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Apologies to Michal

For years I thought Michal was wrong to criticize her husband David for his uninhibited “worship” behavior when he led the Ark procession into Jerusalem. We are told that David “danced before the Lord with all his might” girded with a linen ephod (2 Sam 6:14) Michal looked out her window and saw King David “leaping and dancing before the Lord.” The sight caused Michal to despise her husband in her heart (2 Sam 6:16).

As David returned to his household, Michal came out to meet him. Obviously she was concerned about what she had witnessed. She greeted her husband with words oozing with sarcasm: “How glorious was the king of Israel today, who uncovered himself in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovers himself.” In the Hebrew text there is a triple emphasis on David’s disrobing. There is no indication that the term is used in the figurative sense of “showing off” as proposed by some. Apparently he removed his royal robe (1 Chron 15:27) to dance about in a medium length ephod (2 Sam 6:14) which he must have been wearing under his robe. This left the king’s arms and legs exposed.

David responded to his wife with a vicious verbal barrage: “God chose me over your father and all his house to be prince in Israel. Therefore will I play before the Lord. And I will be yet more vile than this.” In other words, David told his wife that his public worship practices were off-limits to spousal criticism.

The text then tells us that Michal had no child unto the day of her death. Does this mean that she was being punished for criticizing her husband’s worship antics?

Worship leaders love to reference this text. Songs are sung celebrating David’s uninhibited and undignified worship. David’s behavior is urged on Christian assemblies. The more hand waving and gyrating there is the more successful the worship leader has been in getting the Spirit to “move” among us. We are urged to ignore everyone else in the assembly—to let ourselves go and “perform” our worship for God who is our audience of one.

But what if Michal was right? That thought struck me as I read this passage for the umpteenth time. The very thought—previously unthinkable—caused me to look at this passage in a new light.

First, I observe that the narrator does not condemn the criticism of Michal. True, the text says that Michal had no child to the day of her death. But the text does not say that God shut up her womb. Her barrenness may have been caused by David’s antipathy rather than divine judgment.

Second, a spouse certainly has a right to express criticism of her husband’s public behavior. What makes a spouse uncomfortable should be “off limits” even in worship. There is something about being up in front that goes to the head of a worship leader. He (or she) may get “carried away,” especially if there is any hint of support from the audience. Ego-inflation needs to be punctured. A good spouse will take care of that.

Third, so far as I can tell, Michal's criticism was administered privately. One of the Ten Commandments for marriage is "Thou shalt not "put down" thy spouse in public."

Fourth, it was not the religious dancing that Michal criticized, but the partial disrobing. She makes a special point that this was done in mixed company. Behaviors that otherwise might not be inappropriate in single-sex crowds become inappropriate when members of the opposite sex are present.

Fifth, there is no record in Scripture that David ever gave a repeat performance. Though he clearly resented his wife's criticism, he must have realized that she was right. For a king to prance around with bare legs exposed was not appropriate.

Sixth, perhaps David should have learned something from the law that prohibited priests from uncovering even their ankles while officiating in sacrificial services (Exod 20:26). Immediately before and immediately after the "David danced" verse we are told that he led in a sacrificial service. David had not been careful in following God's law about moving the ark earlier in the chapter. Perhaps in his second attempt to move the ark he was violating a principle, if not a precept, about public worship of the Lord.

Seventh, David's response to Michal's criticism seems disproportionate and "over the top." It looks like the kind of response that one often makes when he doesn't want to admit that his spouse is right in her criticism.

Eighth, the parallel account in Chronicles does not contain Michal's criticism of David, nor his response to her criticism. Chronicles tends to omit any mention of David's faults and sins (his adultery with Bathsheba, for example). Therefore, by implication Chronicles may be indicating that David was in the wrong in the extreme to which he went in his public display of enthusiasm for the Lord.

Ninth, what one does in private worship is between that individual and the Lord. In public worship, however, consideration must be given to how others will view the behavior. Surely Paul's admonitions to the Corinthians establish this principle. A behavior that I do not do routinely in my private worship has no place in the public assembly. Otherwise, I'm just "showing off." Even some of my private worship behaviors are best kept private.

My guess is that David did not routinely prance around in his worship. On this occasion he was "revved" up by the "praise band" that accompanied the procession (1 Chron 15:27f). Likewise I suspect that a good bit of what we witness in the public assembly these days is music-generated, not Holy Spirit inspired. Loud, sensuous music will produce outlandish behavior, even in a church assembly.

So maybe Michal was an Episcopalian. Maybe she did despise any display of enthusiasm for the things of God. On the other hand, maybe David was wrong to partially disrobe and carry on as he did in the name of worship.

I think I have been unfair to Michal all these years. I offer her my public apology.