

All About Cosmetics

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Does the Bible say anything about cosmetics?

I presume that you want to know what the Bible says about cosmetics to see how it applies to your own life. But before I mention the few texts that mention them directly, some background information concerning ancient practices could be useful.

1. Cosmetics in the Ancient World: It has been suggested that makeup originated in magical beliefs and in the concern for personal protection. It was probably seen as a way of hiding one's identity in order to be protected from evil spirits. But evidence also points to two main reasons for using cosmetics: hygienic or medical, and beautification. Hygiene was probably the primary one. That seems to have been the case in Egypt, where painting the eyelids offered protection from eye diseases. The makeup repelled flies that produced eye inflammation and protected the skin from the heat of the sun that otherwise would have dried it. Makeup was almost a natural disinfectant.

Painting the eyelids and cheeks was soon perceived to be a way of enhancing a person's appearance. In the case of the eyes, the eyebrows and the upper eyelids were painted one color and the lower line of the eye was painted with a different color. This type of makeup framed the eyes and gave the illusion that they were larger than they were. The colors were usually black and green, although other combinations are known. Egyptians and Babylonians used makeup on their cheeks and lips. The pastes were commonly made from roots, flowers, berries, and minerals, and were used by both men and women.

Preparation for a wedding included a beautification process of cleansing and adornment including making up the eyes as the last element in the process. Facial treatments were particularly common in Egypt, Greece, and Rome. We have recipes from Egypt for ointments that supposedly removed wrinkles and other signs of aging (anyone interested?). Greek women put on a beauty mask before going to bed and used milk to remove it in the morning. The emphasis on makeup as a means of beautification was sometimes associated with seduction, and when exaggerated was considered a characteristic of prostitutes.

2. Biblical Materials: There is very little evidence related to the use of cosmetics in Israel. We know that Israelites used cosmetics, because archeologists have found utensils associated with the production and application of cosmetics. It is impossible to say how widespread the practice was, but it is logical to conclude that it was at least common among Israel's upper classes. The three biblical passages in which makeup is mentioned provide little information. In preparation to meet Jehu, Jezebel "painted her

eyes, arranged her hair and looked out of a window” (2 Kings 9:30).^{*} Her specific purpose for this beautification is not clear. Was she trying to seduce him? Was she using the makeup to protect herself from evil? The text implies that she dressed and adorned herself as a queen to confront her enemy. Her beauty did not save her.

Makeup is associated with seduction in Jeremiah 4:30, where Israel is described as a woman to whom the Lord asks: “Why dress yourself in scarlet and put on jewels of gold? Why shade your eyes with paint? You adorn yourself in vain. Your lovers despise you.” Enhanced beauty through makeup would not deliver her from her enemies. The same ideas are expressed in Ezekiel 23:40. The tone of both passages is negative. Those three texts imply that makeup was known and used by Israelite women, that it contributed to the beautification of the woman, and that there were limits to its value.

3. Makeup Today: Makeup is very common among women and is becoming so among men. The fundamental purposes continue to be hygienic and aesthetic. The Bible does not give any specific guidelines concerning its use, but biblical principles should guide us in its use. First, the Bible does not deny the value of a good appearance and a concern for health. Second, the Bible places the emphasis on inner beauty over physical beauty. Finally, modesty should be the norm when addressing this particular issue. Modesty describes a demeanor that expresses itself in self-respect, discretion, and the avoidance of extremes; based on the fact that we are children of God and representatives of our Lord.

**Texts in this column are quoted from the New International Version.*