Paul and Corinthian Women's Hairstyles

by Nancy A. Carter*

| House Churches | The New Creation | Women's Head Coverings | Paul's Comments |

Paul discusses head coverings and hairstyles for female and male prophets in (1 Corinthians 11:2-6). Let's look at the archaeological evidence for women's hairstyles worn in Paul's day as an aid to understanding his comments about the Corinthian women prophets in particular.

Most of the art that survives of Greco-Roman women who lived around the time of Paul is of upper class women. Hairstyles may have differed according to class and status.

*Detail of relief on large family tomb monument from Neumagen depicting four female slaves dressing wife's hair. Trier, Landesmuseum. Credit: Barbara McManus, 1988

In general, Greco-Roman women wore their long hair up. They let their hair down in certain public contexts, including times of mourning, weddings, and some religious rites.

Greco-Roman women used hairpins, several inches long, to fasten up their hair. The designs of hairpins varied from very plain to fancily carved.
lathed. Hairpins could be made of inexpensive bone or more expensive material, such as silver or ivory.

Some scholars believe that Paul asked the Corinthian women prophets to pin up their hair, rather than wear head coverings (veils). (Read an alternate translation of 1 Corinthians 11.) When the women prophets participated in ecstatic prayer and prophecy during Christian worship, they apparently let their hair down.

The practice of women letting their hair flow loose and uncovered was associated with ecstatic rituals in a number of non-Christian religious associations (religious communities). For example, when worshiping Dionysus, god of wine and revelry, women let the hair down like the mythic Maenads.¹ Maenads (or Bacchae) were female worshipers of Dionysus depicted in myth as madwomen. (The English word "maniac" has roots similar to "Maenad" in Latin and Greek).

Corinth was a major center for Isis (see sculpture below); possibly some of the women prophets of the church had once worshiped her. Certainly they were familiar with this religion, which was popular, especially among women. Isis was a mother goddess who, with her husband Osiris and son Horus, formed a trinity. Her religion included theology of death, mourning, and resurrection connected with a mythic story about Isis’ search for the fourteen body parts of her murdered husband Osiris, who then was restored to life.²
"Archeological evidence also shows that female devotees of Isis usually wore long hair 'with a band around the forehead and curls falling on the shoulder,' while male initiates had their hair shaven."³ Isis was said to have made women's power equal to men's. Like Christianity her communities of worship (called "associations") admitted both women and slaves to equal membership. When the women prophets in the Corinth wore their hair down it may have symbolized to them equality of status with the male prophets.⁴

Paul did not want the Gentile Christian female prophets wearing unrestrained hair. One reason may have been that from a traditional Jewish Christian view, loose hair was a sign of uncleanness. Proper Jewish women braided their hair and and pinned it up. Paul was being sarcastic when he wrote, "any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled [or uncovered with bound up hair] disgraces her head it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved," He was arguing that Christian women wearing their hair down like female ecstatics of other religions was as disgraceful as shaving their head like a man.⁵

Scholars propose a variety of motivations and interpretations for Paul's words. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza suggests he was concerned that the women prophets were giving the "impression of madness and frenzy so typical of orgiastic cultic worship" and they must therefore project a more proper image with restrained hairstyles. Paul's intent was "not reenforcement of gender differences" but rather he was concerned with "the order and missionary character of the worship community."⁶ Antoinette Clark Wire believes that conflict between Paul and the women prophets was a complex one that involved power dynamics related to social status, gender expectations, and interpretation of the early Christian baptismal formula:
Watch the online video for this study. Included is background given by the Rev. Dr. Judith A. Stevens on Corinthians 11 and women's hairstyles.

Return: Paul & Women's Head Coverings --Background and Pictures

Paul's Letters to the Corinthians

Visit Us and Our Other Studies

Email: umw@gbgm-umc.org
Web: http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/

http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/corinths/hairstyles.htm

Notes and Credits

*Nancy A. Carter (ncarter@gbgm-umc.org) has an M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where she won the Hitchcock Award in Church History. Her Ph.D. is in literary studies (literature and theology) from American University in Washington, D.C. She has authored books for church laity including Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: Who Do You Say That I Am?, a spiritual growth study for United Methodist Women written with Bishop Leontine T. C. Kelly.

This web page was originally written in January, 2000.


4 Fiorenza, pp. 226-228.

5 Fiorenza, pp. 226-228.

6 Fiorenza, p. 230.


**Disclaimer:** Some links jump to outside sites for further information on Corinthians, the Bible, Paul, and other resources. Links do not constitute an endorsement by the Women's Division of the information on other web sites. External web sites offer us diverse perspectives; afford us an opportunity to compare them to United Methodist positions; and, encourage us to critically analyze the issues raised by the Corinthians web pages.

Top