

Headcovering Garments

Do you believe it is acceptable for Messianic men to wear a *kippah* or *yarmulke*, when Paul says that it is a dishonor for men to have their heads covered? How do you interpret 1 Corinthians 11:4-16?

One of the most obvious elements of modern Jewish identity witnessed in the world today, is men wearing the *kippah* (or *yarmulke*, יארמולקע) or skullcap. The idea behind wearing this small skullcap is that it shows submission to God. The term *kippah* (כִּפּוּי) is derived from the Hebrew verb *kafar* (כָּפַר), meaning “to cover, to forgive, to expiate, to reconcile” (AMG).¹ The *kippah* is believed to be a “covering” which represents a man’s submission to God.

It is notable that the headcovering garment of a *kippah* is not a commandment of Scripture. This is a Jewish tradition that has developed over time. Alfred J. Kolatch explains this in *The Jewish Book of Why*:

“A *yarmulke*, called a *kipa* in Hebrew, is a skullcap worn by Jews. Some wear one at all times, others only during prayer and at mealtime.

“...The custom of covering the head received wide acceptance, but not by all. Historian Israel Abrahams points out that in the thirteenth century ‘boys in Germany and adults in France were called to the Tora in the synagogue bareheaded.’

“In the Middle Ages, French and Spanish rabbinical authorities regarded the practice of covering the head during prayer and when studying the Tora to be no more than mere custom. Some rabbis were known to pray bareheaded.

“Today, Orthodox Jews and many Conservative Jews believe that covering the head is an expression of *yirat Shama’yim* (‘fear of God’ or ‘reverence for God’)....”²

Wearing a *kippah* is quite commonplace throughout the diverse social strata of modern Israel. Jews of all types throughout the Diaspora commonly wear them as well, sometimes as a part of their everyday dress. While wearing a *kippah* is more frequently associated with Synagogue worship or personal prayers, wearing a *kippah* at the home dinner table of a Jewish family is also witnessed. It is quite commonplace to see a majority of men in today’s Messianic Jewish congregations wear *kippahs* in *Shabbat* worship. Various Messianic Jews also wear a *kippah* as a part of their normal, everyday dress.

It is not uncommon in many Messianic congregations to see non-Jewish men wear *kippahs*. This is largely so that they can respect the protocol of the assembly, as generally all men are expected to wear a *kippah* if they were to attend a service at any non-Messianic synagogue.

It is not difficult, though, to find a substantial amount of criticism, in some parts of the independent Messianic community on whether or not the *kippah* is something appropriate to wear. It is usually based on the Apostle Paul’s instructions witnessed in 1 Corinthians 11:4-16. As we will proceed to describe, there are some translation issues present in these verses in various English Bible versions, as well as some ancient background issues germane to First Century Corinth, which need to be seriously considered.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:4, *pas anēr proseuchomenos ē prophēteuōn kata kephalēs* (πᾶς ἀνὴρ προσευχόμενος ἢ προφητεῦων κατὰ κεφαλῆς), “Every man praying or prophesying, having *something* down from the head...” (my translation). Many versions add something like “with his head covered” (NIV) or “who has *something*

¹ Baker and Carpenter, 521.

² Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Jewish Book of Why* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1981), pp 121-122.

Consult Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), pp 374-377 for a summary of how the *kippah* and related headcovering garments, are employed in the mainline Jewish Synagogue.

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on his head” (NASU), but does this really do justice to the clause *kata kephalēs* (κατὰ κεφαλῆς)? Would it have really been disgraceful for a First Century Jewish man, or even a Greek or Roman man, to wear something on his head during a time of prayer or prophecy? **No**. Paul specifies later in 1 Corinthians 11:14 that there is something which could be down from a man’s head that would disgrace him: “if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him” (NASU). Long hair on a man hanging down, could have communicated something in Corinth that might not be very good for the Believers. At the very least, some males with long hair hanging down, from certain angles, could possibly be confused as being female. Philip B. Payne further describes,

“Something ‘down from’ (κατά [kata] with the genitive, ‘lit. hanging down fr. the head,’ BDAG 511 A.1.a) or ‘over’ the head of men leading in worship was disgraceful. Paul does not in this verse identify what was down from the head, so any explanation, to be convincing, needs to cite evidence from this passage and its cultural context. What hanging down from a man’s head would be disgraceful for men leading worship in Corinth, a Greek city and a Roman colony? Many assume it is a toga (*himation*). It was not, however, disgraceful in the cultural context of Corinth or in Jewish culture for a man to drape a garment over his head. The *capite velato* custom of pulling a toga over one’s head in Roman religious contexts symbolized devotion and piety, not disgrace. Jewish custom and the Hebrew Scriptures also approved head-covering garments for men leading in worship³...Thankfully, Paul identifies in verse 15 what ‘hanging down from the head’ causes disgrace: ‘If a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him [1 Corinthians 11:14, NIV].’⁴

Continuing in 1 Corinthians 11:5a, Paul issues instruction regarding *pasa de gunē proseuchomenē ē prophēteuousa akatakalyptō tē kephalē* (πάσα δὲ γυνή προσευχομένη ἢ προφητεύουσα ἀκατακαλύπτω τῇ κεφαλῇ), “every woman praying or prophesying, with the head uncovered...” (my translation) is to be regarded as having dishonored her head, being as though her head were shaved (1 Corinthians 11:5b). Having a shaved (Grk. verb *xureō*, ξυρέω) head in ancient times, whether in Ancient Israel, Second Temple Judaism, or even Greco-Roman culture, was frequently a sign of mourning and/or humiliation. The challenge for interpreting a “head uncovered,” is that it is frequently read from the perspective of it meaning that a woman praying or prophesying must have some kind of a garment present. Is wearing a headcovering garment really the issue?

A significant usage of the adjective *akatakalyptos* (ἀκατακάλυπτος) in the Septuagint is Leviticus 13:45, speaking of “the leper who has the plague in him, his garments shall be torn, and his head shall be **uncovered** [akatakalyptos]” (LXE).⁵ *Akatakalyptos* actually renders the Hebrew verb *para* (פָּרַע), meaning “to let the hair on the head hang loosely” (*HALOT*),⁶ as “The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head **hang loose** [v’rosho yi’heyeh faru’a, פָּרוּעַ יְהִי־הַיֵּשׁוּרֵי]” (Leviticus 13:45, RSV).⁷ If this background is kept in view, than a Corinthian woman who had her head “uncovered,” is one who actually had her long hair hanging loose for all in the assembly to see. It is true that when modern readers encounter a term like “uncovered,” it is more natural for us to think that the Corinthian woman was to probably be wearing some sort of head garment. But wearing or not wearing a head garment would not have been as problematic as a female having loosed hair flowing freely. In a largely progressive and so-called “sexually liberated” city like First Century Corinth, a woman with free-flowing loose hair **was anything but respectable**. In fact, such a hairstyle would be like a prostitute advertising her wares! Payne details,

³ E.g., Exodus 28:4, 37, 39; 29:6; 39:28, 31; Leviticus 8:9; 16:4; Ezekiel 24:17; 44:18; Zechariah 3:5.

⁴ Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), pp 141-142.

⁵ NETS similarly has: “let his clothes be loosened and his head be uncovered [akatakalyptos].”

⁶ *HALOT*, 2:970.

⁷ “and-hair-of-him he-must-be being-unkepmt” (John R. Kohlenberger III, trans., *The Interlinear NIV Hebrew-English Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 304); Grk. LXX kai hē kephalē autou akatakalyptos (καὶ ἡ κεφαλὴ αὐτοῦ ἀκατακάλυπτος); “and his head uncovered” (LXE).

⁸ Payne, 167 further states,

“The only occurrence in the text Paul cited the most, the LXX [Septuagint], of ‘uncovered’ (11:5; ἀκατακάλυπτος [akatakalyptos] in Lev 13:45) translates פָּרוּעַ [faru’a], from פָּרַע, which Hebrew scholars agree means ‘to let the hair on the head hang loosely.’ It is the earliest instance of the word ‘cover’ (κατακάλυπτος [katakalyptos]) occurring with ‘head’ in the *TLG* database...‘Uncovered’ is explained twice in verses 5-6, using ‘for’ (γάρ [gar]). Both reasons explain the uncovering as equivalent to hair being clipped or shaved. This associates the covering as hair and fits most naturally if ‘uncovered’ refers to a woman with her hair let down.”

“Loosed hair was disgraceful (11:5) and symbolized sexual looseness in Roman, Greek, and Jewish culture...Loosed hair fits the cultural influence and specific practice of the Dionysiac cult, which was popular in Corinth and explains why women in Corinth might have let their hair down.”⁹

Contrary to women with “uncovered” heads—heads with hair freely flowing down—respectable women would have “covered heads” with their hair arranged in a kind of bun, something attested in the artwork of the broad First Century.¹⁰ A Corinthian woman with an “uncovered” head meaning free-flowing long hair, hair that has not been arranged in a proper manner, makes sense of Paul’s prescription that such an “uncovered” woman’s hair be cut or shaved off—which was definitely a sign of dishonor (1 Corinthians 11:6). A proper recognition of the genders is in view here (1 Corinthians 11:7-8), including being aware of how at a previous time in Biblical history (e.g., Genesis 6:4) women may have been able to tempt the angels (1 Corinthians 11:10).

Both man and woman—especially if they are married—are to understand that they are not independent of one another, with all originating from God (1 Corinthians 11:11-12). With the realization that “covered” and “uncovered” probably relates to hairstyles of hair pulled up versus free-flowing long hair, how does this change our reading of Paul’s further direction? When people would attend home gatherings of the Corinthians, *including* any visiting pagans, what impression would it give of the Messiah followers and the Lord Yeshua? As 1 Corinthians 11:13-16 details,

“Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God *with her head* uncovered {**meaning:** with free-flowing long hair}? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a [mantle; Grk. *peribolaion*, περιβόλαιον]. But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the [assemblies] of God” (NASU).

It is difficult at first for us to consider covered/uncovered to relate to hairstyles, which either communicated lewdness or promiscuity or just general disrespectfulness to wider society—but it is a much better way for us to understand the issues of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. The actual issue in Ancient Corinth regarding male and female heads that are “covered” and “uncovered” **actually pertained to specific hairstyles**. Men should not have long hair hanging down. Women should have their long hair put up, being “covered,” as being “uncovered” would mean letting the hair go. The association that such hairstyles would have, could not only communicate a degree of prostitution-promotion (female *and* male) to outsiders, but perhaps also associate the Corinthians as participating with local pagan religious activities. The Apostle Paul clearly did not want something like this communicated to outsiders in the gatherings and worship activities of the Messiah followers!

We have never seen the perspective of “covered” and “uncovered” relating to Ancient Corinthian hairstyles ever really considered in any sector of today’s Messianic movement. Many believe that “covered” and “uncovered” relates to head garments like the *kippah/yarmulke*, various uses of the *tallit*, or some kind of female head garment. While not all of these items as we know them were in use in the Biblical period, ultimately the issue of headcovering garments for men and women is one that is **entirely traditional and cultural**. It is something that all Messianic Believers need to be sensitive about in their *halachah* to be certain (like men wearing a *yarmulke* at the Western Wall in Jerusalem), **but headcovering garments are not the real issue** of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. The main thrust of this part of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians pertains to how various grooming styles can damage the credibility of the faith community. In First Century Corinth, women who let their hair go “uncovered”—long and loose—were communicating something bad. Today, long hair on a woman (perhaps in a pony tail or other style) in some places might instead communicate conservativeness.¹¹ As far as shorter or longer degrees of hair length on a woman *or* man are concerned: they regard the general evaluation of their (Twenty-First Century [Western]) cultural context, and what may be considered respectable.

The author has personally been in widescale favor of all Messianic men wearing a *kippah/yarmulke* during weekly *Shabbat* services **and most especially** during the high holy days of *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

⁹ Ibid., 166.

¹⁰ “What about having one’s head ‘uncovered’ would cause shame to a woman leading in worship in the cultural setting of Corinth? The extensive evidence from portraiture, frescoes, sculptures, and vase paintings in Greek and Roman cities of Paul’s day almost universally depicts respectable women with their hair done up. Women in everyday public settings are not depicted with their hair hanging loose over their shoulders” (Ibid., 151).

¹¹ Indeed, in our family’s experience in the Messianic movement since 1995, most of the average men and women in our faith community have little problems as it concerns our proposed reading of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. They tend to have hairstyles and a mode of dress which communicate a rather conservative demeanor to society at large, consistent with much of respectable Judaism and Christianity, not at all being associated with much popular culture.