



QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE JEWISH TRADITIONS OF HEADCOVERING



A brother in Singapore has sent in several questions that are obviously based on a study of 1st Cor. 11, the chapter in which Paul writes about the Church at Worship.

For the sake of brevity I must deal with his questions in a manageable form, since space in the 'S.S.' is limited. Our brother asks:

1. Why do Jewish men wear a skullcap?
2. Why do women cover their heads and men do not?
3. What is meant by 'because of the angels'?

Q. 1 The Jewish 'skull-cap', the YARMULKE

This is the name of the head covering worn by religious Jewish males, i.e. boys and men. Boys are encouraged to wear the yarmulke from an early age in order to develop the habit of wearing it, and there are some strict, orthodox Jews who never take it off.

Jewish authorities, however, will admit that the wearing of this form of head-covering is actually a custom or a tradition, which, with the passage of time, has become virtually compulsory, and if you were to ask an orthodox Jew why he wears it, he would give you at least one of several reasons. He will say that he wears it:

1. As a recognition and reminder of the Presence of God; it is on his head because God is '*above mankind*'.
2. To show that he accepts the authority of the '*mitsvot*'; that is, the 613 commandments of the Law.
3. To declare his identity as a Jew. In this connection it is interesting to note that one Jewish scholar says that Jewish men should *never* uncover their heads, in order to distinguish themselves from Christians, especially when they are at prayer.

There are, as one might expect, widely differing views as to *how* and *when* this head covering should be worn. For example:

- ❑ One Jewish authority states that a man should not *walk* more than 4 cubits with his head uncovered.
- ❑ Another reduces the distance to *less* than four cubits.
- ❑ And yet another says that he should wear his yarmulke even when *standing still!*

But there is one crucial fact that which Jewish teachers cannot deny. It is that there is no mention of this item of dress in the Old Testament scriptures - which they call the '*Tanach*'. In fact, the reason why the word '*yarmulke*' is not found in the Hebrew Scriptures is because it is not even a Hebrew word. It comes from a Polish word which simply means '*cap*', and we may be sure that, had the wearing of such a head-covering been imposed by divine command, rules governing its form and wear would have been very clearly laid down in the '*Torah*', the Law.

As it is, a Jew may buy his Yarmulke made of virtually any kind of fabric he wishes, from simple, plain cloth to the richest and most luxurious and ornate material available; all with a price-tag to match! This makes it possible for a Jew to make a statement about his social status, or about his religious beliefs, in the yarmulke that he wears, since the many different sects of Judaism wear head-coverings that differ

in style, material, and colour.

And, not surprisingly, special occasions in Jewish society, such as weddings and other celebrations, all provide excellent opportunities for the display of expensive yarmulkes. Consequently, there are many Jewish businesses that are happy to supply them in whatever material, and at whatever cost, the customer desires for such occasions.

If further proof of the fact that this head-covering is not worn because God has commanded it, in the United States, members of Jewish sports organizations often wear yarmulkes in their team colours, and those worn by small Jewish children are often decorated with cartoon characters. I understand that "Star Wars" characters are very popular!

Not surprisingly, strict, orthodox Jews disapprove of such behaviour, and regard it as unseemly and irreverent, and some Jewish schools strictly ban yarmulkes that do not conform to traditional values.

The yarmulke and Scripture?

What we may learn from this is that, for the reason why Jewish men cover their heads in prayer we have to search outside of scriptures, and this means, looking into the Jewish 'Talmud', which is the collection of civil and religious rules, customs, traditions and legends, that cannot be traced back any farther than the 5th century A.D. It is the accumulated wisdom and teaching of their wisest men, and only the most fanatical Jew would claim it to be of divine origin.

Q.2. Why do Christian men pray with uncovered heads?

In contrast with the man-made tradition of the yarmulke, Christian men pray with uncovered heads because:

- 1. They recognize that they are in the Presence of Deity, and**
- 2. Because they obey the clear teaching of God's word.**

In the first verse of 1st Cor.11, we read that '*the head of every man is Christ*', and then in v. 4, we are told that '*every man praying or prophesying having his head covered, dishonours his head*'. Who is the man's 'head'? The man's head is Christ. This means that if a male Christian were to pray with his head covered, he would be dishonouring, or, showing disrespect for Christ, Who is present when His Church meets in worship.

Q.3. What is meant by 'because of the angels'?

This statement, found in verse 10, concerns the woman's head covering. As our brother mentions in his letter, there are some who believe that the instruction concerning the woman's head-covering relates only to a custom of that age, but when we begin to interpret scripture in a way which relegates the commands of God to limited times and cultures we are treading on very dangerous ground.

Are we to understand that angels are no longer interested in woman's acceptance of God's instruction in verse 10 because it applied only to that period? I think not!

In this case, the words '*because of the angels*', tell us that women's acceptance of the order revealed by the Holy Spirit in verse 1 of the chapter, and her compliance with the command in laid down v.10, constitutes an example of obedience, which the angels should observe and follow. Remember that angels have not always been obedient. (Jude.v.6. 2nd Pet.2:4).

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