
Adorning the Temple of God

by Madelyn Jones-Haldeman

Jewelry has long been used by many denominations as a religious yardstick to measure one's spirituality. Even the wearing of a simple unadorned gold ring, such as the wedding band, has been considered in our church, until recently, as on the brink of "worldliness," the wearer inexorably sliding into apostasy. How can a simple gold band, with or without precious stones, become an integral part of an issue of such momentous proportions? Some would argue that the expense involved precludes a Christian from wearing jewelry, but inexpensive yet attractive costume jewelry rules against such a conclusion. Others argue that adornment is really an issue relating to pride, and therefore must be off-limits to the Christian. For some, adornment includes make-up, certain styles of clothing, pins, brooches, and jewelry of any kind. The exceptions are tie pins or clasps, cuff links, watches, medical alert bracelets or necklaces, watches on gold chains, and decorative hair combs, which are acceptable because they are viewed as having a utilitarian purpose.

Most Seventh-day Adventists promote the lack of personal adornment. Their fingers, arms, and necks remain unadorned, save, perhaps, for a lovely watch or a beautiful tie clasp. However, Adventists do not promote the lack of adornment when decorating their homes, buying their cars, or landscaping their property. Pride is acceptable

and even endorsed in some areas of our lives, when we are admonished to "take pride in your school work," or "take pride in a job well done" or "take pride in your appearance." What kind of reasoning permits one to "take pride" in one's appearance but forbids "being proud" of one's appearance? Do the words "taking" and "being" change the basic meaning of pride itself? How much pride can one experience before it is "too much" pride?

"Pride in one's appearance" is limited to certain categories determined by divines of long ago. An elegantly simple gold bracelet is forbidden but an elegant cuff on a sleeve is never questioned. What would be the response if that elegant cuff was detached from the dress and worn by itself, either on the wrist or around the neck? Or what would be the consensus if lovely material was cut in strips and worn on the fingers, the ankles, the neck, or the forehead? A pin placed on the lapel of a suit is considered adornment, and, therefore, improper. However, a lovely paisley print silk handkerchief worn in the breast pocket of that same suit is perfectly acceptable. Both perform the same function—"finishing off" the suit.

The "function" of the bracelet or necklace determines its acceptability. If it keeps a watch on the wrist or around the neck, the gold bracelet or necklace is not considered adornment. The watch is an utilitarian piece of adornment necessary in the 20th century. Everyone knows how to break rules that don't make sense. Wear a watch.

For most members, the simple answer to questions regarding adornment is that the Bible says to be modest and not to wear gold, and the *Seventh-*

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day Adventist Encyclopedia also invokes the Bible as the ultimate sanction against jewelry. “It is clearly taught in the Scriptures that the wearing of jewelry is contrary to the will of God . . . The wearing of ornaments of jewelry is a bid for attention which is not in keeping with Christian self-forgetfulness” (10:402). It is, therefore, the intention of this paper to examine major texts in the Old and New Testament referring specifically to the wearing of jewelry.

Old Testament

The Old Testament frequently refers to adornment of all varieties: amulets, bracelets, earrings, gold, nose rings, rings, silver, and necklaces, to name some of the most commonly mentioned items. The first reference to gold is found in Genesis 2:11, 12, in which the writer remarks that the land of Havilah contained “good gold.” Havilah is mentioned as one of the primeval lands watered by the four rivers flowing out of Eden. The reference to gold is the only description of the land.

The next reference in Genesis (13:2) concerns Abraham and his wealth, which consisted of much cattle, silver, and gold. Genesis 24:22-53 records that Abraham sent many generous gifts for Rebekah’s dowry—bracelets, a nose ring, and finger rings, each specified by weight. A bride was to be adorned for her husband in garments of silk and fine linen, bejeweled with rings, bracelets, necklaces, and anklets. When, therefore, we read in Genesis 35:1-4 that Jacob commanded his family to put away foreign gods and their earrings, it is important to note that no other rings or necklaces or bracelets or nose rings are mentioned.

Some scholars believe that these particular rings were “employed for purposes of idolatrous worship, which were often covered with allegorical figures and mysterious sentences, and supposed to be endowed with a talismanic virtue” (*Pulpit Commentary* 1:141). Such a conclusion appears valid since (1) the earrings are associated with the idols and (2) no other adornment is

mentioned. Also, no command is recorded against wearing jewelry between the time of Abraham and Jacob.

Three chapters later (38:18-25), we read of Tamar who, when playing the harlot, asked for Judah’s seal, staff, card, and signet ring.³ This passage is significant because it is the first clear reference to men wearing jewelry. Genesis 41:42 records Pharaoh placing his ring and necklace on Joseph who willingly wore these items. In this instance, the jewelry symbolized power and authority, as the jewelry of women designated their new status, acceptance, and worth.

The book of Exodus records several accounts of personal adornment. For example, when the Israelites left Egypt, they took gold, silver, and jewels from the Egyptians (see chapters 3, 11, 12, 35). From this store both the golden calf and the temple furnishings were made. In fact, there was such a supply of silver, gold, jewels, and materials that the people had to be restrained in their giving, indicating that the people had some of these precious items left over for themselves.

From Joshua to the prophets, the Old Testament refers several times to jewels, some gained through conquest, other by gift or purchase. The book of Judges (8:24-26) describes Gideon gathering the earrings from the spoil and making an ephod by which Israel played the harlot. For example, 2 Samuel tells us that Saul wore a crown and a bracelet when he died on the battlefield (1:10). The writer of 2 Chronicles recounts that Hezekiah made treasuries for his silver, gold, and stones (32:37). There is no record that these precious items would be taken to a giant “melting pot,” the residual sold, and the money given to some “worthy cause.” Such materials were not only used by the king himself, but also given as gifts to others. The account in 1 Kings (10:2) records that the Queen of Sheba brought to Solomon gold, spices, and precious stones. The books of Proverbs (20:15) and Job (28:12-19) point out that the higher and better things in life, such as wisdom, cannot be equaled by gold and silver. Canticles (1:10; 7:1) speaks of beads and ornaments in the context of an erotic love song.

The prophets use adornment symbolically; it was not banned. Indeed, adornment was clearly in

use. This is clear because adornment symbolized a relationship of betrothal, of worth and value. Probably the most important passage is Isaiah 3. Twenty-one different ornaments are mentioned in verses 18-23, and not one of the ornaments is banned. The prophet denounces members of the tribe of Judah because they set themselves against the Lord. Both men and women are mentioned in this passage. Not only are many kinds of jewelry mentioned, but also hand mirrors, outer tunics, cloaks, undergarments, turbans, and veils. Actually, the whole repertoire of woman's dress, including the necessary accoutrements to dressing, are all mentioned. To appear without adornment is one thing; but to appear without clothing was to be totally and completely destitute. Actually, the removal of women's adornment indicates God's displeasure and lack of acceptance of Judah as his people. Judah is a sad, unadorned woman, unbetrothed, without a husband.

This chapter in Isaiah is complemented with a description of the origin of Jerusalem. Ezekiel uses symbols to describe the birth of a baby girl who was thrown out into an open field to die. The Lord God passed by and said to the dying infant, "Live." The girl grew up and still was naked and bare. Then the Lord God passed by and spread his skirt over her so that she was no longer naked. As a symbol of acceptance and worth, the Lord adorned her with beautiful clothes and ornaments of all kinds. Then the prophet recounts the harlotry of the woman who trusted in her beauty and made idols from her gold and silver and jewels.

These two passages are very similar. However, Isaiah omits references to birth of the woman and passes directly to descriptions of her betrothal, accompanied by beautiful garments and jewels. Removal of these adornments leaves the woman as God found her—naked and bare—a condition that indicates "out of relationship." Thus we can see the symbolism involved in jewelry and other adornment. The giving of these beautiful ornaments indicated the intention of the giver to enter into a relationship, to become betrothed to someone. The recipient was the chosen one, considered of great worth and value. Literally, the bride was always thus adorned for her husband. Symbolically, then, Jerusalem was the chosen one

adorned for her husband, the Lord God.

It would be difficult to interpret any of these texts to mean that individual Hebrews were not expected to adorn themselves.

1 Timothy 2:9

The New Testament refers to jewelry in only two major texts. The first is found in 1 Timothy 2:9. It is reasonably clear from the entire letter that a number of false teachings had created dissension, schisms, and a highly charged atmosphere in the church. For example, false teachings included an ascetic approach to marriage and food (1 Timothy 4), strange doctrines (1:4, 5), mistreatment of elderly parents and grandparents (1 Timothy 5), and misapplication of the Old Testament scriptures (1:6, 7), to name a few.

Both men and women are exhorted in 1 Timothy 2. Certain men were creating disturbance, and verse 8 admonishes them to pray rather than create wrath and dissension. These men were responsible for teaching or perpetuating many of the heretical ideas and concepts found throughout the letter. The Old Testament quotation, "lift up holy hands," is a metaphor clearly aimed at these nefarious activities. These men are just as responsible for the doctrinal perversion in Ephesus as were the women who are addressed next. Therefore, when verse nine begins with "likewise," the reader is to understand that now the women are being admonished to cease their part in creating wrath and dissension. Inasmuch as the hands are symbols of the men's evil participation, the corollary for the women is their ostentatious dress. In some way, their extravagant attire is an expression of their authority and power, a badge of their hegemony, and is associated with the problem in the church. As the men are to pray, the women are to perform good works directed toward others, rather than spending enormous amounts of their time and money on adorning their own persons.

First-century sources indicate that only the very rich could dress in such an ornate way. Philosophers inveighed against the obvious van-

ity and pride of women who spent their entire lives decorating their bodies. Inasmuch as this letter is addressed to Christians, one can only conjecture from the contents of the letter why rich Christian women are being addressed. They would not have become part of the Christian community dressed in such an ornate way. These women must have chosen such opulent dress and coiffures for some specific reason. Rich women became patrons of itinerant preachers and philosophers in the first century, and the letter refers to many heretical teachings. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that these women not only were dispensers of the erroneous teachings learned from these men, but their power and authority to teach was symbolized by their dress and ornamentation.

Thus, in exhorting the women to dress mod-

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estly and discreetly, the author is really removing their power base. The adornment, symbolizing power, was to be replaced with proper clothing that did not symbolize authority. The good works in which they were admonished to engage are the opposite of their actions. These women were bringing in false teachings that created unheard-of problems in the homes and the home church. Therefore, these good works must be defined within this context—taking care of parents and grandparents, teaching women to love their husbands and children, and so forth.

We must understand the admonition against ornamentation against this background. First, we must recognize why it was given. Second, we must interpret it appropriately for our day. To be dressed modestly in the first century did not mean avoiding ornamentation of all kinds. Gold was worn by all peoples, but spectacular styles in which gold and pearls were intricately woven in the hair were time-consuming. No one in the ancient world—Christian or pagan—approved of

such high-handed vanity and personal expense. The exhortation to adorn oneself modestly and discreetly, then, is really a statement against the women's high-handedness in the home churches. Paul was saying: Do not use symbols of power, authority, or status to lord it over others; do not exercise authority in a political way.

Another interesting point about this passage emerges from verse 12. "To have authority over a man," is not the usual verb to describe one's power or responsibility. Rather, in Greek, the word conveys the idea of both seduction and murder. Female teachers in both Greek and Roman times had the reputation of sexually seducing their students. The word also suggests murder—to have full power over someone to the point of destroying the person. Thus the dress of these women suggested seductive powers, and the money they controlled suggested power of another kind. The passage truly deals with high-handed power and authority, used in the most unscrupulous ways. It seems clear, then, that 1 Timothy 2:8, 9 should not be reduced to a proof text condemning adornment.

1 Peter 3:3, 4

First Peter 3:3, 4 records another exhortation against ornamentation. The context of this passage provides perspective to the admonition. These verses are part of a house code that begins in 2:11 and extends to 3:12. Many have written on the house codes in the New Testament and suggested diverse reasons for their use here in 1 Peter. David Balch articulates the most reasonable explanation. House codes were not Christian creations, but came from the Greek philosophy that some persons were superior to others. To the inferior persons, in particular, much has been written concerning the appropriate behavior toward the superior ones. This epistle contains admonitions to slaves, but very little exhortation to masters.

Wives receive full treatment, whereas husbands are accorded one sentence. Balch argues that the house codes were a defense by Christians

against slander, rather than as a manual of Christian behavior.

Balch shows that the Romans in the first century criticized new and foreign cults, accusing them of perpetuating immorality, murder, and sedition. To be seditious in the first century meant reversing the “proper relationship” between a husband and wife or slave and master. Since slaves and women were considered inferior, they were to be submissive to their superiors—husbands and masters. Being women and slaves, they were duty bound to worship the gods of their masters and husbands. The particular rites of Christianity, in which women and men took part together, gave rise to the criticism that women (not men) were immoral. Thus the new religion was accused of corrupting the “weak vessels” of society. A similar charge had been brought against the followers of the Dionysian cult. A slander of this magnitude was tantamount to treason, inasmuch as every home was considered a “mini-state” and the integrity and success of the empire depended upon maintaining the superior/inferior positions in each home as well as the correct behaviors that corresponded to these positions. Failure to worship the gods of masters and husbands was considered seditious. For a cult to be slandered as immoral was a serious offense. The Dionysian cult, for example, was finally banned and its temples closed.

Therefore, this apologetic use of the house codes was, in a sense, a defense for the Christians. The writer is anxious to encourage conduct that would put a stop to the slander and reduce the risk of persecution that apparently loomed in the background.

The exhortation directed to the women included a missionary incentive. In light of the slander befalling the community of believers, it may have been felt that refraining from attending the home churches was necessary in order to avoid the charge of immorality. The reference in verse two to chaste and respectful behavior could well be a suggestion to Christian wives that staying at home (the state disapproved of women going out at night) might be prudent during these difficult times.

The exhortation against adornment must also

be seen against this use of the house codes and the very real charges of slander hurled at the Christians. First of all, only the rich could adorn themselves in such a way. Secondly, Christian wives were accused of immorality and reversing

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society’s role for husbands and wives. Thus, in society, men railed against women because they wore certain colors, used gold and jewels in adorning themselves excessively (according to the men’s standards), and treated themselves to certain oils and bathing rites. The men believed that women who indulged in such behavior were guilty of every crime and in particular, of violating their husband’s beds.

Thus, the writer of 1 Peter exhorts women to avoid any actions that would allow husbands or society to see them as adulterous. To be convicted by society of being adulterous was equivalent to sedition against Rome. The author of 1 Peter was concerned that women not give society any excuse to incriminate all Christians.

Although both Roman men and women wore gold, society considered decoration of the women’s hair with gold and jewels to be inappropriate. A woman’s adornment was to be in accordance with the will of her husband, and deviation from this norm was considered to be immoral. The austere dress suggested in 1 Peter contrasted starkly with the elaborate and exotic dress worn by female participants at the feast of Artemis. Writers of the day describe in detail the beauty of women who paraded through the streets dressed in purple chitons, their hair elaborately braided with gold and jewels. The women who dressed in such a fashion presented themselves as erotically attractive; male observers of the spectacle became convinced that these women were immoral.

The Christian women in 1 Peter 3 did not

participate in the pagan mystery cults. Rather, the accusations of immorality against ornamented and beautifully clothed women in Roman society made it necessary for Christian women to avoid even the “appearance of evil.” Also, Christians were already being accused of sedition because they were making a break with many other aspects of society’s mores. Christian women with pagan husbands were asked to observe society’s customs by treading softly in their homes and deferring to their husbands as lords.

As in 1 Timothy, dress carried important sym-

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bolism. However, 1 Peter does not refer to power and authority, but to morality. Rich women were to be extremely careful in their dress so that society would not consider these Christians as immoral as the women who attended the cultic feasts. Husbands could more readily be won over to the Christian religion if the women conformed to the norms of dress outlined by society because the husbands would not worry about the morality of the wives’ new religion or the purity of the marriage bed.

Thus, it would be a pity to use this passage as a proof text against the wearing of gold or even expensive dresses. In reality, it is not a text prohibiting ornamentation on the basis of some God-given commandment. The very real context was persecution of the church. Under the circumstances, Christians were responsible for one another’s well-being. In the first century, if one was accused of immorality, the whole group was considered guilty.

We must remember that this exhortation was written to women in a monarchic society, women whose very beings were organized around their husbands’ wants and desires. The whole philosophical system of the age was predicated on a system of superiors and inferiors—a principle

that Christianity did not accept. The real purpose for writing 1 Peter 3:1-7 was to encourage wives to look and act the part society demanded in order to lessen the criticism against the new church.

The Old Testament, with its understanding that ornamentation symbolized the acceptance and worth of the betrothed, differs from the New Testament. Gentiles converting to Christianity brought a new perspective to ornamentation. The converts accepted the prevalent idea that the success of the Roman Empire depended on homes’ maintaining the status quo (superior/inferior positions). Dress was a symbol of a hierarchical order of the empire. As a result, it was believed that wives were to respect every mood of their husbands, to the point of buying garments according to the demands and wills of the men in the homes. When the women in Rome finally convinced the government that women in particular needed a temple of their own, the Dionysian cult was born. But the fact that women went out at night without husbands and adorned themselves beautifully convinced Rome that the new cult was immoral.

The Biblical Positions

For Jews, ornamentation related to their belief about God—wives always adorned themselves for their husbands; and Israel adorned itself for its God. Although the promiscuous use of adornment was discouraged, the Old Testament never prohibited adornment itself. However, in the society of New Testament times, lavish adornment was proscribed. Roman society in the first century A.D. suspected that women who dressed in beautiful colors and exquisite materials were immoral. But the New Testament did not declare gold, silver, and jewels sinful. Rather, it recognized that conditions related to ornamentation might become detrimental either to the individual congregation or the church as a whole.

Such conditions do not exist in American culture today. Jewelry does not need to be expensive, and those who wear it tastefully are not necessarily identified with sexually immoral practices.

Furthermore, ours is a democratic society that inculcated the equality of women and men; we must be careful not to teach inequality by prohibiting adornment for women while we permit it for men.

One further point must be made concerning ornamentation. In the Old Testament, from the early tabernacle furnishings overlaid with gold to

the permanent temple building with its magnificent gold furniture, God is not portrayed as opposed to ornamentation, gold, jewels, and beautiful decoration. It is illogical to assume that we can delight in God's dwelling place, that is as ornate and beautiful as humanity can make it, yet we humans cannot delight in beautifying our bodies as the temple of God.