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The hair is not the only covering in 1 Corinthians 11

By BNONN TENNANT on JULY 3, 2023
4 minutes to read

It is impossible for the covering that Paul is speaking about in 1 Corinthians 11 to be merely the woman's hair. Verse 6 makes this reading incoherent, and verse 15 directly signals that it is wrong by using a different word for covering than the rest of the chapter.

There is a perplexingly incoherent interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11 that I've heard often enough—and is held by enough “big names” like Doug Wilson—to be nonetheless worthy of brief refutation.

The idea is that since verse 15 says that a woman's hair is given to her for a covering, this is the *only* covering in view in the chapter. Thus Paul is really just concerned about women praying or prophesying with their covering on, rather

than off. I.e., with long hair, rather than cut hair.

The biggest and most obvious problem with this reading is the mincemeat it makes of verse 6. For a woman to be “uncovered” is (arguendo) for a woman to have her hair cut off. But verse 6 says:

For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn: now if it is shameful to a woman to be shorn or to be shaven, let her be covered. (1 Co 11:6)

If you don't immediately see the problem, let's substitute the hair-as-covering interpretation directly into the verse:

For if a woman is not long-haired, let her also cut off her hair: now if it is shameful to a woman to cut off her hair or to be shaven, let her be long-haired. (1 Co 11:6)

This is obviously incoherent nonsense, and makes Paul's argument incomprehensible. It has him saying, in effect, if a woman cuts her hair off, then she should cut her hair off. Well...she already did that.

(Speaking of which, on this interpretation, what is the rationale for Paul writing this long section? Were women shaving or shearing their heads at Corinth? That seems pretty implausible. Never mind that the Corinthians themselves a hundred years later were strangely practicing veiling in obedience to 1 Co 11...)

The only way verse 6 makes sense is if Paul is *likening* being uncovered to being shorn or shaven. Which only works if being uncovered is *distinct* from being shorn or shaven. Hence, the hair cannot be the covering.

Ironically, this is actually signaled *in verse 15*, where Paul uses a distinctly different word for “covering” (obscured in most translations):

Now a woman, if she have locks, it is a glory to her: for her locks are given her for a mantle.


The Greek word I have here translated as mantle is rare in the New Testament, occurring only here and in Hebrews 1:12, referring to the heavens:


And as a mantle shalt thou roll them up, as a garment, and they shall be changed.


This term is unique in 1 Corinthians 11—verse 15 is the only place where Paul uses it. At every point in this chapter he uses the same word to refer to covering and uncovering, *except* here. It's almost like he didn't want us to think that the covering he was referring to in the rest of the chapter was the same one he refers to in verse 15, since that would completely confuse his point and render his argument meaningless. So he signals the distinction by using a distinct word. As I've covered in the past, the central logic of his argument—obvious once you see it—is that in worship, only God's glory should be on display. Therefore, if a woman's glory is present in worship, it should be covered. It does no good to say that a woman's glory *is* a covering, because true as that may be, it does not cover itself. The canopy of a tree is both a glory and a covering, but it does not cover itself, it covers the tree. It makes the tree *more* glorious *by* covering it. The same is true of God himself: the pillar of fire and cloud covers and conceals him, yet the pillar is itself glorious. The connection to the mantle of the heavens is hopefully obvious; the heavens also contain cloud, and also "cover" God, since he dwells *above* and *within* them—


...that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in... Thou art clothed with honor and majesty: who coverest thyself with light as with a garment; who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain... (Is 40:22; Ps 104:1-2)


So the heavens are a covering, yet they are also glorious—indeed, they tell of the glory of God (Ps 19:1). The same is true of a woman's hair—it is a glorious covering. And so it must be covered in worship, where God's glory alone is to be revealed and celebrated.


 3 comments

 Hmm, interesting. I thought it meant something like “If a woman is going to have short hair, she might as well shave her head” (since she was given her hair as a covering).

GORDON  [July 9th, 2023 <https://bnonn.com/the-hair-is-not-the-only-covering-in-I-corinthians-II/#comment-47438>](https://bnonn.com/the-hair-is-not-the-only-covering-in-I-corinthians-II/#comment-47438)

 Yeah, I might be in agreement with Gordon above. I saw immediately in v. 6 how Paul could be saying (in your second translation), “if a woman is not long-haired, let her also cut off (*all*) her hair,” thus distinguishing long hair from short hair. Short hair, as I understand it, would have been scandalous in Paul’s day, like an act of defiance. But therein lies the difference. Could that be right?


ADAM  [July 31st, 2023 <https://bnonn.com/the-hair-is-not-the-only-covering-in-I-corinthians-II/#comment-47615>](https://bnonn.com/the-hair-is-not-the-only-covering-in-I-corinthians-II/#comment-47615)

 Gordon, I’m not sure I’m tracking with your argument. Paul obviously excludes this option by distinguishing being uncovered from being shorn or shaven. To be uncovered is not to be shorn, for,

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<HTTPS://BN “if a woman is not covered, **then** let her be shorn.” But to be uncovered under this view *just is* to be shorn. I.e., ex hypothesi, to cut off the covering (of hair) = shorn = being uncovered. The NET is helpful here:

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.

Any length at which the hair is not considered “cut off” enough to be uncovered is also long enough to not be considered shorn, given the presuppositions of the text itself. You have to read some kind of unstated middle length into the text for this option to work.

 [August 24th, 2023 <https://bnonn.com/the-hair-is-not-the-only-covering-in-I-corinthians-II/#comment-47717>](https://bnonn.com/the-hair-is-not-the-only-covering-in-I-corinthians-II/#comment-47717)

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