

HEAD COVERINGS, VEILS AND HAIR

By Bill Paul

I. The Scripture passage discussed:

The *only* passage of New Testament Scripture which deals with this subject is found in I Corinthians 11:3-16.

[Other passages mentioning veils: Veil on Moses' face, II Cor. 3:13-16; Veil (curtain) of the tabernacle, Heb. 6:19; 9:3; 10:20; The Gospel veiled, II Cor. 4:3].

[Other passages mentioning hair on women: Long enough for using as a towel: Luke 7:38, 44; John 11:2; Long enough to be "braided" (I Tim. 2:9), or "plaited" (I Pet. 3:3); Regarded as a characteristic of women: Rev. 9:8; "The women wore long hair" (Hinds, p. 133); "The long 'hair' of the spirit-beings described as locusts in Rev. 9:8 is perhaps indicative of their subjection to their satanic master..." Vine, p. 287; "Long hair; not such as men commonly wear, but such as women wear." Barnes, p. 216].

II. Clarifying terms from the original Greek:

Some confusion results from the use of several Greek words in this passage, which are variously translated "covered," and "veiled." Below are the interlinear portions of the Greek and literal English taken from "*The New Greek English Interlinear New Testament*, by Robert K. Brown, Philip W. Comfort, translators and J.D. Douglas, editor (Tyndale)

Verse 4 "6 Jn 6,N 8CEH ŠPT<"
down over [his] head having [anything]

Translations:

"having *his* head covered" KJV
"having his head covered" ASV
"with his head covered" NIV
"who has *something* on his head" NASB
"with something on his head" NRSV
"having something down from his head" Lenski
"having (something) down the head" Vine
"down over the head, on the head" Souter

Verse 5 "t6"J 6 8BBJÄ J 6,N 8 "
uncovered with the [her] head

Translations:

"with her head uncovered" KJV
"with her head unveiled" ASV
"with her head uncovered" NIV
"who has her head uncovered" NASB
"with her head unveiled" NRSV

Verse 6 " ° 6 J 6 8bBJ, J 4" (Verse 6-7 are only NT use of this word)

is not covered

Translations:

“be not covered” KJV
“is not veiled” ASV
“does not cover her head” NIV
“does not cover her head” NASB
“will not veil herself” NRSV

Verse 6 “6 J 6 8,BJ8F2T”
let her be covered

Translations:

“let her be covered” KJV
“let her be veiled” ASV
“she should cover her head” NIV
“let her cover her head” NASB
“she should wear a veil” NRSV

Verse 7 “@06 @N,<8,4 6 J 6 8bBJ,F2 4 J<< 6,N 8 <<”
ought not to be covered on the head

Translations:

“ought not to cover *his* head” KJV
“ought not to have his head veiled” ASV
“ought not to cover his head” NIV
“ought not to have his head covered” NASB
“ought not to have his head veiled” NRSV

Verse 13 “t6 J 6V8LBJ@<”
uncovered

Translations:

“uncovered” KJV
“unveiled” ASV
“with her head uncovered” NIV
“*with head* uncovered” NASB
“with her head unveiled” NRSV

Verses 14-15 “6@s”
wears long hair

Translations:

“have long hair” KJV
“have long hair” ASV
“has long hair” NIV
“has long hair” NASB
“wears (has) long hair” NRSV

Verse 15 “™ 6@:0 t<Ji B,D4\$@8 <@L *X*@J 4 [°J]”
the long hair instead of a covering has been given to her

Translations:

“*her* hair is given to her for a covering” KJV

“her hair is given her for a covering” ASV

“long hair is given to her as a covering” NIV

“her hair is given to her for a covering” NASB

“her hair is given to her for a covering” NRSV

III. Some Keys Thoughts for Understanding the Passage:

Verse 4 refers to “something down over the head” (“6 J6 6,NV8CEH †PT<”). This implies something “hanging” down, without specifying exactly what it is. (See next verse)

Verses 5 refers to being “uncovered” or “unveiled” (uses negative form of “6 J 6 8bBJT” which Ethelbert W. Bullinger says means, “to cover *as with a veil that hangs down*” page 193). We are still not told what this “covering” or “veil” that hangs down from the head is.

Verses 5, 6, 14-15 then speak of “hair” in a way that conveys the idea of short hair on men and long hair on women. Could this be the “covering” under discussion?

Verse 15 then uses *an entirely different word* for “covering” (B,D4\$@8 <@0), a word which means “a wrapper, mantle” (Souter); “a mantle” (Nash); “a mantle, veil, covering, vesture” (Strong 4018); “dress, clothes, raiment, a veil, covering, wrapper” (Grove). (See Heb. 1:12)

Verse 15. Whatever “covering” was meant from verses 4-14 (whether a cloth mantle or hair), this verse specifically makes (long) hair the proper and adequate covering for women.

“For her long hair instead of a veil hath been given to her” (Rotherham, 1897)

“Because her hair has been given to her as a natural head-covering” (Bruce)

“Her hair is God’s gift to her, a natural veil” (A.S. Way)

“For her hair was given her instead of a veil” (Wesley)

“Long hair has been given to her to take the place of a veil” (Noli)

“Because her hair has been given to her instead of a veil” (Wilson)

“Because her hair has been given to her to take the place of a veil” (Knox)

“For the long hair is given (to her) in lieu of a veil” (Darby)

“Because the hair instead of a covering hath been given to her” (Young)

“Because her hair has been given her instead of a veil” (Montgomery)

IV. A Suggested Translation:

“Every man who prays or prophesies with long hair dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with no covering (of hair) on her head dishonors her head---she is just like one of the ‘shorn women.’ If a woman has no covering, let her be for now with short hair, but since it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair shorn or shaved, she should grow it again. A man ought not to have long hair.” [This is the marginal reading of verses 4-7 in the NIV].

V. A Suggested Paraphrase and Commentary [I Corinthians 11:3-16]:BP

[3] Now I want you to realize that the head of (i.e., the one with authority over) every man is Christ, and the head of (i.e., having authority over) the woman (or wife) is man, and the head of (i.e., with authority over) Christ is God. [4] Every man who prays or prophesies (in a meeting with others present, since prophecy is to benefit others) with his (physical) head covered (with some kind of covering, probably hair, verse 14) dishonors (i.e., shows disrespect to) his head, (i.e., Christ, see verse 3). [5] And every woman (or wife) who prays or prophesies (in a meeting, see verse 4) with her (physical) head uncovered (i.e., possibly with some kind of shawl or veil, or more probably with sufficiently long hair to distinguish her from a man) dishonors (i.e., shows disrespect to) her head (the man, or her husband). It (i.e., appearing without some kind of veil, or probably with very short hair) is just as though (i.e., just as bad as if) her (physical) head were shaved (signifying she had been sexually insubordinate to her husband. See next verse). [6] If a woman (wife) does not cover her (physical) head (with some kind of veil, or probably sufficiently long hair to indicate her subordination to her husband) she should (i.e., she might as well) have her hair cut off (i.e., short enough to indicate she was an adulteress, thereby displaying her insubordination to her husband); and if it is a disgrace for a woman (wife) to have her hair cut or shaved off (showing she was at least suspected of being an adulteress. See Num. 5:11-18 and various commentaries) she should cover her (physical) head (with some kind of veil, or sufficiently long hair to verify that she was in proper subjection). [7] A man ought not to cover his (physical) head (with some kind of veil, or probably long hair. See verse 14) since he is the image and glory of God (as the first created being, given authority over all other creatures, see Gen. 1:26-27, under God, his head, verse 3); but the woman (wife) is the glory of man (created from and for him. Gen. 2:18-23). [8] For man did not come from woman (since he was created directly by God) but woman came from man (i.e., when Eve was formed from Adam's rib, Gen. 2:21-22). [9] Neither was man created for woman (since Adam was here first) but woman was created for man (i.e., to be his helper, Gen. 2:18). [10] For this reason (i.e., the order of creation was man first, woman second. See I Tim. 2:13) and because of the angels (who observe the affairs of people on earth, I Cor. 4:9; Heb. 1:13-14, and are apparently pleased or displeased as they view man's subjection to God's plan, Luke 15:10) the woman ought to have a sign of authority (i.e., some kind of veil, or probably long hair, to signify her subjection) on her (physical) head. [11] In the Lord (i.e., as fellow-Christians. See Gal. 3:28) however, woman is not independent of man (as if needing no help, support or companionship from him) nor is man independent of woman (as if needing no help, support or companionship from him). [12] For as woman came from man (See verse 8), so also man is born from woman. But everything comes from God (since all are created by Him and are subject to Him). [13] Judge for yourselves (i.e., see the reasonableness of the argument): Is it proper for a woman to pray to God (in a meeting among others) with her (physical) head uncovered (by some kind of veil, or probably sufficiently long hair, as an indication of her subjection to man)? [14] Does not the very nature of things (physiologically, socially, occupationally) teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him (because of suggesting a reversal of roles and thus effeminacy), [15] but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory (enhancing her natural beauty, femininity and womanly role in life)? For long hair is (now) given to her (by God, as both a physiological consequence of her being female and by a Scriptural decree) as a covering (i.e., in place of the cloth shawl or veil, as the word "covering" actually means here, as a symbol of her subordination to her husband). [16] But, if anyone (in the congregation there) wants to be contentious about this (i.e., the subject of proper

submission and its visible symbols) we (apostles) have no other practice (than the one just described)---nor do the (rest of the) churches of God (who have received this teaching).)

VI. Some Conclusions:

1. There is some question about whether or not women in the early church wore cloth veils (“Drawings in the catacombs do not bear out the assumption that Christian women wore veils at services in the early church.”) Coffman on I Corinthians, p. 166
2. It appears that the common practice in NT times was for men to have short hair and women longer hair. (“Wearing long hair was contrary to the custom both of the Hebrews and Greeks...to a woman, however, in all ages and countries, long hair has been considered an ornament.” “An Exposition of...Corinthians” Hodge, p. 213).
3. There are strong arguments to support the idea that Paul was teaching Christian women that their long hair was a *sufficient* emblem of their subordination to their husbands. Verse 15. (See James Burton Coffman, Commentary on I Corinthians, pages 165-179).
4. The symbols of subordination used in Palestine and Greece in the first century church do *not* convey the *same things* in the 21st century church of America. No one in our society views the lack of a woman wearing a cloth covering or even wearing her hair short as necessarily indicating insubordination to her husband or sexual unfaithfulness to him on her part.
5. This passage (I Cor. 11:3-16), being the only one treating the subject in the New Testament, is sufficiently *obscure* and so widely *controversial* that no dogmatic teaching should be given which attempts to establish a uniform practice for all women in the church today.
6. In view of the difficulty in arriving at absolute certainty on the correct understanding of the passage and its application to us today, Christian liberty must be practiced in the matter. (See Romans 14). In other words, those women choosing to wear a veil or long hair should not be criticized for doing so; those choosing not to do so should likewise not be criticized. But it must not be made doctrine required by all women in the church to observe.
7. Any action, conduct, or appearance which violates the accepted social customs of the society in which the church operates should be discontinued if it brings shame or reproach on the name of Christ. “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God---even I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.” [I Cor. 10:31-33].

Bibliography: Alfred Edersheim, “Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ”
Lange’s Commentary on I Corinthians
Ellicott’s Commentary on I Corinthians
Matthew Henry’s Commentary on I Corinthians
James B. Coffman’s Commentary on I Corinthians
Lexicons by Vine, Thayer, Souter, Grove, Feyerabend, Robinson
Translations: Rotherham, Young, Montgomery, Wilson, Bruce, Wesley, Phillips, Noli, Darby, Knox.