



## BETSEY STOCKTON: PIONEER AMERICAN MISSIONARY

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Born to a slave mother about 1798 in Princeton, New Jersey, Betsey Stockton was the first unmarried woman missionary ever sent by a North American mission agency beyond the borders of the United States.<sup>1</sup> She went to the Sandwich Islands back in 1822, when James Monroe was president of this young Republic.<sup>2</sup>

We know little about Betsey's family except that her mother was owned by Robert Stockton, one of Princeton's distinguished citizens whose home was "Constitution Hill." Robert was a cousin of Richard Stockton, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and both of them were grandsons of one of the original pioneer settlers of the town. There is no record of Betsey's father at all, and it seems likely that she never knew who he was, though either her father or grandfather was probably a white man, since in her will she describes herself as a mulatto.

But her story, even with some pieces lost, is particularly fascinating because of its precedent-breaking character: *a black, a slave, a woman, and the first single woman missionary from North America.*

When Betsey was a small child, Robert Stockton gave her as a little servant girl to his oldest daughter, Elizabeth, who was the wife of a Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia named Ashbel Green. The Greens had three sons, Robert, Jacob, and James. James, the youngest, was six years old when, back in Princeton on his grandfather Stockton's farm, the little slave girl, Betsey Stockton, was born.

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Much later, Dr. Green, in a letter of recommendation for Betsey, supporting her application as a missionary candidate, wrote: "By me and my wife she was never intended to be held as a slave." Dr. Green was a strong antislavery advocate of his day, as was his Presbyterian minister father before him. Green's letter continued: "We deliberated seriously on the subject of dedicating her to God in baptism. But on the whole concluded not to do it. Betsey gave no evidence of piety, or of any permanent seriousness till she was near twenty years old. On the contrary, she was, at least till the age of thirteen or fourteen, wild and thoughtless, if not vicious. She always, however, manifested a great degree of natural sensibility, and of attachment to me and to her first mistress; and a great aptitude for mental improvement."<sup>3</sup>

So we know that Elizabeth and Ashbel Green had discussed the question of her baptism. There was, however, some ambiguity in Presbyterian Church law as to whether believing masters and mistresses who had slave children under their care should see it as their duty and responsibility to baptize them and oversee their Christian nurture — or whether such children might be presented only by believing *parents*.<sup>4</sup> For whatever reason, the Greens decided not to sponsor her baptism, even though they took seriously their responsibility to instruct and nurture her and their other domestics in Christian faith and life.<sup>5</sup>

Of Betsey's growing-up years we have only snatches of information. We know that she was precocious and, by Dr. Green's account, became alarmingly wild and willful. She was treated in their household kindly as a little servant girl, and one for whom they had a growing affection. She was systematically tutored in the academic and spiritual disciplines given their own children.

Elizabeth Stockton Green died in 1807, when Betsey was about nine years old. Betsey stayed on with the

family for all but three or four of her childhood and early teenage years. She was included in family prayers and "home-schooled" by Dr. Green, who often heard her catechism lessons, and by his son, James, who took a particular interest in her education. She developed a sisterly affection for James and his older brother, Jacob, and later in Hawaii took pains to collect and send home to Jacob from the island of Maui a number of interesting and unusual specimens of seashells and insects for his scientific research. Betsey showed a great aptitude for learning, although she never had a day of formal schooling in her life. Dr. Green had an extensive library in his home, and the young girl made the most of it.

The family moved to Princeton in 1812 when Ashbel Green took up duties as the eighth president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). He had married a second time in 1809 and was the father of another baby son, Ashbel, Jr. Betsey was away from their household at the time of the move back to Princeton but returned after three or four years. She had been living in the family of Dr. Green's niece in Woodbury, New Jersey, because of Green's worries about the unhealthy influences of Philadelphia city life on this impressionable young girl.

During the winter term of 1814—15 at the college in Princeton, a remarkable and spontaneous "revival of religion" took place under Dr. Green's tenure. As well as reinstating the study of Latin and Greek in to the curriculum, Green had organized a College Bible Society and offered regular instruction in the sacred Scriptures, examining the students himself on their knowledge of the Bible. Each Sabbath day the young men of the college and of the theological seminary next door gathered together at Nassau Hall for worship. When the revival broke out in early 1815, the atmosphere of community life among the students was greatly affected for good, and this eventually spilled over into Betsey's life. She attributes her conversion, though, to the ministry of a seminary student, Eliphalet Wheeler Gilbert, over a year later, in the summer of 1816, while sitting in the gallery of Princeton's First Presbyterian (now Nassau) Church.

The session minutes of that congregation record that on September 20, 1816, "Betsey Stockton, a coloured woman living in the family of the Rev. Dr. Green, applied for admission to the Lord's table." The session was satisfied as to the evidence of what they called her "experimental acquaintance with religion" and her good conduct and agreed to receive her into full communicant

membership.<sup>6</sup> She was publicly baptized at that time and admitted to the Lord's Table. It was sometime either that year or within the next two years that she was legally manumitted by Dr. Green.

## BETSEY'S GROWING INTEREST IN MISSION

Betsey's maturing Christian faith gradually gave form in her mind to a sense of the duty that Christians bear toward the "lost" of the world. This was a clear reflection of the American evangelical faith of her times represented by Dr. Green, by the seminary students who were her Bible teachers, and by her own pastor in the First Presbyterian Church in Princeton. All of them shared this Christian worldview, which was grounded on the premise of the love of God in Jesus Christ for the whole world — and the conviction that salvation is found only in Christ. Betsey believed with all her heart that it is the sacred duty of Christians to offer themselves in humble obedience to God's call to carry out his plan of salvation through Jesus Christ for the world.<sup>7</sup> This persuasion soon blossomed into a desire to go to Africa as a missionary. Some of her friends opposed her plan, but she continued to read and study, hoping for such an opportunity.

During this time she started a little class of instruction for several black children of the Princeton community. And for about a year and a half she was a member of a Sabbath school class taught by a seminary student, Michael Osborn, who was impressed by her serious scholarship. When eventually called upon for a letter of recommendation, he wrote: "She has a larger acquaintance with sacred history and the Mosaic Institutions than almost any ordinary person, old or young, I have ever known." (He explained that by "ordinary" he meant one not a member of the clergy or a candidate for the ministry.) Osborn went on to say: "I recollect a multitude of instances where, for my own information, I have questioned her about some fact in Biblical history, or some minute point in Jewish antiquities, and have immediately received a correct answer."<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Green was not among those who tried to discourage Betsey's missionary ambitions, although he must have wondered what opportunity she might ever have for such a commission, particularly as a single woman.

American Protestants were not yet ready to send single women overseas without a protector. There were all kinds of problems to overcome in even considering such a radical step. For one thing, there was the danger that a single woman, who would be expected to live in

a married missionary's home, might be imposed upon to act as little more than a domestic servant or built-in baby sitter. And there was also the risk that the people among whom they worked would assume that the male missionary kept two wives.<sup>9</sup>

Betsey Stockton and a Princeton Seminary student, Charles Stewart, had been acquainted for several years, since he had been in and out of the Greens' home often from his earliest days as a college student. Stewart had been one of those converted during the period of spiritual awakening among the students in 1815, and he attributed to Dr. Green's preaching and counsel the first effectual turning of his heart to the Lord and to a missionary purpose.

When Betsey learned that this young friend and his bride-to-be were going out as missionaries to the Sandwich Islands, her heart must have skipped a beat in wondering whether it might be possible for her to accompany them. She was well trained in domestic concerns, had skills as a nurse through useful life experience, and was also well prepared as a teacher, though without a day of public instruction in her life, apart from that received at home and church. But the possibility of her accompanying the Stewarts as a missionary must have seemed at first preposterous.

Nevertheless, on September 3, 1821, Dr. Ashbel Green wrote a letter to the secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions recommending Charles Stewart as a missionary candidate and, as he noted in his diary, another "one for my Betty."<sup>10</sup> "She had saved her wages," he said, "by which, with some small assistance from myself, she was able to prepare her outfit for the mission."<sup>11</sup>

We can only guess at the negotiations that had been taking place in designing the innovative plan that resulted in her trailblazing appointment. While the "mission family" concept was not guaranteed to forestall a possible misunderstanding about a missionary keeping two wives, it did at least provide protection and security for a single woman. The arrangement agreed upon was that Betsey would become part of Charles and Harriet Stewart's family.

Stewart had graduated from Princeton Seminary in 1821 and was married in June of 1822. Five months later, on November 19, the Stewarts and Betsey, bound as a family in this unique but happy association, joined the little band of eleven other missionaries and four native islanders leaving American shores to go as the first reinforcements to the Sandwich Islands mission estab-

lished by its pioneers three years earlier. These islands, which we now call Hawaii, were discovered by Captain James Cook in 1778 and named for the Earl of Sandwich, who had invented one of the most enduring fast foods of the Western world. The mission was under the direction of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, with its headquarters in Boston. This board, known as the ABCFM, was the joint missionary agency of the Presbyterian and Congregational churches in America at that time.

It was still true then, and for quite a while longer, that only the ordained men had a vote in the mission and were officially appointed "missionaries." Wives and single women were "assistant missionaries," without vote. But it is only fair to say that the same was true for a time, of unordained men such as physicians and printers. And one of the reasons for that was undoubtedly the fact that American evangelical Christians between 1810 and 1840 considered the proclamation (i.e., preaching) of the Gospel to be the highest priority in missions. Wives, teachers, physicians, and other workers were important partners to the preachers, but in a secondary role.<sup>12</sup> It was the preachers who most unequivocally bore the name "missionary." So, it was as a member of a "mission family" that Betsey's dream of becoming a missionary, even an "assistant missionary," was worked out.

Betsey's appointment was carefully worded to define her status. The official document, still in the ABCFM archives, spelled out the essentials of this unusual appointment. Among other stipulations, it read: "She is to be regarded and treated, neither as an equal nor as a servant, but as a humble Christian friend."<sup>13</sup> The wording may have been a bit ambiguous but not paralyzingly so. And by this distinctive appointment Betsey Stockton became a missionary.

## SERVING OVERSEAS

In the first letter that Betsey wrote home to Dr. Green during the long five-month voyage, she confessed to "the most death-like sickness I ever felt in my life, occasioned by the motion of the ship. Every person in the mission, except Mr. Stuart and Kermoola [one of the returning islanders], was sick at the same time. The weather became very boisterous....I am happy to tell you that since I left home, in all the storms and dangers I have been called to witness, I have never lost my self-possession. This I consider as a fulfillment of the promise that as my day is, so my strength shall be. But we have not yet come to the most trying part of the voyage. We are

now near the coast of Africa, and I fear I shall not act the Christian, in the thunder storms which are to be expected there."

She continued: "I wish it was in my power to give the ladies of your family some account of our manner of living...sometimes in imagination, I visit them in the night, and get a piece of bread; for there is nothing I have wanted so much since I left home, of the provision kind, as bread. Ours is pilot-bread and crackers, and by using them in our seasickness I took a dislike to them. But we have pudding, boiled rice, and mush once a week, and beans, potatoes, boiled onions, fruit, etc. The cook, however, is a dirty man, and we are obliged to eat without asking questions. While I was sick, they gave me a mug of chicken soup — the grease, the pepper, and the feathers, floated together on the surface." She went on to describe their sleeping arrangements and how her hammock pitched and rolled. "Whenever my head went to leeward and my feet to windward, which was the case every five minutes, it made me very sick...The second night the ship rolled without pitching, and I was thrown back and forth as fast as I could go, until about 12 o'clock at night, when...I was thrown up, first against the ceiling and then on the dining table....The water running on the deck, and the trunks falling in the cabin, allowed me to think very little of myself."<sup>14</sup>

Later on a calmer day she wrote in her journal, "If it were in my power I would like to describe the phosphorescence of the sea. But to do this would require the pen of a Milton: and he, I think, would fail, were he to attempt it."<sup>15</sup>

Finally the long five-month voyage ended, and their schooner pulled into the harbor at Honolulu. Betsey described her feelings at the first sight of the native islanders, who came out to welcome them in little canoes, as a chilling effect. "They were mostly naked except for a narrow strip of *tapa* around their loins. When they first came on board, the ladies retired to the cabin and burst into tears; and some of the gentlemen turned pale....my own soul sickened within me, and every nerve trembled. Are these, thought I, the beings with whom I must spend the remainder of my life? They are men and have souls — was the reply which conscience made....We informed them that we were missionaries, come to live with them and do them good. At which an old man exclaimed, in his native dialect, '...That is very good. By and by know God.'" Betsey went on to say: "In a short time our unpleasant feelings were

much dissipated."<sup>16</sup> One morning a few days after they landed, the queen spoke to a messenger asking solicitously, "Have they hog still?" "Yes," he answered. "Any dog?" "No eat dog." "Any potatoes?" "No." "Any melons?" "No." An order was immediately given, and two men were despatched with potatoes and melons for the missionaries. "In fact," they wrote, "no Christian congregation in America could, in this respect, have received a clergyman, coming to administer the word of life to them, with greater hospitality, or stronger expressions of love and good will."<sup>17</sup>

After about a month at the mission base in Honolulu, Betsey Stockton and her family, Charles and Harriet Stewart, together with Mr. and Mrs. Richards, were sent to open a new mission station on the island of Maui at a place called Lahaina. There was by then also a baby with them, little Charles Stewart, who had been born on board ship just before they landed in Honolulu.

Betsey was greatly skilled in all matters relating to caring for a household, including care of the sick, which was providential, since Harriet Stewart was quite ill for weeks at a time during their residence in the islands. This valuable friend and companion threw herself in to the concerns of the Stewart family and the small mission station at Lahaina. But perhaps her most notable contribution as a missionary assistant in the Sandwich Islands was as a teacher. It is significant that she helped to organize and was put in charge of the first school on the islands open to commoners — predominantly farmers. She wrote to Ashbel Green in 1824: "I have now a fine school of the...lower class of people, the first, I believe, that has ever been established."<sup>18</sup> Charles Stewart wrote that these common folk had made application for books and slates and a teacher. So, beginning with about thirty individuals, this school was formed in the chapel, meeting every afternoon under the superintendence of Betsey, who, he said, "is quite familiar with the native tongue." Other missionaries had established the first schools in the islands, usually attended by the upper classes. Betsey, the former slave, was the first to organize a school for the disadvantaged.

## RETURN TO NEW SERVICE IN AMERICA

After only two and a half years in Hawaii, Mrs. Stewart became so ill that their whole family, including a new little daughter born to the Stewarts during that time, found it necessary to return to America. Betsey chose to leave with them. They were offered a gratui-

tous passage to England by Captain Dale of the English whaleship *Fawn*. After a six-month voyage, from October 15, 1825, until April, 1826, they arrived at the English port of Gravesend. Following a layover of several months in London, they continued the return journey to America, arriving at New York in August.<sup>19</sup> Although her ministry in the Sandwich Islands was relatively brief, her missionary impulses never diminished to the end of her life.

Following her return from the Sandwich Islands, Betsey kept an infant school for black children for a while in Philadelphia. But because of Harriet Stewart's continuing frail health, she stood ready and went on a number of occasions to help care for Harriet and the children. Charles Stewart had been forced to resign his missionary commission because of his wife's health and had joined the navy chaplaincy. Betsey was with Harriet and the children in Cooperstown, New York, during the winter of 1826 and probably through most of 1827.<sup>20</sup> For four months during the summer of 1827 their "Aunt Betsey" and the children were in Albany, New York, while Mrs. Stewart was away travelling with her husband.<sup>21</sup>

Sometime in the summer or autumn of 1829 a Methodist missionary, Mr. William Case, traveled to Philadelphia, where Betsey was living again, with the purpose of trying to persuade the young woman to answer another missionary call and go with him to organize schools and instruct native Indian children at Grape Island across the border in Canada, near upstate New York.<sup>22</sup> She went for a few months and on her return brought a birchbark canoe about three or four feet long to little Charles Stewart, then about six years old. The family was in New Haven, Connecticut, that year, staying with Harriet's "adopted" father while Charles Stewart was away with his ship.<sup>23</sup>

When Harriet Stewart died in 1830, just four years after they had returned from Hawaii, "Aunt Betsey" answered a call again and went to Cooperstown, New York, to care for the (by now) three motherless children. Their father soon had to leave again, as he so often did for long stretches of time when his ship was away at sea.

In 1833 Betsey decided to move the children and herself back to Princeton, even though Dr. Green and his household had been living again in Philadelphia for the past eleven years. James Green, her childhood family tutor, had married and established a notable law practice in Princeton. So Betsey undoubtedly had his family to help her locate to the town she thought of as home, though under very changed circumstances. She enrolled

young Charles, then about eleven years old, in the Edgehill School on Hibben Road.

Charles Stewart, the children's father, remarried in 1835 and they went back with him to New York. But Betsey stayed on in Princeton. She was truly alone for the first time in her life and had some depressing bouts of illness. It was a very distressing time for her. Should she go back into domestic service to earn her living? Where was her family? And who *was* her family? After a while she moved beyond the time of gloomy loneliness and anxiety over her future and succeeded in opening a public, or "common," school for black children, which she served with great distinction for many years as principal.

During the time of her early years back in Princeton, there was some racial tension at the First Presbyterian Church, Betsey's home church. In the mid-1830s an opportunity arose for the black members of the church to separate and form their own congregation a few blocks away. Betsey Stockton's name heads the list of the founding members of the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church of Princeton. She helped to found a Sabbath school for children and young people in connection with the church and was its most faithful teacher for twenty-five or thirty years. Providentially, the records of this school for about a ten-year period have been preserved and are now lodged in the Rare Books and Archives section of Princeton University's Firestone Library. Among the early superintendents, most of whom were drawn from among students at the theological seminary, was John L. Nevius, later of China missionary fame, known widely for his Nevius Method of missionary strategy, so successfully used in Korea and often referred to as the Three-Self Movement.

Mr. Nevius, in a letter to his future wife, wrote from Princeton in 1852, "Mr. Williams [a fellow seminary student], of whom I have spoken to you, intends going with his wife to the island of Corisco, Africa, and thinks of taking with him a negress named Aunt Betsey, and all my...Sunday-School class!"<sup>24</sup> It was probably wishful thinking but indicated the high regard in which he held them.

She also persuaded a student at the seminary in Princeton, the Rev. Lewis W. Mudge, to open a night school for young black men and women who were employed during the day. According to Constance Escher, a Princeton teacher and writer, "[Betsey] Stockton used to read Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars* in Latin with Mudge."<sup>25</sup>

"Aunt Betsey" grew to be one of Princeton's most admired and beloved figures, though unassuming and gentle in spirit. She had a quiet, steady Christian influence, particularly on young people, with whom she was always surrounded in week-day school and in Sunday school.

Escher mentions that "one of the first women teachers at the [Witherspoon Street] Sabbath School, Cecilia Van Tyne, went to Rio de Janeiro in 1848 as a missionary." It is not hard to trace the influence of Betsey Stockton in the life of this young woman.

The three Stewart children were very close to her heart. Young Charles, who was nurtured and trained by "Aunt Betsey" from the moment of his birth until the time of her death, and was as close as she ever got to having a son of her own, graduated with highest honors at the head of his class in the military academy at West Point and went on to a distinguished career as a brigadier general. The children, for their part, loved her dearly. And when she died in 1865, a few months after President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, her funeral was conducted by the president of Princeton college, Dr. John Maclean, who preached the sermon; by Professor Duffield, of Nassau Hall; and by Dr. Charles Hodge, senior professor of the theological seminary at Princeton. She was lovingly laid to rest in beautiful Lakewood Cemetery in Cooperstown, New York, overlooking Lake Otsego, beside the rest of her Stewart family, some of whom died before she did, and some after.

Betsey Stockton was a remarkable nineteenth-century woman missionary pioneer. She must have faced what many today would call daunting identity problems. She was obviously marginalized and often lonely, perhaps feeling that she did not completely belong to anyone or any place. She might well have carried a burden of resentment. But that would have been a costly burden to bear, too costly for Betsey. Instead, like a much earlier missionary pioneer, she discovered a secret that became her victory over loneliness and despair. Paul described it as being "in Christ." Betsey learned that secret, too, through a lifetime of walking with her Lord. She learned the happy secret that "in Christ," one does not live altogether "under the circumstances," whatever they may be.

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#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> A widow, Mrs. Charlotte White, was appointed a few years earlier by the recently formed Baptist Board of Foreign Missions, to go

to Burma. But on the journey to her field she met and married an English missionary in India and remained there with him. There had also been unknown Moravian girls sent abroad to marry men already on the field (R. Pierce Beaver, *AMERICAN PROTESTANT WOMEN IN WORLD MISSION*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980] pp. 63-66).

- <sup>2</sup> It is frustrating at times groping through the shadowy details of Betsey Stockton's life because there are so many clues missing. One researcher wrote, "It's like trying to read a book when some of the pages are torn out, or trying to sing a song when some of the words are forgotten" (Carol Santoki Dodd, "Betsey Stockton: A History Student's Perspective," *EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVES* [Journal of the College of Education, University of Hawaii] 16, no. 1 [March 1977]: 10-15).
- <sup>3</sup> Ashbel Green to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Princeton, New Jersey, September 3, 1821, ABCFM archives, vol. 4, no. 210.
- <sup>4</sup> *Boston Recorder*, Friday, May 6, 1836, article on the baptism of slave children (taken from the *Journal And Luminary*).
- <sup>5</sup> Joseph H. Jones, D.D., ed., *THE LIFE OF ASHBEL GREEN, V.D.M., BEGUN TO BE WRITTEN BY HIMSELF IN HIS EIGHTY-SECOND YEAR AND CONTINUED TO HIS EIGHTY-FOURTH* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1849), in an appended memoir, appearing as chap. 29, written by Green's Philadelphia colleague Rev. Dr. J. Janeway, p. 572.
- <sup>6</sup> Session Minutes, First Presbyterian Church, September 29, 1816, Archives of Princeton Theological Seminary.
- <sup>7</sup> Donald Philip Corr, "The Field Is the World—Proclaiming, Translating, and Serving by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1810-40" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1993), p. 27 (in a general discussion of the principal motivating factors of ABCFM board administrators, missionaries, and supporters between 1810 and 1840).
- <sup>8</sup> Michael Osborn to Jeremiah Evarts, Corresponding Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Princeton, October 27, 1821, archives of the ABCFM, vol. 4, no. 209.
- <sup>9</sup> See discussion of this problem in Beaver, *AMERICAN PROTESTANT WOMEN IN WORLD MISSION*, p. 62.
- <sup>10</sup> Notes from the diary of Ashbel Green, September 3, 1821, Princeton University Rare Books and Archives.
- <sup>11</sup> Jones, *THE LIFE OF ASHBEL GREEN*, p. 326.
- <sup>12</sup> Corr, "The Field Is the World," p. 3.
- <sup>13</sup> From the document of Betsey Stockton's official appointment, signed by Ashbel Green, Charles Samuel Stewart, and Betsey Stockton, Princeton, October 24, 1822, and approved in behalf of the ABCFM by the Corresponding Secretary and Clerk of the Prudential Committee, Mr. Jeremiah Evarts. This document is in the archives of the ABCFM, Boston.
- <sup>14</sup> The quotes in this paragraph are all from the letter of Betsey Stockton to Dr. Ashbel Green, written on board the ship *Thames* bound for the Sandwich Islands, December 19, 1822, excerpts of which were published in the *Christian Advocate* 1 (September 1823): 423-26.
- <sup>15</sup> Journal of Betsey Stockton, December 31, 1822, written on board the ship *Thames* at sea, published by Ashbel Green in the *Christian Advocate* 2 (May 1824): 233-34.
- <sup>16</sup> Journal, published in *Christian Advocate* 3 (January 1825): 39.
- <sup>17</sup> *Missionary Herald* (ABCFM, Boston) 21 (February 1825): 41, from the journal of Messrs. Richards and Stewart.
- <sup>18</sup> Betsey Stockton to Ashbel Green, September 16, 1824, published in the *Christian Advocate* 3 (April 1825): 187-89.
- <sup>19</sup> Joseph Tracy et al., *HISTORY OF AMERICAN MISSIONS TO THE HEATHEN, FROM THEIR COMMENCEMENT TO*

THE PRESENT TIME (Worcester: Spooner & Howland, 1840), p. 153.

- 20 Harriet Bradford Tiffany Stewart to Miss Olivia Murray, Barclay St., New York, March 21, 1827 (among the Chas. Stewart papers in the James Fennimore Cooper library, Cooperstown, N.Y.).
- 21 Rev. Charles S. Stewart to Levi Chamberlain, Island of Oahu, Sandwich Islands, October 29, 1827. Hawaiian Mission Children's Society Library, Honolulu, Hawaii.
- 22 The information that Betsey Stockton served on Grape Island come from an article written by Constance K. Escher, "She Calls Herself Betsey Stockton," *Princeton History*, no. 10 (1991): 87.
- 23 Gen. Charles Seaforth Stewart to Miss Martha A. Chamberlain, Corresponding Secretary of the Hawaiian Mission Children's Society, Honolulu, Hawaii, October 27, 1899, written from Cooperstown, New York.
- 24 Helen S. Coan Nevius, *THE LIFE OF JOHN LIVINGSTON NEVIUS* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1895), p. 95.
- 25 Escher, "She Calls Herself Betsey Stockton," p. 93.



## "I'VE GOT YOU COVERED" THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND FOR VEILING WOMEN

Craig Keener

The current teaching about a husband being his wife's "covering" is so popular that some people are surprised to find that it is actually based on a shaky inference from I Corinthians 11:2-16, a passage which is talking about a woman *literally* covering her hair during Christian worship. Rather than enter the popular debate about whether it is valid to read into a text something that is not there (and then impose one's inference on how other Christians must live), I want to confine myself to asking *why* head coverings were so important for Paul.<sup>1</sup>

People covered their heads for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the reason was mourning, though this practice applied to men (Plut. *R.Q.* 14, *Mor.* 267A; Char. *Chaer.* 3.3.14) as well as women (Plut. *R.Q.* 26, *Mor.* 270D; Char. *Chaer.* 1.11.2; 8.1.7; ARN 1A). Likewise, men (m. *Sot.* 9:15; Epict. *Disc.* 1.11.27) as well as women (ARN 9, §25B) covered their heads due to shame. Roman women normally covered their heads for worship (e.g., Varro 5.29.130; Plut. *R.Q.* 10, *Mor.*

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266C) and Greek women uncovered their heads (SIG 3d ed., 3,999), which might be significant in a city like Corinth which mixed Roman and Greek cultures — except for the fact that Roman men also covered and Greek men also uncovered their heads for worship. However, in I Corinthians Paul addresses a custom that differentiates men from women.

Jewish teachers in Palestine considered it specifically shameful for married women to uncover their heads (m. B.K. 8:6; ARN 3, 17A; Sifre Num. 11.2.2), and this practice seems to have obtained in immigrant Jewish communities elsewhere as well (3 Macc 4:6). The farther East one went, the more pervasive grew the custom of veiling.<sup>2</sup> In the East married women dare not go in public unveiled, nor prostitutes veil themselves as if married, as early as thirteen centuries before Paul (*Middle Assyrian Laws A.40*).

Traditional Mediterranean custom preferred a woman who was not only a virgin physically, but who had never even been *seen* by another man (Char. *Chaer.* 1.1.4-6; Ps-Phocyl. 215-16; 4 Macc 18:6-7; Jos. & Asen. 15:1-2; 18:6). In some parts of the Empire men felt that women were best kept in seclusion as much as possible (Philo *Spec. Leg.* 3.169-75; Plut. *Bride* 9, 30-32, *Mor.* 139C, 142CD; Char. *Chaer.* 5.4.10). This was to keep other men from looking at one's present or future wife. Married women were normally so well covered that men could get "turned on" over bare arms, excusing themselves, of course, as weakened beyond control by the woman's seduction (cf. Char. *Chaer.* 6.4.5; Test. Jos. 9:5). But the supreme object of male desire was the woman's hair (Apul. *Metam.* 2.8-9; Char. *Chaer.* 1.13.11; 1.14.1; ARN 14, §35B; Sifre Num. 11.2.1; p. Sanh. 6:4, §1). This was why many peoples required married women to cover their hair, but allowed unmarried girls to go uncovered (e.g., Charillus 2 in Plut. *Sayings of Spartans, Mor.* 232C; Philo *Spec. Leg.* 3.56). In such a society a married woman who went out with head uncovered was considered adulterous, seeking lovers, and was to be divorced without any payment whatsoever (m. Ket. 7:6; b. *Sot.* 9a; R. Meir in Num. Rab. 9:12).

Traditional Islamic societies in the Middle East today also mandate women's relative seclusion and the use of scarfs as a sign of seclusion when in public,<sup>3</sup> and the purpose for such seclusion fits exactly the primary purpose for women's public headcoverings in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean: the guarding of women's chastity.<sup>4</sup> In some locations,