

INTERPRETING DEUTERONOMY 22:5 IN THE LIGHT OF JEWISH DRESSING CULTURE: A CASE FOR 21ST CENTURY CHRISTIAN DRESSING

INTRODUCTION

A neglected subject in today's Christian purview is the issue of dressing as civilization and westernization seems to have beclouded biblical teachings in the area of dressing. Deuteronomy 22:5, over the ages, has posed a challenge that has left the field of scholarship much controversy; "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God" (Deuteronomy 22:5) KJV. Attempt has been made overtime to interpret this text in the light of modern-day fashion but most research seems not contemporary hence, this research attempts to proffer likely prospect to the puzzle using historical, cultural and sociocultural perspective.

To take the text literally would mean that a man should not wear a female's dress and vice versa. However, according to Ademiluka,

In Nigeria, as in other African countries, this text had been given a literal interpretation by all mainline churches since the advent of Christianity in Africa. In recent times, however, there has been a challenge to this interpretation, particularly among some neo-Pentecostal churches who claim that the text is being misapplied. It is therefore common these days to see many female members of these denominations not only wearing trousers as part of their casual dressing but, in fact, going to church in them on Sundays.¹

Many issues have been attached to Deuteronomy 22:5. These issues, according to Susan Gilchrist, include;

The misuse of cross-dressing for deception, preventing women carrying the weapons of war, condemning cross-dressing for prostitution and foreign religious practice, preventing women wearing religious items of apparel worn by Jewish men, prohibiting men adopting women's customs regarding hairstyles etc., and stopping men and women entering places assigned to the opposite gender for the purposes of illicit sex.²

Another major concern that has occurred in the available research done is taking transvestism, trans-sexualism and homosexuality as the same thing and tying it to the same text when they are not even the same. Transvestism is the idea of wearing clothes traditionally worn by and associated with the opposite sex, trans-sexualism is a situation

¹ Solomon Olusola Ademiluka, "The Prohibition of Cross-Dressing in Deuteronomy 22:5 as a Basis for the Controversy among Churches in Nigeria on Female Wearing of Trousers," *OTE* 26/1 (2013), 9.

² Susan Gilchrist, *Deuteronomy 22:5 and its Impact on Gender and Sexual Variation in the Christian Church*, (2015), Access via: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/articles/index.htm>, 1.

where a person's gender self-image contradicts with the physical gender he/she was born with and homosexuality is the sexual relationship between two people of the same sex. The text in view deals more with transvestism than the latter two.

One truth that should be reckoned with is the fact that styles of clothing have changed overly hence, an examination of the Hebrew dress sense is worth exploring. To this, is what Gilchrist stated, "The Jewish concern in this passage is not about creating or reinforcing gender differences but in preventing the gender associations of clothing, or possibly body hair from being used to deceive others for those purposes which lead to sexual immorality or to dishonest behaviour."³ Hence, it is the concern of this work to justify the contemporary dressing culture in the light of Deuteronomy 22:5 using the Jewish dressing culture as a guide.

THE JEWISH CULTURAL DRESSING HERITAGE

Jews, both men and women, wore five pieces of clothing which included the undergarment, the outer garment called robe, the head gear, the sandal and the belt or girdle. According to Silverman,

Jewish clothes have served as historical markers, symbolic signposts, and indicators of gender, ethnicity, power, resistance, status, and religious observance. Jewish clothing has often been a response to the dictates of the non-Jewish world, including the marking of Jews as a pariah people. Jews were assigned "honey-colored garments, unique buttons on their caps and a pair of patches atop their sleeves."⁴

Clothing has been said to play a significant role in Judaism as it reflects religious identification, social status, emotional state and even the Jews' relation with the outside world. The ancient rabbis taught that "maintaining their distinctive dress in Egypt was one of the reasons the Jews were worthy of being rescued from servitude."⁵

Jewish men have been reported to use prayer shawl and kippot on their heads during synagogue services. It is to this, that Brian commented that,

Men often wore head gear (a turban, Heberew - misnepet, sanip, peer, tebulim) especially in the hot sun. The high priest was required to wear a turban (misnepet) of linene (Ex. 28:39; 39:28; Lev. 16:4). It is generally recognized by scholars that Jewish women wore a veil when out in public (c. Gen. 24:65). Head coverings (i.e. a cloth placed over a woman's hair) are required in public worship by the apostle Paul writing under divine inspiration (I Cor. 11:3-16).⁶

³Susan Gilchrist, *Deuteronomy 22:5 and its Impact on Gender and Sexual Variation in the Christian Church*, (2015), Access via: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/articles/index.htm>, 2.

⁴Eric Silverman, *A Cultural History of Jewish Dress*, <https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/book/a-cultural-history-of-jewish-dress> accessed 3rd April, 2020).

⁵*Jewish Clothing*. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-clothing/>. Accessed 3rd April, 2020.

⁶Brian Schwertley, *Modesty in Apparel: Bringing a Believer's Attire into Subjection to the Word of God* (2011), 6. Accessed via: reformedonline.com/index.html. Accessed 3rd April, 2020.

Searching through the Torah little is found said about the different dressing of both sexes. The only thing available in the Torah as regard dressing is the prohibition of blending wool and linen in a garment (such garments are known as shatnez), in the same verse forbidding “mixing” different seeds and species of cattle (Leviticus 19:19). Also, it forbids men from wearing women’s clothes and vice versa (Deuteronomy 22:5), without specifying the characteristics of either. It also requires Jews to put fringes on the corners of a four-pointed garment (Numbers 15:37-41).

There seems not to be a realistic disparity between the typical Jewish male and female dress. However, Jews are recognizable by their distinctive garments worn for reasons of ritual, tradition or modesty. In particular, Orthodox (and some non-Orthodox) men cover their heads with kippot, and some cover these with black hats or a type of fur hat. However, the only disparity as penned by Brian, existed in their head gear, jewellery and possibly stylistic differences (e.g., perhaps the women’s cloak was more decorative or stylish) except for the outer garment which does not appear to have any large differences between the men and the women.⁷

From all the above, it is deductive that, a typical Jew either male or female is expected to be on an undergarment which was usually worn next to the skin and was usually made of linen, which was soft and did not itch like wool then the outer garment which Brian described as “a large cloth with arm holes used by men and women. It was wrapped around the body like a blanket. The girdle or belt helped hold in place. At night it would be used as a blanket for sleeping (c Gen. 9:23; Ex. 22:26ff; Dt. 22:17).”⁸

CONSIDERING DEUTERONOMY 22:5 IN ITS HISTORICAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Since there are differences in culture, applying Deuteronomy 22:5 to the contemporary Christian would be a difficult task except it is considered in both its historical and cultural context. To ensure this and not treat the text out of context, a little evaluation of the text at hand in its original rendition would be helpful. The text at hand is a very controversial one however commentators seem to agree that “the overall intention of this verse is to prohibit men and women from wearing items associated with the other sex.”⁹

A literal interpretation of the text will render “There shall not be the item of a man upon a woman; and a man shall not clothe (himself) with the garment of a woman.” Commenting on the text, Ademiluka wrote;

The two key words in the prohibition are כֶּלִי (keli) and שִׁמְלַת (simlat) (both in construct form), which have been translated in different ways in various versions of the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 5.

⁹ Hilary Lipka, *The Prohibition of Cross-Dressing: What does Deuteronomy 22:5 prohibit and why?* <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-prohibition-of-cross-dressing>. Accessed 3rd April, 2020.

English Bible. The KJV translates *kelî* (כֶּלִי) as “that which pertaineth unto a man,” and *simlat* (שִׂמְלַת) as “garment;” but the LXX English translation renders *kelias* “apparel,” and *simlat* as “woman’s dress.” In the RSV *kelîis* “anything that pertains to a man,” and *simlat* is translated, “a woman’s garment” but the NRSV has “apparel” for *kelî* and “garment” for *simlat*. Whereas the New American Bible (NAB) translates *kelias* “article” and *simlat* as “dress” the New International Version (NIV) uses the word “clothing” for both terms and the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) says, “A woman must not dress like a man, nor a man like a woman,” thereby avoiding the two terms.¹⁰

The term *Kelli* in the context, according to Harris, is nebulous in that it may mean a variety of things such as armour, bag, carriage, furniture, instrument, jewel, sack, stuff, thing, vessel, weapon, implement, baggage, boat, seat.¹¹ Explaining Harris in a better way, Brian wrote;

First, the command regarding women is very broad and extends to much more than clothing. The expression “anything that pertains to a man” includes not only clothing, but ornaments, armor, weapons, etc. (i.e. anything that is normally associated with men). The expression “that which pertains” normally specifies ownership of something (“peace offerings that pertain to the LORD”; Lev. 7:20; cf. 21) or being peculiar to something (e.g., “breastfeeding pertains to motherhood”). Unfortunately, both the New American Standard Bible (e.g., “A woman shall not wear man’s clothing”) and the New International Version (e.g., “A woman must not wear men’s clothing”) paraphrase this passage [i.e. 5a] and narrow the meaning to attire or garments. They translate 5a as an exact parallel to 5b where, in the case of a man, female garments are specified. This mistranslation misses an important aspect of the prohibition.¹²

Lipka also proposed;

The noun *שִׂמְלַת* denotes a piece of cloth used as a cover and can refer to items that cover a person or inanimate objects, like a bed (e.g., Gen. 9:23; Deut. 22:17). It is also used in the plural as a general term for clothing, including men’s clothing (Gen. 37:34; Exod. 19:10; Josh. 7:6). In this case, since it is used with the verb *לָבַשׁ*, “to wear, put on,” the term *שִׂמְלַת* refers to a cloak, mantle, wrap, or other garment that a woman wears. And thus, the latter part of the verse is easy to understand: a man must not wear women’s clothing. The former part of the verse is more difficult. In contrast to *שִׂמְלַת*, the term *כֶּלִי* has a wide range of meanings, including, but not limited to: various types of containers, baggage, tools, weapons, armor, furnishings and other

¹⁰ Ademiluka, 7.

¹¹“ylik,” BDB: 479; R. Laird Harris, “ylik,” TWOT (The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1980 Electronic version Bible Works), 194.

¹² Brian, 11.

household objects, apparel, jewellery, ornamental objects, and general personal property.¹³

Deducing from the two submissions above, it then, becomes clear that the text may not have necessarily referred to clothing alone, it cut across whatever thing belongs to each sex. Summing all up, one can deduce that the text is strictly a warning against heathenism, idolatry which to God is an abomination. This implies God does not want a divergence from the straight, normal, correct and proper state of his creation. It is often said that when the purpose of a thing is not known, abuse is inevitable. In God's diary, the female dress is created for the female and the male dress is created for the male, an abuse of this is a change in God's order and that, to him, is idolatry.

IMPLICATION OF DEUTERONOMY 22:5 FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS

It is a known fact that Deuteronomy 22:5 has been a major point of reference for most churches to combat the wearing of trousers but is that all that the text addresses? Definitely, not. The context in which this verse is written would have been the best judge of what exactly it is addressing but the text does not provide sufficient contextual evidence. However, building on previous research works and considering the various submissions of scholars, two important things among others are addressed in the text and they are cross-dressing and a strict distinction between gender roles and enforcing a firm boundary between masculinity and femininity.

Although, God has chosen not to specify how gender-distinctness should be manifested in clothing, culture however, determines/creates gender distinctions in clothing. As long as culture maintains the principle of gender-distinctiveness in its styles, it is not deliberately (philosophically) moving in a direction that is contrary to Scripture, and is in harmony with other biblical principles (e.g., modesty).¹⁴

This, then, is to mean that a man should not put on what has been designated by a particular culture to belong to a woman and vice versa. This designation includes hairstyles, jewellery, clothing, etc. Also, neither gender should attempt to usurp the role of each other as an attempt to do such, is a disintegration of God's commandment.

CONCLUSION

One may not be able to really state how the Jews applied that text to themselves but one thing that is known is that regardless the differences in their male and female wears, they were clearly recognizable and the principle was visibly applicable. To this end, since there is diversity in culture, whatever is acceptable in each culture as belonging to either gender should not be arbitrated.

¹³Hilary Lipka, *The Prohibition of Cross-Dressing: What does Deuteronomy 22:5 prohibit and why?*

¹⁴ Philip A. Brown, *Loving God & Others with Gender-Distinct Clothing Introduction: A Theology of Gender Distinctions* (2008), 12.

This submission however, seems philosophical; we must know that almost every culture has been influenced by westernization resulting in indecent dressing by male and female alike. Hence, one can conclude with the words of Brian stating that; “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 jewellery could be applied.”¹⁵ In essence, men and women should never wear clothing that belongs to the opposite sex. Men’s attire should reflect biblical concepts of masculinity while female clothing should reflect femininity. Also, believers should never give in to a fallen, perverted imagination or wicked, unlawful desires. They are to be what God created them to be.

Above all, whatever more of dress one decides to adopt, instructions of the scripture in Philippians 4:8 “Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are Noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy, meditate on these things.” So, as much as westernization has taken over the fashion world, modesty should still be embraced by believers and the definition of modesty, according to the scripture, is pure, lovely, of good report and praiseworthy.

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¹⁵ Brian, 43.