

The Meaning of “Shorn” and “Shaven”



Electra, the Greek Goddess, in SHORN Hair

*“But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were **shaven**. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be **shorn**: but if it be a shame for a woman to be **shorn or shaven**, let her be covered.”*
(1 Corinthians 11:5-6)

Imperative to understanding the passage of 1 Cor. 11:3-16 is defining the key terms in the original Greek, but we must also put the definitions back into their correct historical context. Although we have English equivalents for Greek terms, they do not necessarily bear the same meanings in modern day English speaking cultures.

Word definitions change rapidly over time, and many English words have changed in their definitions since the KJV was translated in 1611. With a modern day, ordinary dictionary a person can be misled by a definition that was not applicable in Biblical times, but in a Bible dictionary a different shade of meaning may be found. The best source for a word study is the Hebrew/Greek lexicon. By defining the original Hebrew or Greek words in the text one obtains the **original meaning** of Biblical terms.

The English word, “shorn,” is the past participial of the verb, “shear.” There is a myriad of definitions for the English “shear.” UPCI author, Daniel Segraves, in his first book on hair length, *Women’s Hair: the Long and Short of It*, does not even attempt to define the Greek verb, *keiro*, translated “shorn,” but bases the belief against women cutting their hair (any length) on a MODERN day definition of “shear” as found in ordinary dictionaries. On p9 he presents 17 definitions, but only 3 of these are Biblical. Segraves states,

“...it is necessary that we establish clearly the meaning of the word “shorn” if our mind is going to be settled as to whether a woman should cut her hair to *any* degree. So far we have the following information:

Shorn is defined as:

To shear (*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*) – to cut with shears or other sharp instrument – to cut the hair, fleece, wool, etc. from – to strip or deprive – to reap with a sickle – to cut with a sharp instrument – to cut off the hair from – to cut off or cut short (hair) by or as if by the use of shears – to cut with something sharp – to cut with shears or scissors – to remove (wool or fleece) by cutting or clipping – to cut the wool or fleece from – to cut close; cut off; cut – to have one’s hair cut off, be shorn (*W.E.Vine*) – shearing or cutting short the hair of the head (*Thayer*) – cut off (eight translations) – cut (two translations)”

Segraves uses three ordinary dictionaries and three Biblical reference books and states:

“...while “shorn” *can* mean “to cut close,” it is *certainly not limited to that meaning*. Indeed, the preponderance of dictionary definitions are on the side of interpreting “shorn” as simply “to cut”, without specifying how much! ...While a minority of the definitions could possibly *apply* to cutting closely the majority testimony is that “shear” simply means “to cut.”

Out of these 17 definitions I counted 10 that bear the meaning of “to cut closely.” But, Segraves is not adding in those of “CUT OFF the hair...” as indicating how much; also, when studying the definitions in the dictionaries Segraves used one will discover that references to shearing sheep are omitted by Segraves. All Biblical uses of the word, “shear,” excluding “shorn” in the NT (Acts 18:18; 1 Cor. 11:6), are referring to shearing sheep. When a sheep is “shorn” there is nothing much left except stubble. The sheep looks almost as if it has been “shaved.”

In quoting *Vine’s* definition Segraves omits the notation to see, “shave.” In the OT “shave” is translated from the Hebrew word, *gazaz*, which means in *Zondervan’s Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, “to shear.” The word is found in Jeremiah 7:29 where it is translated, “CUT OFF.” (“CUT OFF thine hair, *O Jerusalem*, and cast it away, and take up a lamentation on high places...”)

In Bible Dictionaries

The *King James Dictionary* defines “shorn” as, 1. “Cut off; as a lock of wool shorn 2. Having the hair or wool cut off or sheared: as a shorn lamb. ...It is appropriately used for the cutting of wool from sheep on their skins...” *Vine’s Expository Dictionary* says “shorn” means “to have one’s hair cut off, be shorn.” We are also referred to the word, “shave.” *The Interpreter’s Bible* says of v6, “For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair... Two different words are used by Paul for the cutting of the hair. The shaving was with a

razor; the shearing, with scissors. Such a cutting of the hair was a mark of a slave or of a woman in mourning." *The International Bible Commentary*, F.F. Bruce, states concerning v6, "If she discards her veil like a man, she should crop her head like one too!"

In Greek Dictionaries

In Thayer and Smith, *The NT Greek Lexicon*, the Greek verb, **keiro**, is defined as, "to shear: a sheep; of shearing or cutting SHORT the hair of the head." *Greek Word Study Tool* says *keiro* means "to cut the hair SHORT, shear; Mid. To cut OFF one's hair or have it cut off, as in deep mourning..." Archibald Robertson's, *Word Pictures in the NT*, says in Book IV, "*Keiro* means "to shear as sheep; Let her **cut** her hair **close**." *Strong's Expanded Dictionary of Bible Words* says *keiro* is used 1. "Of "shearing sheep" Acts 8:32. 2. In the middle voice, "to have one's hair CUT OFF, be shorn," Acts 18:18; 1 Cor. 11:6 (twice)." *Vine's Expository Dictionary of NT Words* says the same as *Strong's* but adds cp. *Xurao*, "to shave." *Vine's* says *xurao* comes from *xuron*, a "razor," and occurs in Acts 21:24 in connection with a vow (Num. 6:18-20; cp. Acts 18:18 **see SHEAR**). *Xurao* is defined as to "**shear**" the hair in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, *50 Greek Dictionary*. [The UPCI author does not define *xurao* and totally misses the **synonymous** usage of "shorn" and "shaven."]

The UPCI, in teaching on baptism, to prove there is only one correct MODE of water baptism, goes straight to the Greek lexicon to define the Greek word, *baptizo*. The modern, ordinary dictionary, *Webster's New World Dictionary*, defines "baptism" as "immersion, sprinkling, and christening." But, the UPCI did not attempt to define *keiro* until the second book, *Hair Length in the Bible*, by Daniel Segraves, when the author modifies his word study method somewhat. Stated on p30 is,

"The word *shorn* ... is translated from the Greek *keiro*, which means "to have one's hair cut" without specifying how much is cut off. We should carefully note this fact: both the Greek *keiro* and the English *shear* simply refer to cutting. The hair is shorn if any of it is cut off."

But, the author only refers to ONE Greek dictionary, the *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek NT*, by Wilbur Gingrich, where *keiro* is defined as "*shear* Acts 8:32; Mid. *Have one's hair cut* 18:18; 1 Cor. 11:6." This particular dictionary does not present COMPLETE definitions. In the preface it is stated, "Emphasis is placed on the **bare meanings** of words; for more information the user must consult BAGD [Baer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker] or other works." But, the author does not refer to any other lexical works to define *keiro*.

Although ONE MODERN definition of "shear" is "cut" without specifying how much, this is NOT the meaning of the Biblical Greek verb "keiro."

According to Greek Language Experts

Asking various college Greek professors, with Ph.D. degrees in Greek, the answers are predominantly the same:

- Q. 1. Can this word refer to a simple trimming of the hair? 2. Can it have a general meaning such as “to cut” without specifying how much?
1. The Assistant Greek professor of the University of North Carolina says, “The verb *keiro* indicates quite a thorough cropping of the hair, not just a trim. It was frequently used of sheep or when armies chopped down crops, just to give you the idea of the strong force of it. If used metaphorically, it suggests wild tearing (like animals greedily devouring) or of wasting.”
 2. Dr. Radcliffe Edmonds, Department of Greek, Latin, and Classical Studies, Bryn Mawr College, says, “The term generally means to shear, as in CUT CLOSE or what one does to a sheep. **There are other terms that could be used for just to clip.**”
 3. Professor Kilpatrick, from Queen’s University, says, “*Keiro* would mean “shear” (as a sheep) or “cut off.” It implies a **very** short cut. (It was used in Greek for CUTTING OFF one’s hair to fulfil a vow.) Today it might apply to cancer fund-raisers.”
 4. Professor Griffith says, “In Classical Greek *keiro* describes the cutting of the hair of men and women upon their reaching maturity. The amount of hair removed would have been quite substantial. The monumental sculptures will give you some idea of the length of hair prior to the “shearing.” [This refers to the “rites of passage.” An epithet of Phoebus, from Homer’s “Iliad” is translated, “not shearing the hair.” It refers to boys in ancient Greece not cutting their hair SHORT.”]
 5. Professor David Leitao of the Classics Department of the University of San Francisco, says, “I’m not sure the Greeks had the concept “trim.”
 6. Professor of Greek and Latin at Ohio State University, says, “Cutting of the hair SHORT is indicated by the verb *keiro*. This usually denotes an act of mourning, not a hairstyle.”
 7. A graduate student from the University of Minnesota and Baylor University, who works with NT material and is knowledgeable in *Koine*, or Biblical Greek, says, “...‘Keiro’ basically means “to shear (a sheep).” Indeed, this basic sense of the word is attested, among other places, in numerous passages in the *Septuagint*, the Greek version of the OT...Various forms of ‘keiro’ are used...in Genesis 31:19 (“shear his flock”); Gen. 38:12-13 (“ones shearing the sheep” and “shear his sheep”); 1 Sam. 25:2, 4, 7, 11 (“shearing his sheep” and “shearers”); and Isaiah 53:7 (“shearers,” also quoted in Acts 8:32). ...the basic sense consistently remains. That is, ‘keiro’ implies **much more than simply trimming one’s hair**, and its most basic meaning in Biblical Greek carries a sense of the **close cropping** associated with **shearing sheep**. ‘Xurao’, which means “to shave,” is used in **close connection** with ‘keiro’ in 1 Cor. 11:6. It is **closely related etymologically**, e. g., to ‘xuo’ (“to scrape, scratch”), ‘xuron’ (“razor”); and ‘xuraphion’ (“surgical knife”). ...this word...helps to further illustrate the intrinsic differences contained in words that are in some ways **synonyms**. ...‘xurao’...often implies a smooth shave close to the skin, ‘keiro’ would not (necessarily) carry that same nuance. Although ‘keiro’ basically implies a close cropping, it is still a cutting rather than a shaving.”

Menander

To illustrate the literary usage of *keiro* the Assistant Greek professor of the University of North Carolina referred to a play by the comic poet, Menander (342/1-292/1 BC), called *Perikeiromene*, which is a combination of the Greek words *peri* (around) + *keiro* (shear) + *mene* = woman who = *the Woman Who was Shorn all Around*.

The plot of the play is that a Corinthian soldier named Polemon has a lover named Glykera, but because it is not known whether she was born from two Corinthian parents, he cannot legally marry her, so they can only live together but not produce “legitimate” children (i.e., boys who can become Corinthian citizens or girls who can give birth to boys who can

become Corinthian citizens.) One day Polemon sees the next-door neighbor (Moschion) come up to Glykera and give her a kiss, and she does not resist him, because she knows it's her brother (although Moschion doesn't know of this relationship, but their mother is dead now, and they don't know who their father is.) In a fit of jealousy Polemon then CUTS OFF ALL HER HAIR, which was quite an embarrassing situation for Glykera, because a woman being completely shorn was quite frowned upon in Greco-Roman antiquity (and most traditional societies, including those today.) Glykera then leaves Polemon's house and moves next door with Moschion, because he's her only known relative and she has nowhere else to turn. Of course, Polemon interprets this as proof that his suspicions were right. She, however, must keep finding ways to put off his advances. Eventually, her and Moschion's father, Pataikos, recognizes a token she has, and so their Corinthian parentage is discovered, incest is avoided, Polemon is sorry, Pataikos agrees that Polemon can marry her (they don't bother to ask Glykera her opinion), and the play ends happily with a marriage. At any rate, **the play's title gives the right idea**—A Woman Shorned.

The Apostle was a well educated man and had read pagan literature. He, in fact, **quoted from Menander** in 15:33 strongly exhorting the Corinthians to be careful of their associations: "*Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners.*"¹ Menander probably derived this from Euripides (Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.16).² In Acts 17:28 Paul quoted from the beginning of the poem, *Phaenomena*, by Aratus of Cilicia, "*...as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.*" He quoted from Epimenides in Titus 1:12, "*One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, The Cretians are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies.*"³

In the book of Acts, chapter 21, we find that Paul spoke fluent Greek to the Roman military captain, Lysias. Paul was fluent in *Koine* Greek as well as being fluent in Classical Greek.⁴ The Apostle did not use the verb, *keiro*, to mean anything differently than the usage illustrated in these examples from Greek literature.

Electra

The ancient Greeks regarded losing one's hair as a sort of death, and mourners would CUT OFF their hair out of sympathy. Aristotle wrote, "Sympathizing with the dead, we deform ourselves by cutting off our hair."⁵ They also "shorn" the hair of slaves. In mythology Electra, the goddess, "shorn" her hair at the death of her father. She appears in the picture wearing a dark *himation*, also a sign of mourning. From the ancient playwright Euripides' play, *Electra*, we have a clear picture of what was meant by CUT OFF the hair. Euripides also illustrates the synonymous usage of "shorn" and "shaven." Orestes, Electra's brother, assumes that Electra is

¹ "The Corinthian Women Prophets," by Antoinette Clark Wire; p29

² "Menander"; Wikipedia; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menander>

³ "Biblical Poetry"; <http://www.angelfire.com/adazio/page45.html>

⁴ "The Early Life & Background of Paul the Apostle," The American Journal of Biblical Theology; <http://www.biblicaltheology.com/Research/WallaceQ01.html>

⁵ "HAIR," by Rig Veda; p5; <http://theosophytrust.org/tlodocs/symbols/Hair-0483.htm>

a slave when he sees her approaching, because of her **cropped** head. The following passages relate to the fact that Electra appears with SHORN hair.

Electra: "...a water-jug on her **shorn** head. I have come...so that I may...send forth laments into the wide sky, to my father."

Pylades: "But now that I see this maidservant, bearing a weight of water on her **shorn** head, let us sit down, and inquire of this **slave** girl..."

Electra: "I speak the laments in which I am always engaged, day by day, tearing my skin with my nails, and striking my **cropped** head with my hand, for your death." [*Self mutilation was another feature of mourning.*] "I keep up this constant grieving, ripping my dear skin with my fingernails, while my hand beats my **shaven** head—all this because you're dead...And my head and hair, **close shaven** as if by a Scythian's [*enemy of Greece*] razor...And my hair CUT OFF, **shorn** with a **razor**?"

Helen of Troy

Euripides in the play, *Orestes*, uses the Greek verb applicable for "trimming" ends. Even in mourning it was considered disgraceful to be obliged to "shear" off the hair, and lest they should lose this ornament of their heads, the women contrived to evade the custom by cutting off the ends of it only.⁶ Helen should have shorn or shaved her head on account of the death of her sister, Clytemnestra, but instead, she gave herself the equivalent of a modern day "trim." In Line 128 Electra, in speaking of Helen, says, "Did ye mark how she cut off (*apeqrisen*) her hair ONLY AT THE ENDS, careful to preserve its beauty? She is the same woman as of old."⁷ Helen sent these "tresses" to the tomb, along with the libations, by her daughter and servants.

The Greek verb, *apeqrisen*, is translated "to cut off"⁸ and was also used of objects. It is totally unrelated, etymologically, to *keiro* which is closely related to *xurao* ("to shave"). Although Helen "cut" her hair, she still had "long" hair.

The Apostle did not use the Greek verb for "trim" or "cut"—without specifying how much—in vv 5-6, but he used the Greek verb for a thorough cropping of the hair off SHORT!

Conclusion

It appears the UPCI has a tendency to *deceitfully* handle word definitions imperative to understanding the passage of 1 Cor. 11:2-16. Failure to understand the passage within its correct historical context is a major mistake. If we put Gingrich's shortened definition of "have one's hair cut" back into its historical context, it meant to have the hair cut SHORT. Ancient Greeks and Romans did not have the concept of "trim" as we do. "Trimming" ends is a modern day practice related to hair health. Cutting hair in the 1st century Roman Empire was primitive and was not done for style, or fashion, ease of care, etc. as today.

The connection of head-coverings with hair length was evident within Greco-Roman culture, and because of the symbolical meaning of the head-covering, a woman who went

⁶ Adam Clarke's Commentary 1 Corinthians 11

⁷ "Euripides, *Orestes* E.P. Coleridge, Ed." www.perseus.com

⁸ "Greek Word Study Tool"

unveiled may as well cut her hair short. This **parallel** makes plain the phrase “for that is even all one as if she were shaven” in v5. Read “Veiling in the Cult of Dionysus” to understand the relevance of “shorn” and “shaven” within cult worship.