Christianity, Culture, and Body Piercings: Dress as an Expression of Identity

Body piercings have a long and controversial history. Or do they? In my experience, evangelical Christian parents traditionally tend to hold reservations concerning tattoos and piercings. I grew up in a conservative Christian home that interpreted Leviticus 19:28 as meaning that tattoos were a sin. The Christian circles I was in always seemed more tolerating of piercings than tattoos, but overall both were generally viewed negatively. As I grew older, I began to question why tattoos and piercings are such a taboo topic within Christianity. This paper seeks to examine key instances where piercings are mentioned in the Old Testament. While piercings are unquestionably not contingent to Christian salvation, their omission in modern Biblical depictions of characters exemplifies on a microlevel the influence culture can wield over the church's interpretation of the Bible. The lasting effects of the Europeanization of Christianity are visually evident in prevalent portrayals of Jesus as white. Does the omission of piercings coincide with the whitewashing of Christianity? The study of dress in relation to identity is becoming increasingly crucial in postmodern studies, but the connection to Christianity seems relatively unexplored by recent scholars. This paper will follow the evolution of attitudes towards piercings by examining their role in different cultures throughout history, ending with the countercultural movement and modern Christianity. The human body can reveal much, not only about historical cultures, but also about modern culture and its power to shape the modern church.

HISTORY OF PIERCINGS

Pre-Biblical times contain many examples of piercings. Ancient African and tribal cultures feared that devils would enter through the openings in their ears; therefore, they pierced their ears with metal to ward the devils off (Kuroski). Evidence of elaborate piercing of the face

and torso on men and women has been found in Ecuadorian artifacts dating 500 B.C. to 500 A.D. (Schildkrout 326). Sailors would pierce one ear so that if they died at sea and their body washed up, the gold hoop would pay for a Christian funeral. Roman soldiers (even Julius Caesar) sported pierced nipples as a sign of virility ("History of Body Piercing"). Egyptian women wore nose rings, and only pharaohs were allowed to have their navels pierced ("History of Body Piercing"). It is still common in cultures in North Africa and the Middle East for the bride to be gifted with a nose ring before her wedding—the size of the ring being synonymous with the wealth of the family. The nose piercing practice was brought to India by Moghul emperors in the 1500s. Northern India traditionally pierces the left nostril, which is associated with female reproductive organs, supposedly reducing the pain of menstruation and birth (Kuroski). In Southern India, the right nostril is preferred ("History of Nostril Piercing"). During the Renaissance era, most male nobility had at least one ear pierced to show off their wealth ("History of Body Piercing"). To this day, in many Latin American, Indian, African, and Middle Eastern cultures, ear piercing is not a choice but a given.

The body modifications of tattoos and piercings are multivocal in the Bible. The Old Testament highly regulated marks made on the body, which can make it difficult to decipher the exact Biblical attitude toward piercings. Nili Fox reveals that gold rings designed for pierced ears and noses have been found through archaeology, such as the 7th-6th century ones discovered in a Jerusalem tomb at Ketef Hinnom. Such physical evidence supports the written evidence in the Bible and bolsters the notion of their popularity during those times (96). Instances in the Bible where body incision is mentioned in a negative light include Leviticus 19:28, masters physically marking their slaves' legal status, and the Assyrian punishment of enemies. Positive mentions of

piercings are found under the subjects of circumcision, the mark of God, bridal gifts, and decorative uses. Anything outside of these practices was highly restricted.

Body modification is described in a specifically negative way in at least three instances. The explicit verse that bans tattooing is Leviticus 19:28 (ESV): "You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD." Many nearby people groups would mark themselves for pagan gods and tattoo their slaves for identification. Jacobs and Fox explain that neo-Babylonian temple officials dedicated their bodies with permanent marks of their deities. The Israelites, exclusive to Yhwh, were not allowed to bear marks of foreign gods (Libermann 11). To physically reflect their sacredness, God desired His people to look different than those around them. Fox notes how tattoos also commonly functioned as a sign of slavery (98). In fact, Huehnergard and Liebowitz suggest that Leviticus 19:28 prohibits tattooing not because of its connection with mourning the dead, "but because tattooing was commonly used to mark slaves in the ancient Near East" (Liebermann 11). This means that while slaves in neighboring nations were tattooed to display their status, God purposefully commanded that Israelite slaves should have pierced ears, thus visually setting apart even those lowest in the social hierarchy from other countries. Fox also conjectures that this law implies that other mentions of piercings in the Old Testament may be more literal than figurative (98). Many Christians take Leviticus out of context, claiming the Bible bans tattooing in modernity. When they do this, however, they ignore the verses in the very same chapter that also command people to not wear clothing of two different kinds of material or cut their hair. Born-again, modern Christians are not subject to the Levitical law found in the Old Testament.

Piercings are also associated with slave identification and punishment. Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 15 describe the laws surrounding Hebrew slaves and their masters. According to

law, masters were required to free their slaves after six years of service, however, if a slave desired to stay with his or her master, God commanded that the master bring the slave to the doorpost of the house, "take an awl, and put it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your slave forever. And to your female slave you shall do the same" (Deuteronomy 15:17 ESV). Nili Fox describes this legal status mark as a "permanent deprecatory symbol" (96). While the act could be viewed negatively, the piercing at its base level visually identifies the slave to his or her community. Interestingly, this piercing practice is one of the first times in history that piercing is not gendered. In the same way that tattoos have long conveyed a "broad range of cultural information" (89), the piercing of slaves' ears is just one example of piercings communicating status. In addition to the slave's ear context, the nearby Assyrians had a practice of dragging enemy rulers by a nose hook and bit. An oracle in Isaiah predicts that God will punish one of Israel's enemies in this manner (Fox 96). The same exact wording is repeated in 2 Kings 19:28 and Isaiah 37:29 (ESV): "Because you have raged against me and your complacency has come to my ears, I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth." Legal practices surrounding slaves and forms of punishment illuminate more negative aspects of piercings in the Old Testament. While these rules would be restrictive, inappropriate, and abusive in modern society, the slave piercing practice established God's intention for order and identity at that specific time.

Body incision can be organized under the categories of circumcision, the mark of God, bridal gifts, and decorative uses. In Genesis 17:9-14, Yahweh commands Abraham to circumcise every male in his household to symbolize covenant with Him. Circumcision was such a fundamental tradition in Judaic culture that the Bible uses circumcision as a metaphor when talking about obedience to Yahweh. Jeremiah 4:4 (ESV) states, "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem."

Genesis 4:15 describes God marking Cain as a warning to those who might try to kill him. In Ezekiel 9:4, God tells Ezekiel to put the mark of God on the forehead of men. In Isaiah 44, the marking of people's hands is mentioned as a demonstration that they belong to the Lord. A few chapters later in Isaiah 49:16, God engraves a symbol of Jerusalem on his palms to prove He has not abandoned His people, mimicking the events of chapter forty-four. Fox notes that in a time when pagan nations would tattoo themselves for their deities, the symbolism and significance of God marking Himself for his chosen people would not have been lost on the Judean people (98). The symbolism is interesting whether these verses are interpreted literally or figuratively.

One does not have to look far into the Bible to find the first official, historical account of nose piercings, as it occurs in Genesis when Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac. When the servant meets Rebekah, he offers her "a gold ring weighing a half shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels" (Genesis 24:22 ESV). Later, he tells Abraham how he "put the ring on her nose" (Genesis 24:47). Fox explains that during this time, nose rings were in fashion for females, representing wealth and status. Gifts of jewelry from the wealthy groom to the bride and her family provided financial security and acted as physical signs of the bride's transition to a new stage of life (Liebermann 9). Jewelry was a sign of high social status; wealthy women wore "headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets; the signet rings and nose rings" (Isaiah 3:18-21 ESV). If readers do not know the context of verses mentioning specific jewelry—such as the fact that nose rings were given to and worn by a woman about to be married—they will miss out on important cultural details.

Two examples of melting jewelry in the Bible reveal that gold earrings were a commonly worn item of jewelry. In Exodus, in order to make a golden calf to worship, Aaron commands the people to "'Break off the golden earrings, which *are* in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and

of your daughters, and bring *them* unto me'" (Exodus 32:2 ESV). This passage reveals two things about earrings. For one, while nose rings were worn by women, men and women alike wore earrings. Secondly, Fox notes that out of all jewelry, earrings specifically seem to hold religious significance (96). After all, the Israelites certainly possessed other jewelry, such as necklaces and bracelets. Later on in Judges, in order to "fashion an ephod cult object" (Fox 96), Gideon requests that his men "'give me an earring from your share of the plunder.' (It was the custom of the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings)" (Judges 8:24-27 NIV). This verse illuminates the fact that pierced ears were also common in other cultures outside of Israel. Records of the melting of gold earrings sheds more light on who and how many wore earrings in Biblical times.

Jewelry is mentioned in the book of Ezekiel when God is describing the gifts He gave His bride, Jerusalem. However, the jewelry listed changes with the translation. The New American Standard Bible, reputed to be the most literal translation, reads, "I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your hands and a necklace around your neck. I also put a ring in your nostril, earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head" (Ezekiel 16:11-12 NASB). Notedly, the King James Version replaces a nose ring with "a jewel on thy forehead" (Ezekiel 16:11 KJV). Interestingly, the English Standard and New Living Translation, both more modern translations, mention nose rings and earrings. In comparison, the Message translation, a paraphrase of the Bible in contemporary English published in 2013, omits the nose ring detail: "I adorned you with jewelry: I placed bracelets on your wrists, fitted you out with a necklace, emerald rings, sapphire earrings, and a diamond tiara" (16:8-14 MSG). The difference in the wording demonstrates how translators must convey symbolism meaningful to their specific audience. In modern Western culture, a nose ring would not be the first thing that comes to mind as part of a bride's wedding

jewelry. However, in removing evidence of historical jewelry customs from the English translations, the practice of piercing is further alienated from Western Christianity.

CULTURE'S INFLUENCE ON THE CHURCH

It is interesting that the detail of piercings is generally left out of depictions of Biblical characters, illustrating how slowly modern man is catching up in accurately portraying the Bible. Searching "images of Jesus" online summons a multitude of paintings of a white Jesus. It is required to search "realistic images of Jesus" in order for pictures of Jesus as Middle Eastern to pop up. Conversely, when either "images of Mary the mother of Jesus" or "realistic images of Mary the mother of Jesus," is searched, the image of a European, childlike girl dominates the screen with few exceptions. These searches reveal how the inaccurate ethnic portrayal of Biblical figures is still prevalent in modern society. If such a major fallacy is still so pervasive, what other details are being consciously or unconsciously omitted from the larger narrative? While knowing about the jewelry of Biblical figures is not imperative to the Gospel, it still should be recognized that human bodies are the site of expression of identity and culture. Changing Biblical characters' skin color and style of dress reveals how different cultures value different things. The topic of piercings exemplifies how much culture can influence the church. One's cultural upbringing and translation of the Bible influences how they view Christianity. Being aware of the narrative that one subscribes to, even within religion, is important.

Body markings are extremely volatile; their meaning changes from one period to the next (Schildkrout 325). Unsurprisingly, piercings and tattoos were virtually nonexistent in America's first colonies. Protestantism in the New World reinforced the idea that body markings imply savagery by declaring the unmarked body the pure, natural state of God's image (324). Puritans of the time considered piercings a sin. Schildkrout summarizes the dichotomy of the time: "Body

art . . . became a way of describing the exotic uncivilized Other in comparison to the ideal civilized and Christian European" (324). Later on, with the Western countercultural movement beginning in the 1960s, hippies and World War II soldiers brought nose piercing back from their travels to India, flaunting them as a symbol of nonconformity (Kuroski). This direct engagement with non-Western cultures also resulted in the tattoo renaissance (Schildkrout 329). By the turn of the millennium, tattooing became disassociated from its low-class origins of "bikers, seamen, and carnival performers" (327). However, because "modern primitives" were reviving tribal culture, tattoos were simultaneously reinforced as images of primitivism (327). Tattoos slowly transitioned from seedy associations to being identified as part of youth culture. Various social movements—such as women's liberation, punk, and Goth—used tattooing and piercings to affirm identity. More specifically, tattoos and piercings symbolized the rebellion of youth culture against social norms. Is this rebellious attitude what conservative, traditional parents think of when they see tattoos and piercings? This continued prejudice, or hesitancy, toward body modification demonstrates the power of internalized cultural attitudes over the interpretation of the Bible.

I believe that adaptations, illustrations, and translations of history that omit the detail of body piercings indicate how much our perception of history is based on the fallible lens of others. Inaccurate portrayal of dress (including piercings) goes hand-in-hand with the inaccurate portrayal of Biblical characters' ethnicities. The different jewelry mentioned in various Biblical translations demonstrates the complexities of translation, especially with an ancient religious document such as the Bible. Daniel Rosenblatt states, "In the context of the death of global frontiers . . . the territory of the last remaining underdeveloped source of first-hand experience [is] *the human body*" (287). Style of dress provides a multitude of information to the observer

about the wearer's culture. Stripping away customary cultural jewelry as a result of whitewashing denies the observer the full story of life in the Old Testament.

POSTMODERN STUDY OF DRESS

Tattoos convey a "broad range of cultural information" (Fox 89); the practice connects the individual to humanity (Rosenblatt 303). I believe piercings engage with the same ideas. Megan Cifarelli explains that the academic study of dress began as a "quasi-scientific" effort in the Enlightenment. The study of dress, a relatively young discipline, started gaining traction in the 1980s, and is contributed to by anthropology, sociology, cultural, and religious studies. While "there is temptation to trivialize the significance of the emergence and development of dress" (Cifarelli 2), Enid Schildkrout asserts that the study has truly taken off in postmodern culture (319). Dress is now seen as a valuable academic field because the "body is the site of identity expression, power relations, and experience of the world" **(**Liebermann 3). The legal regulations of piercing slaves' ears to visually indicate their identity encapsulates this idea perfectly. The pierced ear immediately identified the person as a slave who committed to staying with his or her master indefinitely. Knowledge about their financial state and experience in the world could likely be easily inferred as well. According to Schildkrout, archaeologists and historians are "rewriting the history of the body using evidence from newly discovered ancient bodies, artworks, and texts" (319). The body offers valuable context clues to written historical records. Cifarelli propounds that along with language, "dress has contributed to the making of humankind itself, and for as long as people have been people dress has played a role in the fashioning of identities and the constitution and communication of personhood" (2). Learning more about the dress of Old Testament individuals provides a more well-rounded understanding of the Bible's history and the context of verses regarding piercings.

Schildkrout furthers modern discussion of the significance of body modification by considering the body as a canvas. Bodies can be a canvas for political power, or the means for an individual to express agency in the relationship between their body and society (323). Tattoos, scars, and branding can and have been imposed by authorities throughout history as a symbol of denying personhood (323). On the flip side, modification can also be an individual's way of asserting agency (rebelling) against authorities or society as a whole, highlighting individuality. In the Old Testament, pierced Israelite bodies exhibit God's assertion of possession, affirming their personhood as His children. Contrarily, piercing during the counterculture movement often was an expression of rebellion against one's parents and social norms. While disobeying one's parents is a Biblical sin, piercing as an art form is not. In the age of postmodernism, Biblical and countercultural connotations around the meaning of piercings should not be used to dictate one negative narrative. By being aware of the art form's history, one can analyze the complexities of the topic and make an informed decision on this subtopic to the style of dress.

Some Western Christian circles may always condemn piercings and tattoos, others may forever frown upon them, and still others will continue to welcome them enthusiastically. The myriad of conflicting perspectives on such a niche topic within cultural dress illustrates the paradox of culture's effect on individual beliefs and practices. The Bible does not prohibit piercings; rather, it demonstrates the widespread practice of them. The varying interpretations of the Bible's stance on body modification is indicative of how complex it is to read the Bible as a work in translation. And Scriptures only demonstrate a small part of the elaborate history of piercings. In the Old Testament alone, body modification is involved with the legal status of slaves, punishment of enemies, circumcision, the mark of God, bridal gifts, and decorative uses. Tracing the larger history reveals other superstitious, financial, bridal, legal, cosmetic, and

familial reasons for piercings. The Biblical narrative starkly opposes the conceptualization that took root in the founding of the New World—the idea of tattooed and pierced bodies as "other." Representation of Biblical characters as white contributes to the idea that the natural tendency for humans is to engage with and tell stories about people who look like them. Increasing emphasis on accurate portrayal of Biblical skin color is a step in the right direction: adding the study of how dress and jewelry relates to social and individual identity can only enhance the conversation. Studying the broad range of symbolism with piercings showcases that negative or condemning attitudes toward the topic likely arise from shifting cultural conceptions rather than religious justifications. For the individual whose American culture does not include piercings in traditional customs (as is the case in Eastern cultures), and for the Christian who is not bound to Old Testament law, postmodernity presents an opportunity to embrace piercing as an art form and express individuality as God's unique creation.

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