

BEHIND THE VEIL: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-16

Sometimes the best way to approach a problem is to try to forget everything you have ever heard about the subject and start afresh. The passage under discussion is such a problem. It is used by some people to show that parts of the New Testament are culture bound and not applicable in the 20th century. It has also been enforced by others to satisfy a legalistic tendency, and even in extreme cases used to suppress women by creating an unnecessary difference between them and men. I believe that the text has a much simpler meaning.

The first step in gaining a good understanding comes in examining the text itself. The following passage is from the NIV but is analyzed according to the Greek text. The symbols used in the text are as follows:

- ° a Greek word has been omitted from the translation and listed in the footnotes;
- ²word two(or more) Greek words have been translated by a single English word;
- word a group of underlined words indicate that they have been translated from a lesser number of Greek words;
- a word smaller letters mean this word is added by the translators;
- word' x `word the accents mark the insertion of a word in the middle of a translated group;

The right-side column gives both literal meanings of the Greek words and how the word is translated elsewhere in the NIV.

1CO 11:2-16

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| <p>2 ° <u>I praise</u> you for remembering me [in] everything and for holding to the teachings, <u>just as I passed</u> [them] <u>'on to you</u>.</p> <p>3 Now <u>I want</u> you <u>to realize</u> that the head <u>of every</u> man is ° Christ, and [the] head <u>of the woman</u> [is] ° man, and [the head] <u>of Christ</u> [is] ° God.</p> <p>4 Every man <u>who prays</u> or prophesies [with] his head ²covered dishonors his ° head.</p> <p>5 And every woman <u>who prays</u> or prophesies [with] her head uncovered dishonors her ° head— ° <u>it is just as though</u> [her] ° [head] <u>were shaved</u>.</p> <p>6 ° If [a] woman <u>does'</u> not <u>'cover</u> [her head], <u>she should have'</u> [her hair] <u>'cut off</u>; and if [it is a] disgrace [for a] woman <u>to have'</u> [her hair] <u>'cut</u> or <u>shaved off</u>, <u>she should cover</u> [her head].</p> <p>7 ° A man ° ought not <u>to cover</u> his head, [since he] is [the] image and glory <u>of God</u>; but [the] woman is [the] glory <u>of man</u>.</p> <p>8 For ° man <u>did'</u> not <u>'come</u> from woman, but woman from man;</p> <p>9 ³neither was man created for ° woman, but woman for ° man.</p> <p>10 ²<u>For this reason</u>, and because <u>of'</u> the <u>'angels</u>, the woman ought <u>to have</u> [a sign of] authority on her head.</p> | <p>4 covered - lit. having (something) against dishonors also trans. humiliate, disappoint, put to shame, shame, embarrass, be ashamed;</p> <p>5 her - lit. the uncovered lit. not covered up - 2x in NT, also in v.13 just as though - lit. one and the same were shaved - lit. having been shaved (with a razor), 3x in NT, also found in v. 6 and Ac. 21:24 where Paul shaved his head as a purification rite with some other Jews;</p> <p>6 does cover - lit. to cover up - only 3x in NT(v.7) she should have (her hair) cut off - lit. let her be shorn - 4x in NT: used of sheep - Ac. 8:32; part of Paul's vow-taking - Ac. 18:18 disgrace - also trans. disgraceful - 1Co. 14:35, shameful - Eph. 5:12, dishonest - Ti. 1:11 to have (her hair) cut - same as 'she should have (her hair) cut off' shaved off - same as 'were shaved' in v.5 she should cover - same as 'does cover' in v.6;</p> <p>7 ought - lit. to be indebted his - lit. the is - lit. possessing;</p> <p>8 did come - lit. is;</p> <p>9 neither - lit. and not for for - lit. through, or because of;</p> <p>10 For this reason lit. through this her lit. the;</p> |
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- 2 °and; 3 °the, °the, °the; 4 °the; 5 °the, °for, °the (one); 6 °for; 7 °for, °indeed; 8 °indeed; 9 °the, °the;

- 11 In [the] Lord, however, woman [is] not independent of man, nor [is] man independent of woman.
- 12 For as woman [came] from man, so also ° man is born of ° woman. But everything [comes] from ° God.
- 13 Judge ° for yourselves: Is it proper [for a] woman to pray to ° God [with her head] uncovered?
- 14 Does not the very nature of things teach you that if ° [a] man has [long] hair, it is [a] disgrace to him,
- 15 but [that] if a woman has [long] hair, it is her glory? For ° [long] hair is given to her as [a] covering.
- 16 ° If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.

- 11 independent lit. without;
- 12 is born of lit. through, or because of;
- 13 proper also trans. appropriate, in accord, fitting uncovered same as v.5;
- 14 nature also trans. natural, by birth, by nature(used by implication of disposition in Js. 3:7 and 2Pe. 1:4) of things lit. itself has hair lit. grows hair, 2x in NT disgrace also trans. shameful, common, dishonor, shame, ignoble;
- 15 has hair same as v.14 hair only time in NT covering lit. something thrown around, 2x in NT, also trans. robe;
- 16 wants lit. has opinion contentious lit. lover of strife, only time in NT other m.o. trans. such practice also trans. custom, accustomed churches lit. assemblies;

12 °the, °the, °the; 13 °yourselves, °the; 14 °indeed; 15 °the; 16 °and;

Two comments should be made concerning the translation from the Greek and the omission of certain words: 1)the exact meaning of what appears to be the definite article 'the' in the Greek language is not totally understood; 2)sentence structure is used in language to give meaning just like specific words, so that literal translation can result in redundancy.

The first thing that should be noted about this text is the high number of Greek words that are found only in this text and nowhere else in the New Testament – to **grow hair, hair, to cover up, not covered up and contentious**. There is also a number of words that are used only once or twice apart from this text – **covering, shave, cut and practice**. This observation alone makes this text a special case since cross-referencing word usage is a very powerful tool in the translation of the New Testament. It should also be noted that the Greek word for 'veil' is not present in the text.

If not in this passage, where do we get the impression that a woman should cover herself with a veil? NOWHERE!! Though the wearing of veils was mentioned in the Old Testament as a definite clothing mode (Gen. 24:65, 38:14,19, S of S 4:1,3, 6:7, Isa. 3:19, Ezk. 13:18,21), it was never required by the Law or considered to be especially spiritual or submissive. In fact, it was the men serving as priests in the temple/tabernacle of God who were required to wear something on their heads according to the Law of Moses (Ex. 28:4,37,39, 29:6, 39:28,31). Instead of finding reinforcement for mandatory veil wearing among women (complemented by men being bare-headed), the Old Testament teaches that the most honored among the Jewish men were required to wear 'something' on their heads in the presence of God.

Paul prefaces this text with a reminder of the ordering of relationships in God's plan (v. 3) -- Christ is the head of man, and man is the head of woman. This is repeated in vs. 7-12 and is intrinsic to the discussed problem of women covering their heads, etc. A thorough exegesis of this passage will explain why the 'covering' on the women's head is a sign of the man's authority (and thus the woman's submissiveness). In 7:2-6 of this same letter, Paul uses the verb form of the word 'authority' to say that 'the wife's body does not belong to her alone', and 'the husband's body does not belong to him alone' or literally, 'the wife does not have authority over her own body and the same for the husband'. Apparently both parties were depriving the other of sexual rights for 'spiritual' reasons without mutual agreement. This lack of respect for authority figures significantly in the understanding of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.

The word 'covered' translated in 1 Corinthians 11:4 demands closer scrutiny. This word is given as the translation of the two Greek words – 'to have' and 'against'. 'To have' is translated 'wearing' in Mt. 3:4, 22:12, Jn. 18:10 and Rv. 9:17 with regards to clothes, wedding garments, a sword and breastplates respectively – since the idea of having clothing implies the wearing of them. 'Against' is most often translated 'according to' and is used as a prefix meaning 'down' in word construction. These two words are not found together in the context of clothing anywhere in the New Testament and are translated 'covered' here quite uniquely. However, the words 'to have' and 'against' are found together in Mt. 5:23, Mk. 11:25, Rv. 2:4,14,20. In all of these cases the context is the situation of one person (Jesus in Rv. 2) 'having something **against**' another person. This translation gives the text under study a whole new possibility. Instead of referring to some physical piece of clothing, verse 4 is making reference to the man who prays or prophesies having something (i.e., an attitude) against his head (that is Christ) dishonoring his head (that is Christ). The Mt. 5:23 example speaks of leaving your offer at the altar if your brother has something against you, going to make everything right with him first. Praying or prophesying without being right with the Lord is not pleasing to God!!

The word 'uncovered' in v. 5 is also in need of special attention. It literally means 'not covered up' and is only found one other time in the NT – in v. 13 of this text. Just by reading v. 5 it is impossible to determine whether this is the absence of some article of clothing or simply just 'hair' itself. It is much clearer in v. 13 where the propriety of a woman 'being covered' is based on the natural human disposition towards women growing their hair long and men not growing their hair 'as long' or even loosing it with age. We read in v. 15 that hair is given to woman as a covering (i.e., a robe, lit. 'something thrown around') in the sense of something to be worn. These words for 'hair' and 'growing hair' are found exclusively in this text and seem to differ from the more usual Greek word translated 'hair' by pointing out the ornamental value and not anatomical designation. Since this 'not covered up' seems to be talking only of hair -- the translation 'bald' is probably a better understanding of the word in the given context.

The two words **shave** and **cut** can also give us insight by how they are used elsewhere in the New Testament. The word 'shave' is derived from the Greek word meaning 'razor.' It is only used one time outside of the considered text and this is in Acts 21:23-26 when Paul returned to Jerusalem with the gift from the western churches. James and the elders urged him to engage himself in 'purification rites' along with some other Jewish brethren to help lessen the tension between the converted and unconverted Jews. These rites included the offering of sacrifices and the 'shaving' of their heads. The word 'cut' is found in only two passages outside of the considered text, Acts 8:32 and Acts 18:18. In Acts 8:32 where Isa. 53:7 is cited, this word is translated 'shearer'. The original Hebrew word is translated 'shear' (in respect to sheep) 11 times in the Old Testament and 'shave' the 4 times it is used in respect to people (in Mic. 1:16 the Israelites were commanded to make themselves 'as bald as the vulture'). In Acts 18:18 Paul had his hair 'cut off' at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken. The full import of these verses is two-fold: 1)the two words shave and cut are not emphasizing a difference in length but instead a difference in method of achieving the same result; 2)these words are associated with Old Testament practices of vow-taking.

Making a vow before the Lord was a very serious undertaking according to the Law. Consider the details described in the two following passages:

Num. 6:1-21 concerning Nazirite vows:

- 1) women, as well as men, could make the Nazirite vows of separation;
- 2) Nazirites could not drink fermented drink or any product of the grapevine;
- 3) the hair could not be cut under the period of the vow;
- 4) Nazirites were not permitted to have close contact with dead bodies;
- 5) at the end of the vow period prescribed sacrifices should be offered;
- 6) at the end of the vow period the Nazirite's head must be shaved;

Num. 30:3-16 concerning the limitations upon women making vows:

- 1) if a young woman still living in her father's house makes a pledge or vow without the knowledge of her father, he has the right to forbid or confirm her vows when he becomes conscious of them -- if he says nothing the pledge or vow is binding;
- 2) any vow or obligation taken by a divorced woman or widow was binding on her;
- 3) if a married woman makes a pledge or vow without the knowledge of her husband, he has the right to forbid or confirm her vows when he becomes conscious of them -- if he says nothing the pledge or vow is binding;

The significance of these two passages is this: Even though a woman was allowed to make a Nazirite vow which included the shaving of her head, its legitimacy (as all other vows) was dependent on the approval of her husband or father depending on her marital status.

We have now defined the pieces sufficiently to put the passage together in a possible biblical perspective though definitely 'non-traditional'. The problem being discussed here was one of submission. The Jewish sector of the Christian church in Corinth was still holding to certain practices like that of 'shaving' or 'cutting' the hair in connection with vow-making to God (Paul himself did this at Cenchrea which is only a few miles from Corinth). The women had this option available to them as well, but the final decision was still in the hands of her husband (or possibly father) according to the Law. Interestingly enough, the law of Moses is not considered here by Paul but instead a law of nature -- what man would like his wife shaving herself bald? If the hair on a woman's head represents the preference or will of her husband then it definitely could be considered a 'sign of authority' on her head. And the shaving of her head could be definitely seen as a dishonoring of her husband (her spiritual 'head' before God). God is not pleased by the performance of worship when our hearts are not in submission to authority he has ordained. For those women who had already gone ahead and 'shaved' without respecting their husbands wishes, Paul admonished them to cover up their heads -- possibly implying some sort of material covering, but even more likely the growing back again of the natural 'covering' (hair). This passage should not to be taken as a legalism to bind women to some obscure custom of dress (without base in the Scriptures) but to show that in all things we need to honor God's ordering of our lives and offer the sacrifice that he will not despise (Ps. 51:17).

With the preceding points considered, let's read again 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 with some slight modifications - 'literal translations' are indicated by **bold face** and insertions indicated by smaller letters and [square brackets]. Compare the changes with analyzed text cited at the beginning of this article.

- 2 I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you.
- 3 Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.
- 4 Every man who prays or prophesies **having something against his head** dishonors his head.
- 5 And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head **not covered** [by hair] dishonors her head – it is **the same for the one having been shaved**.
- 6 If a woman does not [want to] cover her head with hair, she should have her hair cut off; **but** if it is a disgrace for a woman [because of her husband's disapproval] to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head [with hair].
- 7 A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.
- 8 For man did not come from woman, but woman from man;
- 9 neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.
- 10 For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.
- 11 In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.
- 12 For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.
- 13 Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head **bald**?
- 14 Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him,
- 15 but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.
- 16 If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice--nor do the churches of God.