility. These days, to speak of "tearing your clothes" brings to mind images of professional wrestler Hulk Hogan, whose signature gesture was tearing his muscle shirt when working himself up about an opponent. Modern Western culture has little idea what tearing one's clothes means, much less knows what real humility is, so it treats the practice with flippancy and humility with disdain.

For example, many people consider buying and wearing torn jeans to be desirable, though they are a deliberate display of sloppiness and deterioration by their designers. Yves Saint Laurent's high-end, distressed jeans retail for \$1,350. Jeans with tears across the thighs make up a quarter of the new jeans market.

As for completely misunderstanding humility, social influencers frequently put on faux humility, purposely down-talking themselves. The term for it is "humble bragging." There is a whole class of bloggers whose goal is to garner clicks for posts, saying things like, "I finally upgraded to a Tesla after driving my old car for 18 months. I just couldn't take it anymore." Or, "Ugh, my cleaning service canceled today. Now I have to vacuum myself when I get home from Paris."

Such speech and behavior are rife with hypocrisy. A person can talk about his or her troubles while actually revealing arrogance. This parallels Jesus' Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector ([Luke 18:9-14](#)), in which the Pharisee states, "God, I thank you that I am not like this tax collector. I fast twice a week." He may well do that, but the punishment [Jesus](#) later describes is for his self-exaltation and disdain for the tax collector.

Biblically, tearing one's clothes is portrayed as an involuntary and spontaneous—not deliberate—act of grief, repentance, or shame. But quoting God, [Jeremiah 8:12](#) describes the people living just before the coming destruction, "They were not at all ashamed, nor did they know how

to blush." At best, modern people likewise consider the rending of garments to be like "wearing your heart on your sleeve," a disdainful aphorism.

Tearing one's clothing, as mentioned in the Bible, is still practiced in the twenty-first century. The premier example comes from Jewish culture, where it is a tradition called *kriah* and is well defined in *The Mishnah* and *The Talmud*. *Kriah* means literally "tearing one's clothing." Doing so is meant to be a striking expression of grief and anger at the loss of a loved one.

Of course, the Jews have stipulated how rending one's garments should be done. When mourning a parent, a person tears his shirt or blouse or jacket over the left breast. For all others, he tears his clothing over the right breast. One tears while standing up to signify facing the situation with strength. A rabbi will even start the tear with a knife or a pair of scissors.

On a practical note, should anyone consider performing this practice, women should wear a garment under the blouse or shirt to be torn, so that upon tearing it, she is still dressed modestly—or she may rebind it with a safety pin. This is no exaggeration. These instructions come directly from the Jewish Chabad Library.

However, I am not suggesting that any of us start doing this.

In this modern, psychologically driven era, it seems natural, even encouraged, to determine and even express what others may be feeling. But this modern process can turn out to be little more than projection without proof. However, tearing one's clothing is a tangible indicator, a witness, so to speak. What someone says, or an action he or she may take, speaks louder than supposed thoughts, feelings, and motives.

Thus, in historical accounts of this practice, we have descriptions of the outward sign of strong emotion. It has existed for millennia as a cultural phenomenon, being referenced in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* from ancient Mesopotamia, in which the main character rends his clothes and pulls out his hair in response to the death of his friend, Enkidu. Mesopotamian funerary reliefs from 3000 BC depict mourners with torn or disheveled clothing. The

Egyptian *Book of the Dead* describes mourners loosening or tearing their garments to express sorrow. Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* both narrate incidents of mourners spontaneously tearing their clothing.

So, when the practice appears in the Bible, it should be no surprise to us. We find its first biblical occurrence when Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, who do not like him very well: "But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him" ([Genesis 37:4](#)). The account continues, giving a lengthy description of the developing cause for their hatred. Later, in [Genesis 37:14](#), his father, Jacob, sends Joseph to see if it is well with his brothers and the flocks. When the brothers see him far off, they conspire to kill him.

But Reuben heard it, and he delivered him out of their hands, and said, "Let us not kill him." And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit which is in the wilderness, and do not lay a hand on him"—that he might deliver him out of their hands, and bring him back to his father. ([Genesis 37:21-22](#))

After eating a meal, the brothers sell Joseph to a caravan of Midianites headed toward Egypt, while Reuben's back was turned: "Then Reuben returned to the pit, and indeed Joseph was not in the pit; and he *tore his clothes*. And he returned to his brothers and said, "The lad is no more; and I, where shall I go?" ([Genesis 37:29-30](#); emphasis ours throughout). *The Amplified Bible* renders the last clause as, "Where shall I go to hide from my father?" It appears that Reuben expresses genuine remorse, albeit accompanied by an ample supply of self-pity.

A second occurrence happens after the brothers break the news to their father:

Then Jacob *tore his clothes*, put [sackcloth](#) on his waist, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and he said, "For I shall go down into the grave to my son in mourning." Thus his father wept for him. ([Genesis 37:34-35](#))

These occurrences help us recognize that the practice of tearing one's clothing is a deep and emotional outpouring of grief or other strong emotion.

In Part Two, we will see more examples and a significant detail about the practice in regard to the high priest.

- James C. Stoertz

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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Featured Audio Schedule

Friday Night Bible Study

The next Bible Study (Friday 22-May-26) will be **Who Was Herbert W. Armstrong?**, given by **John W. Ritenbaugh**. The Bible Study will be featured on the [CGG homepage](#) from **6:00 pm Friday** (EST) and all day Saturday.

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