

Modesty in Apparel: Bringing a Believer's Attire into Subjection to the Word of God

Chapter 5: What about Makeup?

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When discussing believers and modesty another topic that divides professing Christians is makeup. Those denominations and writers who prohibit all uses of makeup for women argue that every example of makeup being used in the Bible is associated with *wicked* women. This is an argument of guilt by association. Since only wicked women are identified as those who wore makeup, God must be telling us that the use of makeup is wicked as well. Before we discuss whether such a conclusion is a sound logical inference from God's Word or a legitimate application of Scripture, we need to point out a few things.

First, there are no explicit prohibitions against wearing makeup in the Bible. It is for this reason that those desiring to ban all makeup must rely on such tenuous inferences in their argumentation. Therefore, those who disapprove of any use of makeup must be careful not to judge others on this issue. God could have simply banned makeup as He did the pagan practice of cutting or tattooing the body (e.g., "You shall not make any cuttings in your body for the dead nor tattoo any mark on you: I am the LORD" [Lev. 19:28]). The issue of makeup, however, is more difficult than jewelry because unlike jewelry, which has many passages that prove it was lawful (e.g., Gen. 24:47; 41:42; Ex. 32:2; 35:22; Dt. 15:16-17; Isa. 61:10; Ezek. 16:8-14, 17; Job 42:11; Est. 8:15; Lk. 15:22; Jas. 2:1-4; Rev. 21:9-21), the Bible has nothing *directly* to say on makeup, whether positive or negative.

Second, an examination of the three passages which mention eye makeup reveals that these sections of Scripture are not designed as a moral commentary on makeup itself, but rather reveal unbiblical responses of people under divine judgment.

2 Kings 9:30-31

Our first passage regards the behavior of the evil queen Jezebel. 2 Kings 9:30-31 reads, "Now when Jehu had come to Jezreel, Jezebel heard of it; and she put paint on her eyes and adorned her head, and looked through a window. Then, as Jehu entered the gate, she said, 'Is it peace, Zimri, murderer of your master?'" In this passage Jehu comes to Jezreel to put Jezebel to death. She is aware of this and prepares herself by painting (Hebrew-*puk*, Greek-*stimmi*, Latin-*stibium*) her eyes. If we translate the verb *painted* literally it would say "she set her eyes in stibium"; to paraphrase "she applied eyeliner." The verb is usually identified with the noun *kohl* (Assyrian-*quhlu*), a mineral pulverized by the Arabs into a black powder, which was mixed with oil and applied to the eyebrows, and/or as an eyeliner, and/or eyelash enhancer. It was used throughout the ancient world by women and can be seen on Egyptian hieroglyphics and pottery. Clay jars of this substance have been found in the tombs of women from ancient Egypt. Until the widespread use of modern cosmetics the same substance was used by Moorish women of north Africa and women in India. The prepared ointment was "applied with a fine smooth eye-pencil

of the thickness of an ordinary goose-quill, made of either wood, metal or ivory. The way to use it was to hold the central portion of the pencil horizontally between the eyelids, and then draw it out between them, twisting it all the while, so that the edges of the eyelids were blackened all round; and the object was to heighten the splendor of the dark southern eye..."¹ She also adorned her head, "by putting on the head-band and crown which held her elaborate head-dress in place."²

Those who oppose any use of makeup in general argue that Jezebel was putting on makeup in order to attempt to seduce or incite lust in Jehu. Such a view is incorrect and has been rejected by virtually every reputable commentator (e.g., Matthew Poole, Matthew Henry, John Gill, Paul E. Kretzmann, James A. Montgomery, C. F. Keil, Fredrick W. Farrar, G. H. Jones, etc.). The general consensus of Old Testament scholars is that Jezebel wanted to present herself in a royal, dignified manner and die as a queen. This makes sense in light of her age (at the time of her death she was an old hag and would not have tempted Jehu) as well as her blatantly sarcastic remarks to Jehu (she addresses him as Zimri the murderer of the king [Zimri ascended to the throne after killing Elah and all those who remained of the house of Baasha. He was then himself murdered after reigning for a few days; cf. 1 Kg. 16:9-15. This seems to be an implied threat: "You will kill me and my husband, but your day of slaughter will come also." In other words, "You can expect to be slain by some of my posterity."] Jezebel also mocks Jehu by beginning her implied threat with the absurd remark: "Is it peace?").

The point of the inspired author in this passage is not for us to draw out some negative ethical concept of mascara; but, rather, to point out Jezebel's pride and arrogance. She was not repentant at all and cared more for her status as the queen than admitting her guilt and repenting in sackcloth and ashes. Instead of humbling herself and admitting her sin, she made herself look great and majestic because she wanted to face death like a proud humanist. *In this context* it was certainly inappropriate for Jezebel to put on makeup and place the queenly ornament on her head. This truth, however, does not prove or even imply that mascara is inappropriate in other circumstances (e.g., at a wedding). Perhaps those who presuppose that it does present a solid case against makeup in all circumstances should also forbid "adorning the head," wearing hats and looking out of windows, for verse 30 connects painting her eyes with all these actions.

Jeremiah 4:30

Another passage which is used as a proof text against makeup comes in Jeremiah's prophecy against Jerusalem: "And when you are plundered, what will you do? Though you clothe yourself with crimson, though you adorn yourself with ornaments of gold, though you enlarge your eyes with paint, in vain you will make yourself fair: your lovers will despise you; they will seek your life" (4:30). With the metaphor of a loose woman (or even a whore) who seeks to make herself beautiful to attract her former lovers, God rebukes Jerusalem for seeking help from destruction by appealing to the surrounding pagan nations (her adulterous paramours such as Assyria or Egypt; cf. 2:35-36). "She is supposed to do all she can to keep up her interest in their affections. She does what she can to make herself appear considerable among the nations and a valuable ally. She compliments them by her ambassadors to the highest degree, to engage them to stand by her now in her distress."³

¹ C. F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 3:344.

² Paul. E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1923), 1:620.

³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 4:432.

The sin that is being emphasized in this passage is Jerusalem's folly in putting her trust in heathen allies instead of God. In verse 31 she recognizes that her lovers (v. 30; Hebrew, *hoge bim*) are her murderers (Hebrew, *hore gim*). The leaders and people were in love with the ways of the heathen and did not trust in or love Jehovah. Consequently, they acted pragmatically by looking to their heathen paramours. But they would discover that these lovers were vicious killers. Because she refused to yield her soul, life and fate to Jehovah—her husband and redeemer—she must yield it to murderers, to those who acted as lovers but were really full of hate and thoughts of vengeance. In verse 31 unfaithful Jerusalem is pictured as a woman giving birth, gasping, screaming in agony, and dreading her plight as she realizes she has placed herself in the hands of bloodthirsty murderers. “Wanton Judah, playing the harlot over the years, had reached the climax and had paid the price of her iniquity.”⁴

All of this raises some pertinent questions: Was this prophecy designed to tell the inhabitants of Jerusalem the dangers of crimson clothing, jewelry and eye makeup? No. The whole point of the metaphor was to point to Judah's spiritual adultery and her lack of trust in God, exhibited in her trust in wicked heathen allies. The clothing, jewelry and makeup are incidental to the prophetic application. Yes, but does not the metaphor associate mascara with loose women or prostitutes? While it is true that whores sometimes wear scarlet clothing, jewelry and makeup, the point of the metaphor is on the attempt to be attractive or alluring, not on the pros and cons of scarlet clothing, earrings or eyeliner. In Scripture there are exceptionally godly women who wear high quality attractive purple clothing (e.g., Prov. 31:22); clothe their covenant children in scarlet (e.g., Prov. 31:21) and even wear beautiful jewelry (Gen. 24:47; Song of Sol. 1:10-12) without sin or guilt. Consequently, one cannot appeal to Jeremiah 4:30 as a proof text against eyeliner without being inconsistent and arbitrary in one's application.

Ezekiel 23:38-40

The only other passage that mentions makeup has strong similarities with the Jeremiah passage:

Moreover they have done this to Me: They have defiled My sanctuary on the same day and profaned My Sabbaths. For after they had slain their children for their idols, on the same day they came into My sanctuary to profane it; and indeed thus they have done in the midst of My house. “Furthermore you sent for men to come from afar, to whom a messenger *was* sent; and there they came. And you washed yourself for them, painted your eyes, and adorned yourself with ornaments (Ezek. 23:38-40).

To understand these verses we must consider the context. Chapter 23 is an allegory regarding Samaria and Jerusalem. The prophet uses crude, shocking language to describe their idolatry and spiritual adultery as well as their intrigues with foreign powers. In verses 22 to 45 we have four oracles of judgment. Verse 40 which mentions eyeliner comes in the final section which recapitulates and enlarges upon the previous oracles. Both Samaria and Jerusalem have defiled God's sanctuary and profaned God's Sabbaths. They were a thoroughly syncretistic people. After they sacrificed their children to Molech, they would come to the central sanctuary to worship Jehovah. Like Jeremiah 4, the Ezekiel passage refers to their invitations to pagan foreign nations to make alliances. The description of a loose woman or harlot who makes herself

⁴ J. A. Thomas, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 233.

up and prepares her chamber is used because these alliances were an aspect of their apostasy or spiritual adultery. To entice these heathen countries they had to be unfaithful to their husband, Jehovah. A common practice in the ancient world would be to build temples with the favored nation's pagan god to honor the alliance and solidify the covenant. (When Solomon married heathen women to make alliances, this involved housing all their foreign gods; cf. 1 Kgs. 11:4-6). These Jews were so corrupt they had no problem worshipping the false gods of their neighbors. "The Jews enter league with these robbers, and admit their idols, and so commit whoredom with them."⁵ The result of all this would be God's judgment. They would suffer the fate of idolaters and hypocrites.

Does verse 40 in its context teach us that Christian women are not allowed to use makeup? No. Like Jeremiah 4:30 it is simply a symbol of an enticement to the foreign powers. As noted in our discussion of Jeremiah, the only way for those who prohibit all use of makeup to use this passage is to make an appeal to guilt by association. Prostitutes put on eyeliner to look more attractive and be more seductive. There are a few problems with such an approach. First, the passage does not condemn eye makeup, jewelry or the use of beds (KJV) or couches (NJKV, v. 41), but only their use in the committing of sin. A man can put jewelry on his wife (Gen. 24:24-47; Song of Sol. 1:10-12) and lay on a "stately couch" with her without guilt. What then would be wrong with a modest use of makeup for a special occasion (e.g., a wedding, anniversary, a special romantic evening out with a spouse, etc.)? Second, arguments based on guilt by association must have something in the context that indicates a universal moral principle or one can prove virtually anything with such an argument. Certain Anabaptist groups, for example, allow beards because Jesus had one, but disallow mustaches because supposedly the Roman soldiers who crucified Christ had them. Such reasoning is absurd. Those who use the passages discussed above simply have not demonstrated through logical inference, sound exegesis and legitimate application that God has forbidden or disapproves of all uses of makeup. One, perhaps, can multiply quotes from prominent churchmen who disapproved of makeup, but such argumentation without biblical proof is pharisaical and Romish.

What then is to be done in situations where the Bible gives no explicit directions on a particular issue? One must apply the general principles of the Word to particular situations. In this case, Paul and Peter's teaching on modesty which applies to the ostentatious, gaudy, excessive, indecent or showy use of clothing, hairstyles and jewelry could be applied to makeup. A woman should not try to look like a prostitute, Broadway starlet or circus clown. Applying a general principal takes wisdom, caution, discernment and a certain amount of sanctified common sense. Such a view will offend legalists and all those wedded to human traditions, but given the teaching of Scripture on this matter it is the only viable biblical option.

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⁵ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 2:734.