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Did Yeshua Pray with a Head Covering?

Understanding 1 Corinthians 11:1-16

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Did Yeshua wear a head covering when He prayed and prophesied? What did the Apostle Paul mean when he said that men should not cover their heads to pray or prophesy? Why did he advocate women to cover their heads when they prayed or prophesied?

Excellent answers are harder to come by than they asking of these questions. We have to be careful in answering these questions so that we don't put medieval or modern spins on original context and meanings. So we'll do my best to stay true to the Hebraic content on this subject.

To answer whether Yeshua wore a head covering when He prayed or prophesied, we will begin with Paul's teaching to the Corinthians found in 11:1-16. From this instruction of this Pharisee of Pharisees we will discover the greater implications regarding Yeshua's example.

The brief answer is that for a Jewish man to cover his head when he prays or prophesies is to do a pagan (Gentile) act contrary to God's way. It was the way of Gentiles to cover their heads. Such behavior failed to appreciate or follow the Torah in its pure meaning and intention. As a corollary, for a woman not to cover her head is the same Torahless act. We will explain in greater detail.

1 Corinthians 11:1-16. This whole passage is a part of a larger scope of instructions regarding the worship of Almighty God (chapters 8-14). Therefore, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is properly understood within the context of Paul's instructions on worship for Jewish and Gentile believers.

This section on head coverings is bracketed in context by verses 1 and 2 . The apostle writes: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Messiah. I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you."

What example? He means teachings he learned from the Lord, i.e., by Messiah's example. Then he seals his teaching about head coverings with this end-bracket statement: "If anyone wants to be contentious about this [to argue another point], we have no other practice--nor do the churches of God" (11:16). Paul permits no variation on this teaching. It is not to be contended or argued against.

Kibel and Masar. Paul is saying that he passed on to the Corinthians in his teachings what was passed on to him. Similar language is found in 12:23, "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you." Paul is teaching what he has learned from the Lord Yeshua, not reinterpreted. In Hebrew the method of learning by receiving and passing on to others is called kibel masar. It is founded on oral tradition, well attested to be as accurate if not more so than other means of preserving information in ancient times.

When we consider that Paul attributes his teaching on the subject from the example of Messiah (11:1) even as he attributes his teaching on the thanksgiving meal (communion) to the Lord, we

should be careful in having any other opinion. He states his source for "the head covering" teaching and "the Lord' Supper" teaching to be no one else but the Messiah. What he received, he claims, he passed on to the Corinthian believers.

Paul was a Pharisee and a well-respected practitioner of the method of kibel masar, passing on reliably and accurately what He received from the Lord. He was punctiliously accurate to the letter, phrase and example.

When treating these ancient methods of preserving the teachings of our Lord, we should ever be reminded that the apostle never quit his well-honed skills learned in the educational tradition of the Pharisees. He never divorced himself from this Jewish sect even as a believer in Messiah, but continued to meet with them and gained followers of Messiah from among them, offering the kingdom of God through faith in Messiah.

When we interpret the writings of Paul, we must never divorce him from his Hebraic roots either, even as He refused to do. He was highly taught in the traditions of Judaism and understood them. Even when he was in Corinth, he was in the synagogues, always beginning his work there. To the Jew first, he taught, then to the Gentiles. It was his code of practice and instruction to others to do so as well.

So Paul is not anti-Jewish (on the contrary), nor anti-Torah (on the contrary), but he was against any Jewish tradition or practice that violated the Torah or, its fullness--the Living Torah, i.e., Messiah Yeshua (Jesus). This passage in First Corinthians on head coverings is a case in point.

Today's Jewish Practice of Head Coverings is Rabbinic, not Biblical. Most Jews today believe that a man wearing a head covering when he prays is a tradition that was embraced by the Torah. This is not the case at all. Even the best of Jewish literature teaches otherwise. Neither the Torah, the whole Tenach (Hebrew Bible) or the Talmud (fifth century A.D.) teach men to cover their head when praying.

In fact, the Jewish tradition for men to cover their heads in prayer has no Hebraic or Torah root at all, but is pagan in origin. It first occurred when Jewish men in Babylonian exile adapted the pagan custom of the Babylonians to cover their heads. It is well attested that paganism, not the Bible nor pre-Babylon Hebrew teachings, taught that men should cover their heads when they make their prayers to their gods. Jews in Babylonian captivity adapted their ways. Torah was neglected, and it took Ezra after the exile to call them back to the Torah and righteous living.

The Encyclopedia Judaica, a well-respected Jewish source, states: "The covering of the head, as an expression of the fear of G-d, (yirat shammayim), and as a continuation of the Babylonian scholars was gradually endorsed by the rabbis."

Again the Encyclopedia Judaica states: "According to the description of the priestly garb in Exodus (28:4, 37, 40), the high priest wore a miter (miznefet), and the ordinary priests a hat (migba'at). It was generally considered a sign of mourning to cover the head and face (2 Sam. 15:30, 19:5; Jer. 14:3-4; Esth. 6:12). In talmudic times, too, men expressed their sense of grief while mourning by covering their heads, as did Bar Kappara after the death of Judah ha-Nasi (TJ, Kil. 9:4, 32 b; TJ, Ket. 12:3, 35a). A mourner, one on whom a ban (herem) had been pronounced, and a leper, were, in fact, obliged to cover their heads."

In this true context for men having head coverings, it was to show uncleanness and unworthiness before God, their unjustified state penultimately shown in the unclean (tamei) state of death. Hence, men who mourned wore hats and women covered their heads. Lepers covered their heads because of their uncleanness. And, because of their sinfulness, high priests

wore a miter and the priests wore hats. They mourned for their sins and the sins of others as they were daily reminded by the practice of animal sacrifices (see Leviticus 1-5).

Again Encyclopedia Judaica says: "Jewish tradition requires men to cover the head as a sign of humility before G-d, and women, as evidence of modesty before men, although the Bible does not explicitly command either men or women to cover the head."

And again: "Artistic representation, such as Egyptian and Babylonian tablets and in the synagogue at Dura Europos, generally depict Israelites, (and later Jews) without head covering."

Why do Jewish Men Wear Head Coverings Today? The question arises why Jewish men today wear a kippah, or yarmulke when they pray. Rabbinic Judaism explains as already mentioned above: "A man should cover himself to show that he is ashamed before G-d due to his sins and is unworthy to behold Him with an open face." Regarding appearing before the open face of Messiah if you are a believer in Him, the apostle Paul writes in contradistinction: "For God ... made his light shine in our hearts ... in the face of Messiah" (2 Corinthians 4:6). No covering required. His blood, as the final sacrifice, covers us, serves as our atonement before God. Hats off, please.

To wear a miter (high priest), a cap (priest), or a kippah (other Jewish men) was a sign of mourning for sin and shame. That was its primary purpose in the Bible. As long as the high priests and priests had to offer blood sacrifices for themselves, they had to cover their heads because of their own sins. But when Messiah offered Himself as the final sacrifice for sin wearing a crown of thorns on his head for all the sins of mankind, the high priest could (and should) remove his mitre, and the priests their caps. The mourning for their sin was done, as for all who call upon the Name of the Lord for the salvation wrought by Yeshua. Hats come off when men approach God or prophesy in his Name. Mourning for past sins is over.

So we get a stronger understanding in the particular use of miters, hats and caps regarding men wearing them as head coverings, and why they shouldn't. They were for when they were mourning for their sin, as well as for the dead who died in their sins. They were not meant for ordinary men to wear in approaching God through faith in Messiah Yeshua.

So why do Jewish men, especially the orthodox, wear hats and kippahs when the Torah does not endorse it nor earliest Hebrew and Jewish tradition?

Rabbi Dr. Rudolph Brash, writes in his book, *The Star of David*: "The paradox resides in the fact that this practice (head-covering), deemed fundamentally Jewish and hallowed by ancient tradition, is in reality pagan [Gentile], and in terms of Jewish chronology, comparatively modern. The truth is, the practice of head covering was copied from their environment by the Babylonian Jews."

R. Brash writes in the same book: "These Babylonian Jews took their custom to the shores of Spain in the eighth century A.D. where it became firmly established. However, at the same time in other corners of Europe, it was unheard of. History records that at that epoch young German males were called to the reading of the Torah bareheaded. Head covering, although now practiced in Spain and Portugal, had not taken root in east or north Europe. A famed rabbi of the sixteenth century, Rabbi Moses Isserles whose work is included in the book, *The Code of Jewish Law - Shulchan Aruch*, taught that 'the covering of the head could not be considered a religious principle.'"

In this matter, Rabbi Moses Isserles agrees with the apostle Paul.

Rabbi Brash continues in his book, *The Star of David*: "Even more recently, in the eighteenth century, that eminent Jewish authority, Rabbi Eliyah Gaon of Vilna said, 'According to Jewish Law it is permitted to enter a synagogue and pray without covering one's head.'"

The basis of Paul's Appeal for "Hats Off!" What we've discovered on the basis of historical documentation is that Paul is calling for the Jewish men to honor the Torah, especially if they are believers in Yeshua. They should follow his example even as Paul follows Messiah's example (11:1).

Yeshua (Jesus) did not wear a head covering except the crown of thorns. And it was pressed on Him like guilty men pressed by their hands their sins onto innocent sacrificial animals (see Leviticus 1-5).

Paul is saying to the Gentile men, men of pagan background and worldview, to follow the example of the Messiah who is the Living Torah. It was a remarkable teaching from Paul for the Gentile men and women to be Torah conscious, Torah aware, Torah obedient not only for Jews but for Gentiles alike, following the example of the Messiah.

To bring it into sharper context, the issue was not likely that Jews were making Gentile men wear skullcaps. As we've seen from the testimony of Jewish history, it was not an established Jewish tradition in the first century for men to wear hats or head coverings. True, the Jewish scholars of Babylon where the great Jewish school of Babylon existed did persist in wearing hats or head coverings. It was not an established tradition in Jerusalem during Paul's time, though he was undoubtedly acquainted with the Babylonian Jews practice of head coverings contrary to the teachings of his upbringing in the Word of God and contrary to what he learned by example and by revelation from Messiah Yeshua.

So what was the issue? It was that Corinth was predominantly pagan, that is, Gentile. Men wearing head coverings was common among them, especially in reference to their historic approach to cover their heads when they approached their idols. Further, homosexual men, something not uncommon in Greco-Roman culture, also were known to distinguish themselves by an effeminate covering of their heads and faces, like a woman wearing a veil.

Gentile men who became believers, being ignorant of the Torah and the rest of the Scriptures, brought their pagan practice of wearing head coverings into the worship of Almighty God and his Son, our Lord Yeshua. Paul's agenda is to try to get the Gentile believers to truly hear the Word of God, the Scriptures, as it speaks to their lives, respecting the Torah, Prophets and Writings. He does not want them to adapt to pagan ways in worship of God, to divorce themselves from the Torah and all the rest of the Scriptures, or from God's revelation in Messiah who set the example, the highest example, of obedience to our heavenly Father in the "filling up" of Torah in himself.

An ironic twist. Consider this irony. First, the Israelite men, and later the Jewish men, were taught not to cover their heads in prayer or when prophesying, even as the apostle Paul clearly understood from the Torah and our Lord Yeshua. He taught the Corinthians accurately about the matter. The biblical exception, of course, was in mourning over the unclean state of humanity, particularly in the time of mourning for the dead.

Second, Gentile men covered their heads as a pagan rite. And if the head and face were covered as a woman uses a veil, it was a mark of homosexual men as well. Paul told the Corinthians not to embrace their pagan past but to embrace the Torah and the rest of the Scriptures in this matter with its truth being "filled up" in the Messiah who set the most excellent example in Torah observance.

Now, here is the irony. Gentile believers in Yeshua, in fact, did in fact embrace the Torah's teachings fully exemplified in the Lord Yeshua. By the Lord's holy example, as Paul taught the Gentile believers to obey, the Gentiles (until the Roman Church era after the fourth century) got rid of their pagan ways regarding head coverings, adapting to the ways of God taught in Scripture.

Between the fourth and sixteenth centuries Roman Catholic priests reverted to head coverings as the pagans did before. The red hats of the cardinals and the miter of the papacy still remain intact from Gentile customs. But In the Protestant Reformation, head coverings for ministers was dropped entirely. The Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church continue the practice of men wearing head coverings today.

Now in this light of Protestant ministers and other men not wearing head coverings, we learn from Jewish literature and teachings a century after the Protestant Reformation that Rabbinic Judaism was greatly offended by Christian men going bare-headed as they were taught to do from Scripture and ancient traditions, teachings so familiar to the apostle Paul.

In the Encyclopedia Judaica, we find this statement: "The opinion of Rabbi David Halevy of Ostrog (17th century) declared that since Christians generally pray bareheaded, the Jewish prohibition to do so was based on the biblical injunction not to imitate the heathen custom."

What irony! The Jewish men by Scripture and ancient tradition were to be bareheaded except when mourning the dead. When Christian men finally caught on and changed their pagan practice of head covering when worshipping their gods, the Jewish men, to distance themselves from Gentile believers in Yeshua, adopted the Gentiles pagan practice!

Women should wear head coverings. Having considered this, what do we make of what Paul says to the women about wearing a head covering when they pray or prophesy?

We will not make this a detailed study. Our purpose is to clarify the historical record regarding men not wearing head coverings. But we will lightly touch the subject regarding women and head coverings.

What Paul teaches, using Messiah's teachings as the fulness of the Torah, is that for a woman to worship, especially to speak to God or others in worship, she should wear a head covering. Why? In the first century and the centuries before and after, for a woman to wear a head covering was an act of propriety in respect for her husband and his covering role for her. Further, it recognized that the Lord Almighty was over her husband as well who covers man and woman with his rule and makes them clean by his atoning blood. If the woman acts improperly in respect to her husband by uncoverng her head, Paul says, she "dishonors her head" (11:5).

What is her head? The answer is three-fold: (1) her own head, i.e., herself as a whole being; (2) her husband; and (3) the Lord God. Wearing a head covering showed her "sign of authority on her head" (11:10).

Among the Jews, believers and non-believers in the Messiah, in those days if a woman appeared in public without her veil, she would appear as one of the women whose head was shorn as a witness to her harlotry. This is what was done to a woman caught in adultery. Paul is sanctioning this ancient and prevailing custom so that a woman does not appear to be in contention, rebellion or wanton in respect to her husband, to the Lord God and to her reputation in the community.

The Gemara (commentary) of the Talmud, Berakhot 24a, asserts that when a normally covered area of a woman's body, including her head, becomes uncovered (tevach), that area of her body is called 'erva, a special word for "nakedness" that is used in the sense of incest, adultery, and so forth. So for a woman to have her head uncovered was a major breakdown in her modesty and reputation. It dishonored her pledge of fidelity to her husband and faithfulness to the Lord Almighty.

Did Yeshua wear a head covering? Paul says no. He contends that the Lord gave the example for men not to wear a head covering completely in line with the Torah's teaching. Yeshua did not violate the Torah but "filled it up" in Himself.

Today, Yeshua is often pictured or said to have worn his talit (garment with four tassels [tzitzit]) over his head as a head covering when he prayed, taught or prophesied. This, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:1-2 was not Messiah's example that He passed on to him and the Lord's disciples. Yeshua did not borrow the Gentile traditions of Babylon to wear a head covering when He worshiped his Father. He ever remained true and faithful to the Torah.

This puts into serious question the contemporary teaching that the talit (now resembling a prayer shawl) was used to cover the head for prayer in the time of Yeshua's ministry. On the contrary, the talit was not used to cover a man's head for prayer at all. That was never its function biblically.

Some interpret that the talit, the Jewish man's outer garment, was the "prayer closet" Yeshua refers to in Matthew 6:6. This cannot be a correct interpretation for obvious reasons already explained. It was contrary to the Torah and Yeshua did not violate it but kept it perfectly without sin.

Paul, instead, cites the Messiah Yeshua as the example for his teaching regarding men not to wear a head covering in worship, especially when they pray or prophesy.