

CHAPTER 17



**“WITH HER GAUZY VEIL BEFORE HER FACE”:
THE VEILING OF WOMEN IN ANTIQUITY**

Stephen D. Ricks and Shirley S. Ricks

A charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld.
The lady dare not lift her veil
For fear it be dispelled.

But peers beyond her mesh,
And wishes and denies,
'Lest interview annul a want
That image satisfies.¹

The Ricks family has been acquainted with Kent Brown for well over four decades. In the mid-sixties when Kent was an undergraduate student at the University of California, Stephen was an energetic schoolboy in Berkeley. After marriage, Stephen and Shirley maintained that acquaintance and friendship with Kent while at Brigham Young University and, years later, as accompanying faculty at the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies. We

1. Emily Dickinson, “A Charm Invests a Face.”

honor Kent for his dedicated scholarship and for his devotion to the university and the church.

Face veiling in public, occasional or ongoing, was expected of women of higher social status in the ancient world. The first mention of face veiling of women is recorded in an Assyrian text from the thirteenth century BC that restricted its use to noble women: “Women, whether married or [widows] or [Assyrians] who go out into a (public) street [must not have] their heads [uncovered]. Ladies by birth . . . whether (it is) a veil(?) or robe or [mantle?], must be veiled; [they must not have] their heads [uncovered].”² “Women of the upper classes, whether married or not,” observe G. R. Driver and John C. Miles, “must be veiled in public.”³ Further, prostitutes and common women were prohibited from assuming the veil, the sanction for which was a fearsome penalty: “A hierodule, . . . whom a husband has not married, must have her head uncovered in the (public) street; she shall not be veiled. A harlot shall not be veiled; her head must be uncovered. He who sees a veiled harlot shall arrest(?) her; he shall produce (free) men (as) witnesses (and) . . . she shall be beaten 50 stripes with rods, (and) pitch shall be poured on her head.”⁴ Free married women and widows as well as women who were “captive maids” or “concubines”⁵ (Assyrian *esirtu*)—who were, in the view of Jeremias, in the “middle stage between free woman and a slave woman”⁶—were obliged to be veiled.

2. G. R. Driver and John C. Miles, *The Assyrian Laws* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935), 407.

3. Driver and Miles, *Assyrian Laws*, 127; cf. Karel van der Toorn, “The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East,” in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 329–30.

4. Driver and Miles, *Assyrian Laws*, 407, 409.

5. Driver and Miles, *Assyrian Laws*, 127.

6. Alfred Jeremias, *Der Schleier von Sumer bis heute* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1931), 14; in the view of Theophile J. Meeks, “The Middle Assyrian Laws,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 183 n. 21, the fate of the “captive woman . . . was to become a concubine or secondary wife.” The translation of the text itself is “concubine.”

Two basic interpretations of face veiling have been offered: veiling, according to Morris Jastrow, “was originally designed to mark a woman as the property of a man.”⁷ Emile Marmorstein, on the other hand, observes more favorably that veiling was “the mark of the well-born women, a symbol of privilege, and that it was imitated by all women in the towns” and that even “the ruling class of Ancient Greece adopted it.”⁸ In the Israelite and early Christian traditions, however, reflected in the Old and New Testaments, face veiling was practiced in order for the woman to disguise herself (or to be disguised) and as a sign of modesty and purity. Incidentally, the veiling of men, as well as sacred parts of the temple, also occurs in the biblical tradition.⁹

Veiling in Ancient Near Eastern Mythology

As art imitates life, so in the ancient Near East, facets of daily life such as the wearing of the veil found their way into legend and myth. In the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Siduri, the divine barmaid who lives by the sea at the edge of the world and guards the vine in order to make sacred wine, wears a veil.¹⁰ Ishtar (Inanna in the Sumerian tradition) descends to the underworld to the presence of her sister, Ereshkigal, queen of the underworld.¹¹ At each of seven gates Ishtar is deprived of her garments, “vom Kopftuch bis

7. Morris Jastrow, “Veiling in Ancient Assyria,” *Revue archéologique* 14 (1921): 215.

8. Emile Marmorstein, “The Veil in Judaism and Islam,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 5/1 (1954): 11.

9. After coming down from Sinai, Moses’s face shown with such brightness that it had to be veiled: “When [Moses] entered the Lord’s presence to speak with him he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil over his face until he went in to speak with the Lord” (Exodus 34:33-35). It appears that Moses veiled his face after speaking with the Lord so that the brightness of his countenance would not harm those who viewed him.

10. E. A. Speiser, “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” Tablet IX, in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 90; further, see van der Toorn, “Significance of the Veil,” 331.

11. E. A. Speiser, “Descent of Ishtar to the Nether World,” in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 108.

zum Schamtuch” (“from veil to undergarments”), until she stands completely naked in the presence of Ereshkigal.¹²

Face Veiling in the Bible

The customary practice of prohibiting prostitutes from veiling themselves may also have prevailed in the ancient eastern Mediterranean, although the story of Tamar veiling herself before encountering Judah as a prostitute in order to disguise herself from him (Genesis 38:14) appears to be an exception. That she was to be understood as a harlot is indicated, not by her veiling or special dress, but instead by her sitting at the highroad (cf. Ezekiel 16:25).¹³

When Rebekah was returning with Abraham’s servant to meet Isaac, her husband-to-be, she saw a man in the distance walking toward them in the field. She inquired of the servant who it was, and when told it was Isaac, “she took a vail, and covered herself” (Genesis 24:65). Indicating “principles of modesty and humility” before God, the veil seems to be a “symbolic connection between clothing and faith.”¹⁴

Brides’ faces were also veiled: Leah’s face was veiled at the time of her marriage to Jacob—hence Jacob’s consternation at being deceived by Laban, who coolly informed him that it was the custom in his land for the elder daughter to be married before the younger (Genesis 29:26-27).¹⁵ Mercifully, Laban allowed Jacob to marry Ra-

12. Josef Kroll, *Gott und Hölle: Der Mythos vom Descensuskampfe* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1932), 208. The dance of the seven veils—said to be performed by Salome to inflame King Herod with desire—is thought to have originated with the myth of the goddess Ishtar.

13. See Jastrow, “Veiling,” 225-26.

14. Jennifer Heath, introduction to *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 7.

15. The most ancient representation of Jacob’s marriage to Rachel, found in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, is obscured by damage to the mosaics sufficient to make it unclear whether Rachel’s face is veiled or not. “In this scene, Laban performs the marriage and, like Juno Pronuba or Concordia, stands behind the bridal pair and with his arm leads Rachel to Jacob. He wears an orange-red pallium pulled over his shoulder and is looking at Rachel. Rachel herself is dressed in a golden gown with her neck decked with precious stones. Above her brow two diamonds are

chel following the week-long wedding celebration, but only after exacting from Jacob his agreement to work another seven years for her (Genesis 29:28-30). Lifting the veil is part of the ancient Israelite-Jewish marriage ceremony and is symbolic of the groom taking possession of his bride as his lover or property.¹⁶ In ancient Judaism, this part of the ceremony took place just before the consummation of the marriage as a symbol of becoming one in the marriage bed.¹⁷ Ostensibly because of Laban's deceit, in Ashkenazi Jewish tradition the *badken* (cf. the Middle High German *bedecken* "to cover") ritual is observed, in which the groom places the veil over the face of the bride immediately before the ceremony.

The story of Queen Vashti in the Old Testament is sometimes interpreted to mean that she would not lift her veil, perhaps part of the "crown royal," for the princes and people to look upon her beauty at the king's court.¹⁸ Her refusal to come at the king's command led to her replacement by Esther (Esther 1:11-19).

Relatively few allusions to veils in the Bible may actually refer to face veiling. Ruth held out her veil to receive six measures of barley from Boaz (Ruth 3:15), but it is not known if it was a face veil. When Isaiah speaks of the haughty daughters of Zion, he mentions veils in conjunction with "glasses [transparent garments],¹⁹ and the

shining, while a transparent veil surrounds her head in the form of a halo. Rachel . . . holds her left hand to her mouth as a sign of diffident reflection. For his part, Jacob is dressed as a shepherd and solemnly looks directly in front of himself. . . . Rachel's sister Leah gently urges her forward with a gesture of encouragement and lightly grasps her upper arm. For her part, Rachel, aware of the significance of the event, is looking toward her father, Laban." Stephen D. Ricks, "Dexiosis and Dextrarum Iunctio: The Sacred Handclasp in the Classical and Early Christian World," *FARMS Review* 18/1 (2006): 434, drawing on the astute description by Beat Brenk in *Die frühchristlichen Mosaiken in Santa Maria Maggiore zu Rom* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1975), 69.

16. However, Roland de Vaux, "Sur les voiles des femmes dans l'Orient Ancien," *Revue biblique* 44 (1935): 408, asserts that wedding ritual "requires the fiancée to remain covered until the newly wed are alone"; cf. van der Toorn, "Significance of the Veil," 331, 339.

17. "Veil," at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veil (accessed 29 December 2009).

18. Mohja Kahf, "From Her Royal Body the Robe Was Removed," in Heath, *The Veil*, 30-31.

19. Footnote in LDS Bible.

fine linen, and the hoods” (Isaiah 3:23). The veil referred to here may be a kind of cloak or wrapper. In the incident in which King Abimelech of Gerar desires Sarah and believes she is Abraham’s sister, he speaks to Sarah of giving Abraham a thousand pieces of silver and of his being “to thee a covering of the eyes” (Genesis 20:16). One interpretation of this phrase is “implied advice to Sarah to conform to the custom of married women, and wear a complete veil, covering the eyes as well as the rest of the face,”²⁰ but “the phrase is generally taken to refer not to Sarah’s eyes, but to the eyes of others, and to be merely a metaphorical expression concerning the vindication of Sarah.”²¹

Other veils mentioned in the Bible include kinds of temple veils such as “the vail of the covering” for the ark of the testimony, a veil which was finely made of blue, purple, scarlet, and “fine twined linen of cunning work” (Exodus 40:21; 26:31; 36:35); the “vail before the mercy seat” (Leviticus 16:2), the “vail of the sanctuary (Leviticus 4:6), and the “vail of the testimony, in the tabernacle of the congregation” (Leviticus 24:3). Such veils were intended not so much to obscure as to shield the most sacred things from the eyes of sinful men, which purpose would also make sense in the veiling of women.

Face Veiling in the Hellenic World

Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones and Caroline Galt have both argued from plastic art representations and literary references that it was commonplace for women (at least those of higher status) in ancient Greece—following an ancient Near Eastern pattern—to cover their hair and face in public: “Greece is to be regarded as a Western branch of the old civilizations of Hatti, Mitanni, Babylon, Assyria, and the Levant, sharing in their cerebral processes and material

20. Matthew G. Easton, “Covering of the Eyes,” in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1903), 172.

21. “Covering of the Eyes,” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Covering_of_the_eyes (accessed 30 December 2009).

artefacts to such an extent that some modern hellenists are coming to regard Greece merely as a colony of the Near East.”²²

Face veiling in ancient Greece was not only a custom in the classic period,²³ but also in the Homeric age as well. The delectable English translation of Homer’s *Odyssey* by T. E. Shaw (the pseudonym of T. E. Lawrence—the renowned “Lawrence of Arabia”) gives several instances of face veiling: “As for her face she held up a fold of the soft wimple”;²⁴ “she held the thin head-veil before her face”;²⁵ “the queen stood with her gauzy veil before her face.”²⁶ “Penelope,” observes Lucinda Alwa, “whenever she appears before the abusive suitors, covers her face with her shining veils (*lipara kredemna*). . . . The *kredemnon*, as the veil of a married woman, obviously conveys the notion of chastity.”²⁷ Odysseus, as an initiate, was saved from a storm at sea by binding his abdomen with a veil from the sea nymph Leukothea.²⁸

Ovid’s story of Pyramus and Thisbe in Book IV of his *Metamorphoses*, perhaps best known from the whimsical version of the tale found in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, mentions a veil in the account of their star-crossed love. Thisbe’s veil—dropped in haste at their appointed meeting place when she sees a lioness—is bloodied and shredded by the animal. Pyramus, upon finding

22. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite’s Tortoise: The Veiled Woman of Ancient Greece* (London: Classical Press of Wales, 2003), 7; cf. Caroline M. Galt, “Veiled Ladies,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 35/4 (1931): 373–93. Classical, artistic depictions of veiling show “Greek women covering their heads, or much more rarely, their faces.” Larissa Bonfante, review of *Aphrodite’s Tortoise*, by Llewellyn-Jones, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 13/2 (2006): 285.

23. Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite’s Tortoise*, 61–66.

24. Homer, *Odyssey* 1.334.

25. Homer, *Odyssey* 16.416; 18.210.

26. Homer, *Odyssey* 21.65. These examples by Shaw (Lawrence) are cited in Hermann Haakh, “Der Schleier der Penelope,” *Gymnasium* 66 (1959): 377.

27. Lucinda B. Alwa, “Veil and Citadel in Homer,” *International Journal of the Humanities* 6/8 (2007): 135–44, at http://h07.cgpublisher.com/proposals/740/index_html (accessed 29 December 2009); cf. Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite’s Tortoise*, 28–33.

28. Walter Burkert, “Concordia Discors: The Literary and the Archaeological Evidence on the Sanctuary of Samothrace,” in *Greek Sanctuaries: New Approaches*, ed. Nanno Marinatos and Robin Hägg (London: Routledge, 1993), 187.

the mutilated veil, believes Thisbe is dead and kills himself. When Thisbe returns and finds Pyramus dead, she too kills herself with the same sword.

The Veiling of Women in Egyptian Mythology

It is significant that face veiling of women, not generally practiced in ancient Egypt, is mentioned by the Greek writer Plutarch (whose contemporary Hellenic society may not have engaged in veiling, but whose culture historically did) in his *Isis and Osiris*: “In Sais the image of Athena, which one also sees as Isis, contains the following inscription: ‘I am the cosmos, the past, present, and future, no mortal has yet lifted my veil.’”²⁹ “Throughout the ancient world,” observes Hugh Nibley, “the veil of the temple is the barrier between ourselves and both the hidden mysteries of the temple and the boundless expanses of cosmic space beyond. An example of the former is ‘the veil of Isis,’ which no man has lifted.”³⁰

Covering the Head in the Christian Tradition

Some head coverings mentioned in the Christian tradition may not necessarily refer to face veilings and may apply to both women and men. Edward Yarnold, in discussing Christian baptismal rites, states that “in some places a white linen cloth was . . . spread over the candidate’s head.”³¹ Though not likely a strict face veiling, the covering was likely symbolic of the sacredness of the occasion. Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. AD 350-428) believed that

29. Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 9. The following commentaries note that lifting the veil has sexual connotations: J. Gwyn Griffiths, *Plutarch’s De Iside et Osiride* (Cambridge: University of Wales Press, 1970), 284; and Theodor Hopfner, *Plutarch über Isis und Osiris* (Prague: Orientalisches Institut, 1940-41), 84.

30. Hugh Nibley, “On the Sacred and the Symbolic,” in *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2008), 376-77.

31. Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the RCIA* [Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults], 2nd ed. (Great Britain: Clark, 1994), 33, cited by Bryce Haymond, “Early Christian Face Veiling,” www.templestudy.com/2008/07/22/early-christian-face-veiling (accessed 13 January 2010), who in turn seems to have been influenced by Matthew Brown, *The Gate of Heaven: Insights on the Doctrines and Symbols of the Temple* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 1999), 202 n. 90.

this covering was a sign of freedom in contrast to slaves—following an ancient Near Eastern pattern—who must have their heads uncovered.³² According to an opposing view by St. Augustine, however, it was unveiling rather than veiling that symbolized freedom: “The veils are due to be removed from their head and this is a sign of freedom.”³³ John the Deacon suggests that the veiling was symbolic of the priesthood since “priests of that time always wore on their heads a mystic veil.”³⁴

Baptismal candidates were veiled, “with their faces covered, in order that their mind might be more at liberty, and that the wandering of their eyes might not distract their soul.”³⁵ After individuals have been exorcised in preparation for baptism, according to St. Cyril, the candidate will be breathed on and his face will be covered to secure for him peace of mind from the dangers of a roving eye. Veiling the face frees up the mind so the eyes or heart do not distract the ears from “receiving the means of salvation.”³⁶ In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul discusses the covering of a woman’s head (but not necessarily veiling) when she prays or prophesies, again perhaps in the context of avoiding distraction. A straightforward reading of Paul’s text suggests that the veil (from the Latin *velare*, “to cover”) helps define the relationship of God, man, and woman.³⁷ This practice has continued more in the sense of etiquette, courtesy, tradition, or elegance rather than for religious purposes. A Mennonite study of this passage by J. C. Wenger suggests that it could be that “Paul is here thinking of

32. Theodore, *Baptismal Homily* 2.19, in Yarnold, *Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, 179.

33. St. Augustine, *Sermon* 376.2, in *PL* 39:1669.

34. John the Deacon, *Epistula ad Senarium* 6, in *PL* 59:403.

35. Wolfred N. Cote, *The Archaeology of Baptism* (London: Yates and Alexander, 1876), 70.

36. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procatechesis* 9, in *PG* 33:349.

37. Donald P. Goodman III, “Because of the Angels: A Study of the Veil in the Christian Tradition,” at http://www.traditioninaction.org/religious/d006rpVeil_2_Goodman.htm (accessed 31 December 2009).

the veil as *a beautiful symbol of woman being the glory of the race, man's very queen.*"³⁸

The liturgical feast of the Veil of Our Lady symbolized protection by the intercession of the Virgin Mary.³⁹ The assumption is that she must have worn a veil, pieces of which covered the original miraculous statue of Our Lady at Loretto and have since become relics.⁴⁰ In the Eastern Orthodox tradition of the tenth century, Mary interceded with her son for those who prayed to her for protection. After the prayer she spread her veil over the people as a protection.

In the Christian tradition the veil is worn during a "white" wedding. The veil represents the bride's purity and inner beauty, as well as her innate modesty. According to Alfred Jeremias, "The [Sumerian-Babylonian bridal veil] is indirect but certainly attested through mention of the night of a 'veiled bride.'"⁴¹ The white diaphanous veils worn by traditional brides today may signify virginity (which earlier may have been represented by the bride's own long, flowing hair). Roman brides wore a brightly colored veil as a protection against evil spirits on their wedding day.⁴²

Veiling in Early Islam

Clothing in early Islam likely emphasized modesty, as it did in Near Eastern Judaism and Christianity, and was not all that different from pre-Islamic Arabia.⁴³ The early Christian writer Tertullian, arguing on behalf of the veiling of virgins, observes that contemporary Arab women veiled themselves.⁴⁴ Once a year in

38. J. C. Wenger, *The Prayer Veil in Scripture and History: The New Testament Symbol of Woman as the Glory of the Race* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1964), 10.

39. "Veil," at Wikipedia.

40. "Veil of Our Lady of Loretto," at <http://www.ichrusa.com/saintsalive/veil.htm> (accessed 19 January 2010).

41. Jeremias, *Der Schleier von Sumer bis heute*, 12.

42. "Veil," at Wikipedia.

43. Norman A. Stillman, "Clothing and Costume," in *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Josef W. Meri (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1:159.

44. Tertullian, *De velandis virginibus* 17 (CSEL 76:102); cf. van der Toorn, "Significance of the Veil," 339. Note the full-body veils in Hugh Nibley, *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 37, fig. 5A.

pre-Islamic Mecca, it was customary for young women to wear their fine clothes but to walk around unveiled to attract appropriate suitors. Once a husband was found, however, veiling was resumed. Veiling was typically practiced in urban areas but not among the Bedouin women in the desert.⁴⁵

The Qur'an teaches modesty in dress for both men and women; modesty as such provides protection.⁴⁶ The idea of separation (*hijāb*) is also inherent in the Islamic texts cited for the precedence of veiling: "And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms and not display their ornaments except to their husbands [and other men close to them]" (Qur'an 24:31). Another verse requests "your wives, your daughters, and the wives of true believers that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad). That is most convenient, that they may be distinguished and not be harassed" (Qur'an 33:59).

In the early Muslim community, strict veiling for women does not appear to have been the norm except for the wives of Muhammad, who had special status.⁴⁷ Apparently, it was only in the second Islamic century that veiling became common, where it was "first used among the powerful and rich as a status symbol." Rural and nomadic women typically did not veil and remained secluded in the home.⁴⁸ Veiling eventually became a customary practice of the Islamic community as a result of its presence in pre-Islamic Mecca.⁴⁹

45. Riaz Hassan, *Faithlines: Muslim Conceptions of Islam and Society* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 188.

46. Sherif A. Azim, "Part 15 - The Veil?" in *Women in Islam versus Women in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition: The Myth and the Reality*, at http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/w_islam/veil.htm (accessed 2 January 2010).

47. Stillman, "Clothing and Costume," 160.

48. "Historical Perspectives on Islamic Dress," in *Women in World History Curriculum* (1996-2009), at <http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/essay-01.html> (accessed 31 December 2009).

49. Hassan, *Faithlines*, 188.

Conclusion

While the veiling of women in the ancient world “was originally designed to mark a woman as the property of a man,”⁵⁰ veiling in the ancient Israelite and early Christian world was practiced to suggest purity, modesty, and holiness⁵¹ as well as to reduce or eliminate the distraction of the hair or faces of women from others. As Nibley has astutely observed, the main purpose of the prayer circle, in which veiling is observed, is “the complete concentration and unity of the participants that requires the shutting out of the trivial and distractions of the external world.”⁵² The veiling of women had the function of emphasizing holiness and of eliminating distractions and maximizing focus on the religious task at hand. As a religious item, the veil in the Judeo-Christian tradition was intended to honor the woman and to emphasize her holiness, modesty, and purity. What is holiest among us—the most sacred precincts of the tabernacle or temple, and women—is protected with veils.

Stephen D. Ricks is professor of Hebrew and cognate learning at Brigham Young University.

Shirley S. Ricks is a senior editor at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at Brigham Young University.

50. Jastrow, “Veiling in Ancient Assyria,” 215.

51. Cf. van der Toorn, “Significance of the Veil,” 331, 338-39.

52. Hugh Nibley, “Early Christian Prayer Circle,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 82.