

## What does 1 Cor. 11:2-16 teach concerning the veil?

By Bob Young

I have been asked to write something to explain the context and teaching of 1 Cor 11:2-16 as it relates to the veil. A matter of first importance is to get a good translation of the text. Following is the NET translation, with alternate translation in brackets, and textual notes after each verse.

**<sup>2</sup> I praise you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I passed them on to you.**

The word “traditions” and the verb translated “passed on” are from the same root. Traditions means teachings that have been given and does not carry the same meaning as “traditions” in modern English.

**<sup>3</sup> But I want you to know that Christ is the head of every man, and the man [husband] is [...] the head of a woman [his wife], and God is [...] the head of Christ.**

The verb is missing but understood in the last two phrases.

The words for man and woman can mean husband and wife, to be determined by the context.

Head is used figuratively, not literally in this verse to establish a principle that is applied literally in the verses that follow.

**<sup>4</sup> Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered disgraces his head.**

Covered is literally *kata kephales echon* “down from head having.” The preposition *kata* is capable of various shades of meaning, depending on the context; I have followed Eldred Echols in choosing “down.”

One must determine contextually whether head is used figuratively as in v. 3 or literally.

**<sup>5</sup> But any woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered disgraces her head, for it is one and the same thing as having a shaved head [as having been shaved/shorn].**

Uncovered is *akatakalupto* “not ‘down from’ covered.” In the compound verb, *kata* may mean completely or entirely, “not entirely covered.” “Down from” would be consistent with notes on v. 4.

Note that two different phrases are used in v. 4 for the men and in v. 5 for the women, even though almost all translations use antonyms such as covered and uncovered.

*Kalupto* means covered. To insert the ideas of unveiled and veiled in the context is to read something into the text that is not there. (See v. 15 below, where the text says that the hair is given to a woman as a shawl or covering.)

Shaved is from *xurao*, perfect passive participle, “having been shaved.” Head does not appear in the Greek text. Shaved indicates that the subject is hair.

**<sup>6</sup> For if a woman will not cover her head, she should cut off her hair. But if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, she should cover her head.**

“Not cover” is *ou katakaluptetai*, from the same verb (*katakalupto*) used in v. 5. See also the last phrase in this verse where the same verb is used.

Cut off is from *keiro*, meaning to cut or shear. This verb also indicates that the subject is hair. In the context, *xurao* and *keiro* may be used synonymously. If a woman will not completely cover her head (with hair), she should cut off her hair. This idea would not be acceptable in the first century, as is shown by the following part of this verse.

“If it is disgraceful,” the class of the subjunctive indicates that it is in fact disgraceful, so the second part of the verse must be obeyed. It is disgraceful to be shorn (*keiro*) or shaved (*xurao*), repeating the verbs from v. 6 and v. 5 in reverse order, therefore the woman should be covered (*katalalupto*), possibly covered completely, or covered to the extent of “down from.” Since it is disgraceful for a woman to have hair shorn or shaved, she should be covered.

**<sup>7</sup> For a man should not have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God. But the woman is the glory of [the] man.**

Here Paul begins to explain a theological reason for his instructions.

The man ought not to cover *katalalupto* his head. This is a different phrase than v. 4. Here the same word is used that has been used regarding the woman. Continuing the reading from v. 6, the woman must cover *katalalupto*, the man ought not to cover *katalalupto*.

The image and glory of God “being” (*huparcho*). The word for “being” should be noted.

The woman is (*eimi*) the glory of man. The article “the” appears before woman but not before man. Again, man and woman can be translated husband and wife, depending on context.

**<sup>8</sup> For man did not come from woman, but woman from man.**

Literally, for man is not from woman but woman from man.

**<sup>9</sup> Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for man.**

The NET translation follows the literal reading almost exactly.

**<sup>10</sup> For this reason a woman should have a symbol of authority on her head because of the angels.**

For this reason, suggests that the conclusion presented in this verse is based on what has just been presented, probably in vv. 7-9.

Literally, a woman must/should/ought (*opheileo*) to have authority on her head....

Symbol of, does not occur in the text and is interpretation as much as translation. The literal reading is, the woman ought to have authority on her head....

In the context, it appears that the authority the woman should have on her head refers to being covered. Being covered indicates that she respects the authority set up by God.

Because of the angels, is a phrase difficult to explain in the context. Here are some possibilities. (1) Because angels are present in the lives of Christians (Heb. 1:14), Christians should live as examples of those who respect God’s authority structures. (2) Angels need the example of humans who respect authority because they are prone to disrespect authority (Jude 6; 2 Pet. 2:4). (3) Angels witness church life (Eph. 3:10) and would be particularly sensitive to resistance to God’s created order.

**<sup>11</sup> In any case, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.**

Literally, neither woman without man nor man without woman in lord.

The point seems to be that both exist in mutual interdependence, and not separate from the created order.

**<sup>12</sup> For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman. But all things come from God.**

Literally, for just as the woman from (*ek*) the man, so also the man through (*dia*) the woman. All things from (*ek*) God.

**13 Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?**

Uncovered is *akatakalypton*, a form of the word used previously with reference to women (and used once with reference to men in v. 7). Women should be covered; men should not be covered. Prayer is mentioned but not prophecy.

**14 Does not nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace for him, ...**

Literally, nature itself teaches you that man in fact if hair disgrace to him it is.

Nature itself, *phusis autn*, suggests the application of a general principle that was known to and accepted by the readers. The same word, *phusis*, is used in Eph. 2:3, "being by nature children of wrath." Thayer's lexicon says this is "feeling or action which has become nature by long habit." The English idiom, "second nature," approximates the meaning. This is not a reference to the natural world, nor to human nature received genetically. The reference is to longstanding principles and practices. For Paul, such practices also reflected God's design.

Paul refers to the principle that long hair is a disgrace to a man. "Long" does not appear in the Greek text, but is inferred in the context. This may relate to "down from" in v. 4. This is the opposite of v. 6 where it is a disgrace for a woman to be shorn or shaven.

Note that in this verse as in v. 6, the subject is hair. Note also that Paul's topic is not the hair length of the men but rather the practice of the women who were "uncovered."

**15 ...but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.**

Literally, but a woman if hair glory to her it is.

The sentence is continued from the previous verse.

Note that the construction is exactly parallel in vv. 14-15, "if hair." Again, "long" does not appear in the original text.

[Long] hair on a man is disgraceful; [long] hair on a woman is her glory. Disgrace for a woman is in being shorn or shaven (v. 6).

For a woman, her hair is given her for a covering (*periboulaiou*, literally something thrown around a person, thus a mantle, shawl, veil).

No word for veil or head covering appears in vv. 3-14. In v. 15 is the first reference to a covering other than one's hair, and the verse says the hair is given instead of a veil, thus the hair is considered a covering in the context of vv. 2-15.

This point is essential to a correct understanding of the text. It is an error to think that vv. 3-14 refer to veiling since nothing in the context suggests or demands such an application. To insert a "veil" through translation is interpretation and not translation.

**16 If anyone intends to quarrel about this, we have no other practice, nor do the churches of God.**

Literally, but if anyone seems to be fond of strife, we of this sort custom do not have nor the churches of God. More smoothly, if anyone wants to be contentious about this, that sort of action does not reflect our custom nor the custom of the churches of God.

A common reading of this verse suggests that the matter talked about in vv. 2-15 is not to become the subject of arguments.

The literal reading shows another possibility: that Paul is softly admonishing those who would seek to be contentious, saying that such is not the practice of Christians.

Considering that the paragraph divisions of the text are of human origin, one must consider the possibility that v. 16 belongs with what follows. The conjunction "de" in v. 17 is not a strong conjunction that introduces a new paragraph. This *touto* in v. 17 could refer what precedes it or what

follows it. This possibility presents the following: “If anyone seems to be fond of strife, such custom we do not have nor the churches of God, but transmitting this I do not praise you....”

### **Observations**

The general subject of vv. 2-15 is hair and hairstyles. The only reference to a shawl or veil is in v. 15 where it is said that the hair on a woman serves instead of a veil.

A biblical principle that is reinforced in this textual section is the separation or distinction of the sexes (see Dt. 22:5 for example).

Paul appeals to God’s created order (nature) in this teaching.

Men are to wear their hair “not down from” or with the head “uncovered.”

Women are to be “completely covered.” That can be done by their hair, which is given as a shawl or veil (v. 15). Obviously, it can also be done with a shawl or veil, but such would be optional. The passage does not teach that veils are required for women, since their hair functions in place of a veil. Since hair can function as a covering, this suggests that men (who are to be uncovered) should not have a hair covering.

If one inserts the veil into the passage when the text only mentions covering, then any hair style is acceptable on men as long as they do not have a veil (hat? cap?).

The distinction between the shorter hair on a man and the longer hair on a woman is a reminder of God’s created order and God’s authority structures. How and why that is the case is not set forth in the passage.

The specific case mentioned in the text is to women who are praying or prophesying. How the verses should be applied to women who are not praying or prophesying must be determined contextually. Should these verses be applied to every woman in a public setting?

What these verses mean for the use of women in public assemblies today, praying and teaching, is not treated in this study.