

Hijab in the Bible and Torah

(part 1 of 2): Hijab in Christian Denominations



The literal meaning of hijab is to veil, to cover or to screen. It encompasses more than just a dress code; it is concerned with moral boundaries and respect for woman. It is part of community cohesion and modest behaviour. However, the term hijab has become interchangeable with the word scarf. The meaning is sometimes extended to cultural dress standards such as the burqa of Afghanistan, the chador of Iran and the shalwar kamise of Pakistan. Hijab has multiple meanings and in this series of articles we are going to focus on hijab as a head covering and discuss hijab in the Bible and the Torah.

The first recorded instance of veiling or covering the hair for women is recorded in Assyrian legal texts from the 13th century BCE. Its use was restricted to noble women. Prostitutes, slaves and poor women were forbidden to cover their hair/heads. In both the ancient empires of Greece and Rome there is evidence that points to various degrees of head coverings worn by females. Particularly in Rome it seems that head coverings were associated with prayer and devotion. While in Greece evidence determined by sculpture and pottery from that time leads many to believe that respectable woman covered their heads outside the home. As new discoveries are made our opinions about the degree and reasons for covering wax and wane but we can be sure that women's head or hair covering was not an unknown practice.

Interestingly the Bible verses to which Christians refer to when explaining why women should cover their heads, especially in prayer or in church come to us from Saint Paul in his letters to the Corinthians. Corinth was a city situated on the peninsula of Southern Greece and was part of the Roman Empire during the time Corinthians was written. It was a cultural melting-pot of Roman, Greek, and Jewish cultures, thus it is pertinent to wonder what cultural norms were retained as the city changed hands and empires.

1 Corinthians 11:5, says that "Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head, for that is one and the same as if her

head were shaved.” The early Christian women veiled their heads in church and anytime they were in public and Christian women continued to maintain this practice to some degree throughout the centuries until the 19th and 20th centuries when the practice rapidly declined.

In Corinth and throughout Christian history the head covering was, and in some places and denominations still is, considered a sign of submission to authority, to God and or to her husband. Christians in second century Egypt were urged by Christian theologian Clement to “... go to church decently attired, with natural step, embracing silence, possessing unfeigned love, pure in body, pure in heart, fit to pray to God. Let the woman observe this, further. Let her be entirely covered, unless she happens to be at home. For that style of dress is grave, and protects from being gazed at. And she will never fall, who puts before her eyes modesty, and her shawl; nor will she invite another to fall into sin by uncovering her face. For this is the wish of the Word, since it is becoming for her to pray veiled.”^[1]

The historical roots of veiling in Western Europe go back to the Byzantine Empire, where veiling codes attributed high social rank to families whose women were veiled. In the Middle Ages it was customary for married women to cover their hair with various kinds of coverings. Paintings of urban women in Western Europe often depict everything covered except the face and hands. At the time peasant and working-class women who did not cover were considered "loose" and fair game for assault. This non respectable depiction of uncovered women also plays out in the Muslim context where Quran says that veiling or covering indicates the high status of believing women.

“...Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks (veils) all over their bodies That will be better, that they should be known (as free respectable women) so as not to be annoyed (molested or insulted)...” (Quran 33:59)

A Christian woman who becomes a nun is said "to take the veil". This is said in reference to her head covering. Nuns throughout Christian history have been recognisable by their distinctive head coverings many of which resemble Muslim hijab. In medieval times, across the western world married women normally covered their hair outside the house, and nun's veils were often based on secular styles, reflecting a nun's position as “a bride of Christ”. Nuns were said to give up a secular life in order to serve God but nonetheless were due the respect and honour given to a modest married woman.

There is some evidence to suggest that veiling in Spain was influenced by the remnants of the Andalusian Islamic empire and by Muslim women from nearby North Africa. The lightweight lace head covering known as the mantilla came into use in Spain at the end of the 16th century, and was a common sight at Catholic masses throughout the world. Queen Isabella II of Spain actively encouraged its use inside and outside the church. After her abdication in 1870, the use of the mantilla became largely limited to formal

occasions and at mass. Strangely enough the requirement that women cover their heads in church was not introduced into Canon Law until 1917. From then until 1983, the Catholic Church's Code of Canon Law mandated that women wear veils or other head coverings. Prior to 1917, there was no such law, though wearing hats or veils was customary for women.

Although the use of veils and scarves has diminished there are some Christian denominations where the practice has maintained its high status and is in some cases mandatory. For nearly 2000 years Orthodox women, whether they be Greek, Serbian, Russian, Egyptian, or Syrian have gone to church with their heads covered. The universal Orthodox Church has an enforced dress code based around non distraction from prayer. In Albania, Christian women often wear white veils and in Albanian Orthodox Christian church buildings, women are separated from men by latticework partitions. Many smaller protestant Christian denominations wear some sort of head covering or hijab. These include the Amish, the Mennonites, and the Hutterites. In those Protestant denominations that have no official expectation that women cover, some individuals choose to practice head covering according to their understanding of 1 Corinthians 11. Many Catholic women choose to cover their heads to emulate the Virgin Mary. Mary the mother of Jesus covered her head and hair according to Jewish customs of the time and we will explore these and later Judaic hijab customs in the next article.

Footnotes:

[1] Clement of Alexandria, Paedagogus [The Instructor], Book III. Chapter XI. English translation from Ante-Nicene Fathers.

(part 2 of 2): Hijab in Torah

Modern Jewish women who cover their hair ascribe various meanings to the act. For some it is a sign of marriage, for others it is a symbol of piety and humility, perhaps an act of deference to the will of God. It is also thought of as a sign of modesty. In Biblical times, in the Middle East and the ancient Greco Roman worlds it was customary for the hair to be covered, at least by married, respectable and free women. The Old Testament (Torah) mentions head or hair covering only briefly but these few words have evolved into a complex hijab ritual practiced by devout Jews across the globe.

The claim that covering the hair was a biblical injunction comes from a small passage in the Book of Numbers referring to the priest uncovering or loosening a women's hair as a punishment or humiliation. It describes a ceremony that tests the fidelity of a woman accused of adultery. According to the Torah, the priest uncovers or unbraids the accused woman's hair as part of the humiliation that precedes the ceremony and can be found in the Book of Numbers 5:18.

Other orders calling for the Jewish woman to wear hijab or to cover her hair come from the body of literature known collectively as the Talmud. Accordingly women 'going about' with uncovered hair were engaging in an unacceptable act, so unacceptable that it was considered grounds for divorce. In a society so highly conscious of sexuality and its dangers, veiling was considered an absolute necessity to maintain modesty and chastity. Some rabbis even considered the exposure of a woman's hair to be as socially unacceptable as the exposure of her private parts. Thus married women were enjoined to cover their hair in communal spaces and many rabbis even forbade the recitation of blessings in the presence of a bareheaded woman.

The modesty laws found in the Talmud acted to render the woman inaccessible and unavailable to all but her husband. The covering of the hair was a warning signifying that the wearer was a respectable married woman. So although the Jewish hijab is a symbol of submission it is also a badge of honour. When a married woman covers her head it is a symbol of the greater dignity now attributed to her. Many women regard their head coverings as a queen does her crown.

In biblical and post biblical Judaism the wearing of hijab came to represent part of a women's life cycle, symbolizing the move from maidenhood to womanhood. By the Middle Ages, across the Jewish world, hair covering was a firmly entrenched religious obligation. Interestingly this was the same obligation that at the time, existed in both the Christian and Muslim spheres of influence.

The first serious challenge to traditional hair covering came from the wearing of wigs. A practice that began in the French court soon swept over Europe and into the Jewish communities. The practice was at first denounced by Jewish authorities who inveighed against what appeared to be inappropriate emulation of the ways of the non-Jews. Many maintained that the traditional prohibition against women displaying their hair was to prevent feminine attraction from giving men sinful thoughts. The wig, they claimed, could evoke the same feelings as the women's own hair. Nonetheless the wearing of wigs soon crept into Jewish communities and was eventually accepted.

Despite this many Jewish women continued to find it difficult to wear a wig instead of the more traditional scarves and veils and some wore the wig but covered it in the usual manner. The wearing of wigs as a hair covering also had a comeback in the 19th and 20th centuries when Jewish women needed to participate in secular life but did not want to compromise religious edicts. When the external pressures of the European life forced many Jewish women to go out bare-headed some found it more convenient to replace their traditional veil with a wig.

While not inexorably linked with the wearing of wigs the practice of shaving a woman's hair upon marriage became prevalent in central Europe in what is known as the early modern period Jewish law. Thus many women

chose to shave their heads in order that no hair could escape the confines of her wig or scarf.

Into the 20th and 21st centuries there is widespread disregard for the practice of hair covering itself. However religiously oriented Jews continue to confront the problem. There are rabbis who tolerate the lapse of the custom with the understanding that society had changed and it is no longer considered immodest to keep one's hair uncovered but for the most part head covering continues to be problematic. Today, the majority of Jewish women do not cover their hair except in the synagogue.

For Jewish and Muslim women modesty is an important part of their faith, influencing their daily lives in many ways such as how they walk, dress, and interact with others. Both religions encourage modesty primarily to channel a woman's beauty to where it truly belongs, within her marriage. Both religions take their laws of modesty very seriously and hijab is considered a way of living rather than just a scarf, wig, or veil. At one time, and as little as 100 years ago, most Christian denominations considered covering their hair and dressing modestly an integral part of their religious beliefs too. In the 21st century this behaviour is generally restricted to fringe denominations yet to a certain extent both Christianity and Judaism still consider modest dress and behaviour to be the norm.