



*ADVANCING THE
CHRISTIAN TRADITION
IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM*

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FILM & MUSIC REVIEWS

BREASTFEEDING BABY JESUS

Monte E. Wilson

As the chairman of the African American Self-Help Foundation, I have the opportunity quite frequently to travel in Africa. As much of our work is far outside the larger cities, I am often working in small villages. One of the things that took some time getting used to was the nudity that is often displayed—quite freely. It is not uncommon, for example, to see children running around naked, young mothers openly breastfeeding their children, or women who are naked from the waist up. For a Westerner, such displays of nudity are shocking. To some Christians, the nudity is evidence of . . . *im-mo-rality*.

The fact is, once you leave the “civilized” cities of Africa (or, for that matter, Asia as well), you find people who have a different view of nudity. And while we may be tempted to think this means that such people are immoral or unchaste, if we would take the time to get to know them, we would discover that our assumptions are wrong. Simply because they see various degrees of nudity as a normal part of life does not mean that they view immorality as “normal.”

For we civilized and Christianized Americans, the subject of nudity is something that causes us discomfort and embarrassment. I remember on one occasion, while visiting the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia, overhearing a minister commenting on Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of Mother Mary breastfeeding the Christ-child (*Litta Madonna*) and calling it “inappropriate.” “Frankly,” I replied, “I find your comment inappropriate.” He didn’t stick

around for my art history lesson.

Looking back on this exchange, I should have been far more understanding. I remember my response when, as a young boy, I first saw a copy of the painting of *The Rape of Lucretia* (Lucas Cranach The Elder, 1472–1553). I had pretty much the same response as this minister. “Good grief! Is rape a legitimate subject matter for art? What is it with these European artists and naked women?”

Lucretia was a virtuous woman. Tragically, for her, the Roman king who saw any woman as his rightful property was not virtuous. When he approached Lucretia and was shunned, he raped her. She then went to the center of the town fully naked, cried out for justice, and killed herself. By this one desperate act she inspired the people to overthrow the crown and establish a republic. Death was preferable to dishonor and servitude.

As the early Reformers were facing exactly this sort of predicament, they believed the rape and subsequent suicide were important and worthy of depicting in various forms of art. (Martin Luther had particular affinity for this painting.) This was true not only of *Lucretia* but of other “naked” women as well. For artists such as Cranach, their art was a courageous commentary on contemporary social, political, and theological debates.

Cranach’s *Lucretia*, as well as paintings of nudes by Rembrandt, Durer, and other artists of these times, are not pornography. They are pictures of virtue and depravity, metaphors of life as it was being lived out in their times.

Which brings us back to breastfeeding baby Jesus.

What’s the deal with all these artists painting the Christ-child being fed . . . from an exposed breast? The deal is that Jesus and Mary are not otherworldly creatures—they are humans, and they are doing what normal humans do. Jesus was not a god who dropped out of the heavens fully grown, but, as a human, came into the world just as all humans since Adam and Eve have come into the world. Okay, there was one notable difference—Jesus was born of a virgin—but you get my point.

It intrigues me that while Eastern Orthodoxy places great emphasis on the incarnation, its icons of the Christ-child almost solely depict the divinity of Jesus. You are hard pressed to get a

sense from their art that Jesus is human. On the other hand, Leonardo, along with other Western artists, is making a clear theological statement: Jesus is both fully God and fully man.

So, the question is not “What’s the deal with all these artists painting the Christ-child being fed from an exposed breast?” The real question is, why are so many Christians so uncomfortable with their bodies and their humanity?

AUTHOR

Dr. Monte E. Wilson is president of Global Impact, editor of *Classical Christianity*, and a speaker and writer who lives in Alpharetta, Georgia. He is an ordained minister in the Reformed Episcopal Church and travels widely. His postal address is: P.O. Box 22, Alpharetta, GA 30009, and his web site can be found at <http://aashf.org/>.