

# Tzitzit, Tallits, and Head Coverings

by Tim Kelley

What we wear makes a difference. It tells a lot about who we are, where we're from, our outlook on life, and in many cases, what we believe. In the mid 70's a book was published entitled "Dress for Success". It was about how a person's dress could affect their advancement in the work place. It was pretty much the concept that *you dress as you feel* . . . if you feel successful, you will dress that way. In times past it would be that when a person interviewed for a job, he would often put his "best foot forward" at the interview which would include dressing nicely. It was considered a part of looking professional.

How we dress is often intended to stimulate a certain reaction from those who will be seeing you. For instance, a person in uniform – a policeman, soldier, or even a nurse - garners more respect than a person in street clothes. As well, a woman dressed in short skirt, high heels, and a low cut blouse will stimulate a different response than the same woman dressed in an ankle length skirt and a high-collar blouse with long sleeves – sort of the Mary Poppins look.

There are also things that we attach to our clothing that tell something about us as well. A badge on your shirt normally indicates that you're a police officer of some type. A king or a queen will normally wear a crown. A ribbon on your lapel indicates that you support a certain cause, and a person with a cross hanging from his neck gives an indication of that person's religious bent. These little symbols don't have any intrinsic power or function, their only real purpose is to give the person who might be looking at you a little hint as to who you are and what you believe.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is aware of the fact that we are often inclined to think a certain way about a person based on the way he dresses or by what he attaches to his clothing, thus clothing is a big thing to God.

When instructing Moses about the things pertaining to the Tabernacle worship, He instructed Moses to make specific garments for the priesthood.

ESV **Exodus 28:2** And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty.

These colorful and stately garments were not just so that Aaron would look different than the other Israelites, or even the other priests. They were to set him apart from the others in their mind. Notice how the LXX interprets this verse:

LXE **Exodus 28:2** And thou shalt make holy apparel for Aaron thy brother, for honour and glory.

God wanted the Israelite people to honor Aaron's role, thus one of the purposes of Aaron's garments was to instill a sense of honor or respect in and for him. You'll remember that Aaron did not wear these garments all the time . . . only when he was performing his duties as a priest.<sup>1</sup> It was while he was doing this work that he was to be given the utmost respect, after all, while performing his duties he would be bearing the weight of all Israel on his shoulders.<sup>2</sup>

So garments, as well as the decorations attached to the garments (the breastplate, the gold plate on his turban, the pomegranates on the robe) are all designed to instill a certain amount of recognition and respect for the High Priest.

When we began to study the scriptures through Hebraic eyes, many of us began to see that God gave instructions pertaining to dress. This was oftentimes due to the newly-found or at least renewed awareness of the Jewish people and lifestyle. We noticed that many Jewish people wore caps, and that if we were to visit a Jewish synagogue (other than a Reform synagogue), we were asked to wear a *kippah* – a skull cap. We also saw that many men wore a tallit – a prayer shawl – during times of worship or

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 28:43

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 28:29-30

## Tzitzits, Tallits, and Head Coverings

---

while reciting the Torah. And of course, we became aware that the children of Israel were instructed to wear tassels on their garments.

In our zeal, many of us began wearing these things without doing much research into what the Bible says about them. Seeing that not all these items of dress were Biblically mandated, others held back and did not wear them . . . that was my reason for holding back. And of course, some held on to the belief that these things are *ceremonial* and can thus be “spiritualized” away.

Today we’re going to do a brief study on the Biblical instructions pertaining to head coverings, tallits, and tassels to see if they are something a child of God would want to incorporate into his or her dress.

### Head Coverings

Head coverings are something that most of us really want to dismiss because, after all, it’s not a part of our culture. In America hardly anyone other than the Amish and Mennonites wear head coverings for religious purposes. I just recently went to an auction where the auctioneering company was owned by a Mennonite family. I recognized this within a few seconds of entering the building because I saw how the auctioneer’s women employees were dressed . . . they wore long dresses and head coverings. They were clearly distinguishable from the wives of some of the men attending the auction because of the way they dressed.

If we lived in the middle east, head coverings would not be an issue. In that part of the world everyone wears a head covering. In fact it’s customary for American dignitaries, especially women, to wear a head covering while in certain middle-eastern countries out of respect for the native people. This became an issue during the first Gulf war when female American soldiers based in Saudi Arabia were told to wear head coverings anytime they got off the American base.

What about the Jews – don’t they wear head coverings? Yes and no. In the synagogue most Jewish people (men and women) do wear either a kippah or a scarf, but outside of Jewish communities, most Jewish people don’t do so on a daily basis. Why? Because they recognize that head coverings are not mandated in scripture except in certain cases. Never-the-less, if you were to go to Jerusalem you’ll find that most of the Jewish people do wear head coverings.

So what does the Bible have to say about head coverings. The place to start our search is not in 1 Corinthians, but in the beginning of the book. So we’ll go to the place were head coverings are first alluded to – the story of Isaac and Rebekkah.

NKJ **Genesis 24:65** for she had said to the servant, "Who *is* this man walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It *is* my master." So she took a veil and covered herself.

The Hebrew word for veil in this passage is *tsaiyph* (6809 צַעִיף ) which means a wrapper. It comes from a root word that means to wrap over. The text also says that she covered (3680 קָאֵחַ kakah - concealed ) herself with the *tsaiyph*, the wrapper. So here's Rebecca getting ready to meet the man who she was betrothed to, and she covered herself – at least her head. This was obviously a custom of the day.

Later we find that the priests of Israel were to wear various coverings, including head coverings, during their time of service.

ESV **Exodus 28:4** These are the garments that they shall make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a coat of checker work, a turban (4701 מִצְנֶפֶת mitsnepheth ), and a sash. They shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons to serve me as priests.

ESV **Exodus 28:40** "For Aaron's sons you shall make coats and sashes and caps (4021 מִגְבָּעַת migba`ah ). You shall make them for glory and beauty.

The turban of the High Priest seems to have been more of a wound type of headdress ( from 6801 – wrapping, wound around) as opposed to that of the regular priests who wore caps. The word caps comes

## Tzitzits, Tallits, and Head Coverings

---

from the root word *gaba* (Strong's 1389) that means "hill" and would thus give the connotation that the *cap* looked like a hill, not necessarily a mountain. This would lend one to think of a Jewish *kippah*, a cap that looks something like a hill as opposed to a mountain.

As far as I can tell, this is the only place a mandate is made in regards to head coverings. Notice that the priest wore these garments during their priestly service which, in Tabernacle/Temple times, was a part of the daily worship.<sup>3</sup> Never-the-less, there are a number of illusions to the thought that the Hebrew people did wear head coverings as a matter of practice. For instance, the case of the woman suspected of adultery – the *sotah* laws – reveals something interesting.

NKJ **Numbers 5:18** 'Then the priest shall stand the woman before the LORD, uncover the woman's head, and put the offering for remembering in her hands, which *is* the grain offering of jealousy. And the priest shall have in his hand the bitter water that brings a curse.

In order to perform this service, the priest had to uncover the woman's head. Some translations say that he was to unbind or let loose her hair, but the Hebrew word for *head* is *rosh* (7218 שָׁׁרֶשׁ) which actually means *head*, not hair.<sup>4</sup> Thus it could be assumed that at this time in Israel's history, married women wore head coverings.

Seven hundred years later we read a prophecy of what God was going to do to Israel in the event they didn't repent of their idolatry. Verses 16 thru 23 of chapter 3 show that God would take away the things that make the daughters of Zion beautiful and replace them with stench and ugliness. I've been taught that the things that were taken away are the things that symbolized an adulterous woman, but I now believe that instead, they represent a woman of beauty – a woman walking in God's way. Adultery and sin is ugly . . . not beauty. Let's look at what was taken from the daughters of Zion – the children of Israel.

Isaiah 3:18-23 <sup>18</sup> In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; <sup>19</sup> the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarves; <sup>20</sup> the headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets; <sup>21</sup> the signet rings and nose rings; <sup>22</sup> the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags; <sup>23</sup> the mirrors, the linen garments, the turbans (<sup>6797 צְנִיֵּף</sup> tsaniyph – turban, headdress ), and the veils.

Comparing this verse to the case of Rebecca who was given a nose ring when she became betrothed to Isaac<sup>5</sup> as well as wore a veil once she was married. Also, look at Ezekiel 16:9 – 13 where Israel is once again given jewels and a nose ring. According to these passages, it's clear that the woman who was pleasing to God had a turban on her head. According to the Ezekiel passage, in the future Israel is given a crown – a circular covering for her head.

So what about 1 Corinthians 11? The first thing to notice is the first two verses in this chapter -

ESV **1 Corinthians 11:1** Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. <sup>2</sup> Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.

The word for *traditions* is *paradosis* (3862) which 12 out of 13 times in the New Testament, and predominantly in Paul's writings, is translated *traditions*. This verse is the only place where (in the King James Version) it is translated *ordinances*. Every place else it's correctly translated *traditions*. So before talking about head coverings, it's important to realize that Paul does not intend to change the current understanding, the current *tradition*, regarding head coverings.

It's also important to realize that if Paul was making a case that it's improper for a man to have his head covered during worship, he would be in opposition to the Torah that commands the priests to perform their Temple duties with their heads covered. So what is Paul talking about? We would need to know a little bit about the Jewish tradition of that day to understand.

<sup>3</sup> Worship took place at the Temple while study took place at the synagogue up until the time of the destruction of the Temple.

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word for hair is *se'ar* (8181 שֵׂעָר )

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 24:22,30 & 47

## Tzitzits, Tallits, and Head Coverings

---

So what was the Jewish tradition concerning head coverings during and shortly after the first century? It's somewhat hard to determine due to the lack of pictures of Jewish people during this time period. The Talmud says little about this matter as well – at least in regards to the first century. But we do have a glimpse from the first century Jewish historian Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE to 50 CE).<sup>6</sup> In his treatise *The Special Laws*, Philo gives an interesting comment about the significance of the Jewish woman's head covering. Regarding the procedure followed by priests who examined women accused of adultery (cf. Numbers 5:18) he writes:

"And the priest shall take the barley and offer it to the woman, and shall take away from her the headdress on her head, that she may be judged with her head bare, and *deprived of the symbol of modesty*, which all those women are accustomed to wear who are completely blameless."<sup>7</sup> (emphasis mine)

Obviously Philo was talking about a Torah custom that according to tradition was not practiced in the first century, but never-the-less he speaks somewhat matter-of-factly about head coverings as if they were a common practice in his day. He also mentions the thought that head coverings symbolized modesty for the married women.

So if Paul was not instructing the men and women pertaining to the Jewish tradition of wearing head coverings, what was he talking about. I believe he's referring to the practice of women wearing extremely short hair and men wearing long hair. Paul makes this connection in verse 14 where he says that long hair is a dishonor to a man. Why? Because it blurs the distinction between the genders. As we see in verse 3, Paul is discussing *headship*, the role of husband and wife in the family. He's saying that when a man prays with his head covered with long hair (not a head covering, which is a Jewish tradition), he dishonors Yeshua (who is his head); and a woman who does so with short hair dishonors her husband (who is her head). In other words, reversing or mixing the roles by the way a husband or wife wears his/her hair brings confusion and dishonors the clear distinction between the genders that God created. When we see that Paul removes the Jewish tradition from the discussion, the point is clear.

### Tallits

What does the Bible have to say about wearing a *tallit* or *prayer shawl*? Actually - very little. The English word *tallit* comes from the Aramaic word *talal* (תַּלָּל) which means to cover. Many believe that the tallit is what's being spoken of when the woman with the issue of blood touched Yeshua's garment –

**ESV Matthew 9:20** And behold, a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment,

But there's nothing to clearly substantiate that belief, especially since a tallit, as we know it today, is a somewhat more recent tradition in Judaism, not coming into practice until the second or third century CE. There is some evidence that the large "poncho style" tallit came into existence around 100 BCE as many Jewish men became Hellenized and began to dress like the Greeks yet wanted to maintain the mitzvah<sup>8</sup> of the tzitzit. Thus, instead of being a traditional garment, it was probably a creation of Judaism for the purpose of satisfying a clear Biblical command. Over the years the tallit got smaller and smaller until it became either a prayer shawl or what is commonly called a tallit-katan, a "little tallit", which is worn as an undergarment. Both the prayer shawl and the tallit-katan serve the purpose of having something to which you can attach the tzitzit.

### Tzitzit

Unlike the *kippah* (head coverings) and the *tallit*, which in Judaism are clearly understood to be traditions, the tzitzit is a clear command from the Torah. The Israelites are twice shown that they are to wear tassels on their garments –

---

<sup>6</sup> From an article on this subject - <http://www.bible-researcher.com/headcoverings3.html>

<sup>7</sup> *The Works of Philo*, translated by C.D. Yonge. New Updated Edition, edited by David M. Scholer (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1993), p. 599.

<sup>8</sup> *Mitzvah* is the Hebrew word for *instruction* or *commandment*. The plural of mitzvah is *mitzvot*.

## Tzitzits, Tallits, and Head Coverings

---

**ESV Numbers 15:38-41** "Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner.<sup>39</sup> And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after.<sup>40</sup> So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God.<sup>41</sup> I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the LORD your God."

**ESV Deuteronomy 22:11-12** You shall not wear cloth of wool and linen mixed together.<sup>12</sup> "You shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of the garment with which you cover yourself.

Thus we have two witnesses to the fact that YHVH intends for His people to hear His instructions regarding this mitzvah.

There are a number of key words in these two passages that we should discuss. The first, of course, is the word tassels in Numbers 15 and its corresponding word in Deuteronomy. These two words are *tzitzit* (6734 צִיצִית) and *gedil* (1434 גֶּדֶל). *Tzitzit* means *twisted threads or tassels* and comes from a root word *tsuwts* (6692) that means *blossom, shine, and sparkle*. The first place we see this root word is when the Israelites challenged Aaron's authority. In that story Moses collected the staffs of the leaders of each tribe and placed them in the Tabernacle. The next morning Aaron's rod had blossomed, thus clearly identifying Aaron as YHVH's chosen. So the word carries a connotation of *identifying God's people*.

The other word, *gedil*, means *twisted thread* and comes from the root word *gadal* (1431) that means to *become great, to do great things, or to grow*. There again, the connotation is *growing or becoming great*. When you combine these thoughts you see that the tzitzits are *an identifying sign of a growing people*. As we know, the promise to Abraham is that his descendants would grow to become an innumerable people. Thus, tzitzits are an identifying sign of that people.

Another key word in this scripture is *borders* (as in borders of their garments). It's from the Hebrew word *kanaph* (3671 כָּנ֑ף) which means *border, corner, wing, and extremity*. Its root word means *to be thrust into a corner or hidden*. Thus you could say that the identifying sign (the tzitzit) would be found in those who had been hidden from view as if they had been sent to the extremities of the earth . . . scattered to the four winds . . . the four corners.

Kanaph is found a number of places in the scripture including these scriptures pertaining to God using his wings or skirt to protect his people –

- God bore the Israelites out of Egypt on eagle's wings (*kanaph*)

**ESV Exodus 19:4** You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

- God is someone who covers us; under whose wings we can take refuge

**ESV Ruth 2:12** The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!"

- God covered our nakedness with his skirt and took us as His bride

**ESV Ezekiel 16:8** "When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine.

There are also passages that pertain to the role of The Messiah and how His tzitzit would be used –

- In the last days men from all nations (the scattered Israelites) will grab hold of the Jewish Messiah.

**ESV Zechariah 8:23** Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'"

## Tzitzits, Tallits, and Head Coverings

---

- The Messiah came, and will come, with healing powers in His garment

NKJ **Malachi 4:2** But to you who fear My name The Sun of Righteousness shall arise With healing in His wings; And you shall go out And grow fat like stall-fed calves.

This last passage is quite significant in that it had a partial fulfillment in the first century -

KJV **Matthew 9:20-22** <sup>20</sup> And, behold, a woman, which was diseased with an issue of blood twelve years, came behind *him*, and touched the hem of his garment. <sup>21</sup> For she said within herself, If I may but touch his garment, I shall be whole. <sup>22</sup> But Jesus turned him about, and when he saw her, he said, Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole. And the woman was made whole from that hour.

In this passage the word for *hem* is *kraspedon* (2899) which means *fringe* or *extremity*. It is only used in regards to the *extremity* of a Jewish man's garment, not the garment itself, and thus could be a translation for either *kanaph* or *tzitzit*. What this woman obviously touched was Yeshua's tzitzit, thus in part fulfilling the Malachi prophecy.

The third key word (or better – phrase) in this mitzvah is *cord of blue*. The word for *cord* is *pathiyil* (6616 פָּתִיֵּל) and literally means *twisted thread*. The word for *blue* is *tekhelet* (8504 תְּכֶלֶת). It would appear that the tzitzit should be made from twisted threads, one of which should be blue, but it's not that simple. According to the rabbis, the word *tekhelet* not only means blue, but it also states the source of the blue dye. They teach that the blue dye must come from a somewhat rare snail that produced a yellow dye that turned blue in sunlight. Thus if you don't have the proper source – the tekhelet – you don't have the proper blue. Thus many Jews do not have blue in their tzitzit unless it's from the tekhelet.

Other Jews, and most non-Jewish followers of this mitzvah do not subscribe to the rabbis teaching on the tekhelet and thus put a blue thread in their tzitzit anyway. This, of course, becomes a source of contention between the two groups. Thankfully, the source of tekhelet is now becoming more abundant and this issue may resolve itself.

God doesn't provide many instructions pertaining to tzitzit other than that they have a cord of blue, and that they be attached to a garment. It could also be said that they must be visible so that they can be seen, but the question arises as to who should be looking at them, you or your neighbor. Since the passage includes the admonition to look at them so that you don't go *whoring* after the lust of your eyes, it's been suggested that they can be worn inside your pants as well since if a man takes his pants off to visit the "lust of his eyes", the tzitzit will be there to stare him in his face.

Another instruction was made evident by Yeshua in the first century when he instructed His followers to not make their tzitzit so long as to draw attention to themselves.

Matthew 23:2-5 <sup>2</sup> "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, <sup>3</sup> so practice and observe whatever they tell you- but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice. <sup>4</sup> They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. <sup>5</sup> They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long,

Apparently some of the Pharisees, just as some religious people today, try to impress others with the size of their religious trappings, be it a building, a prayer, or their tzitzit. Fulfilling the mitzvot of YHVH should never be done for show.

So here we have three traditions, one of which is firmly grounded in scripture. What then should a disciple of Messiah Yeshua do? How much of this stuff do we want to do? Does praying with a tallit, wearing tzitzit, and covering my head make me a more righteous person? Does not the "New Covenant Christian" have the law "written on his heart" and thus spiritually fulfills the commandment concerning tzitzit? Those are questions each of us needs to answer for ourselves.

If you decide to adopt any of these three traditions and make them part of your dress, you will find that they will help identify you as a Hebrew. It's sort of like wearing a badge. Unfortunately, at this time in history, wearing a kippah or tzitzit would cause a person to assume that you're Jewish instead of being a

## **Tzitzits, Tallits, and Head Coverings**

---

Hebrew person who walks in the ways of YHVH. Hopefully that will change as we see value in the commandments of God as well as some of the Jewish traditions that have been preserved for thousands of years.

Shalom Aleichem!