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The Problem of Uncovered Prophets: Exploring 1 Cor 11:2-16

KEN CUKROWSKI

Headcoverings, prophets, the cryptic phrase “because of the angels”—what is going on in 1 Cor 11:2–16? Certainly one of the more difficult passages in the New Testament, 1 Cor 11:2–16 presents an array of vexing problems, each one impacting the interpretation of the passage. Despite my desire to address all difficulties in the text, engage the academic literature, and discuss the application of the text, I will restrict myself to the task of a clear explanation of an apparently murky passage. We begin with the context of the passage, and then move to some of the key issues.*

CONTEXT OF 1 CORINTHIANS

How does 1 Cor 11:2–16 fit within the letter as a whole? First Corinthians is not Paul’s first contact with the Corinthians. Paul founds the church at Corinth on his first visit to the city (Acts 18:1–8) with the assistance of Silas and Timothy (Acts 18:5; 2 Cor 1:19). After a stay of eighteen months in Corinth (Acts 18:11), Paul moves and spends the next three years in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–20:1, 31). During his time in Ephesus, Paul writes a letter, now lost, to Corinth (1 Cor 5:9).

Apparently, Paul hears quite a bit about the church in Corinth. He hears from Chloe’s people about quarreling in Corinth (1 Cor 1:11); Paul mentions other reports about Corinth throughout his letter (1 Cor 5:1; 11:18; 15:12); and the three envoys carrying the letter, Stephanus, Achaicus, and Fortunatus (1 Cor 16:17–18), likely converse with Paul about the contents of the letter.

First Corinthians is a response to the letter from the Corinthians carried by those three emissaries; Paul responds to their questions as 1 Cor 7:1 indicates: “Now concerning (*peri de*) the things about which you wrote.”¹ The same phrase (*peri de*) occurs several more times in 1 Corinthians, probably indicating matters that the Corinthians have raised to Paul in their letter.²

Was the matter about headcoverings a topic mentioned in the letter from the Corinthians? It seems possible, even though “now concerning” (*peri de*) does not begin the passage. It is worth noting that no *peri de* precedes 11:17–34, which, nevertheless, appears to be part of Paul’s response to specific questions about the Lord’s Supper (note v. 34b). At the same time, it is also possible that Paul is responding to information from the other sources (1:11; 5:1; 11:18) or the three envoys sent from Corinth (16:17).

WHAT PAUL MIGHT HAVE READ

We don’t actually know what Paul might have read. So, in what follows we engage in a significant degree of conjecture; let the reader beware. However, the attempt is not without merit. In fact, envisioning the circumstances that produced Paul’s response is a key, perhaps lost, to understanding this passage. The danger is mirror reading, assuming that every statement of Paul’s is a response to or denial of what the Corinthians wrote. The challenge for any interpreter is to account for Paul’s praise in 11:2 and his critique in the following verses. In other words, the Corinthians were doing something right, but not completely right.

Taking into account key words from 1 Cor 11, I attempted to craft a fictitious letter approximating what Paul might have read:

Paul,
Some of us are shocked about the behavior of *women* while they are *praying and prophesying* in our assemblies. The *women's uncovered heads* are not *proper* in public, where a number of *men* are present. The *women* claim the authority to *pray and prophesy* with their *heads uncovered* because gender distinctions do not matter *in the Lord*. They base this claim on the *traditional* recitation at their baptism, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female." We want to *maintain* the *traditions* you *delivered* to us, but this *tradition* certainly does not permit *women* to act in this way, does it? Paul, we need your advice, since the discussions about this *custom* are becoming *contentious*.³

CONTEXT OF THE PASSAGE: WORSHIP IN THE CONGREGATION

Why are headcoverings such an issue? Since the church meets in a house—the domain where women have greatest freedom—it seems possible that the women think of the church meeting as a "private" context. Others in Corinth likely view the assembly as a "public" place, since outsiders or unbelievers freely enter (14:23). As support for the public/private distinction, note the contrast between "at home" and "in church" in 14:35.⁴

Despite the differing views of the nature of the gathering, the purpose of the gathering is clear: the church is gathered together for worship. First, the structure of the letter points in this direction. As Carl Holladay notes, in 1 Cor 11 one moves from "the relation of Christians to pagan worship" (chapters 8–10) to "the question of Christian worship"⁵ (chapters 11–14). The worship issues in chapters 12–14—praying (in tongues at 14:15) and prophesying—are the same issues here (1 Cor 11:4–5, 13).⁶ Second, the contrasting phrases in the immediate context point to a parallel structure (i.e., 11:2 "I praise you;" 11:17 "I praise [you] not"), connecting 11:2–16 with the discussion of the Lord's Supper in 11:17–34, which is clearly in the context of worship. Third, prophecy "by definition, presupposes an audience; it is not a private act."⁷ Fourth, reflection on the situation virtually demands a public setting, since it "is difficult to imagine why the problem addressed would exist if a private setting were assumed."⁸ Fifth, and most persuasive, Paul explicitly places his discussion in the context of church practice in 1 Cor 11:16.

OUTLINE OF THE PASSAGE

Following the contours of Paul's thought in 11:2–16 is notoriously difficult. The following outline, however, shows that Paul, in a recognizable pattern of repeating appeals, argues for women having headcoverings based on tradition, culture, and creation:

Introductory appeal to tradition	v. 2	"maintain the traditions" (v. 2)
A Appeal to culture	vv. 3–6	"shames; shameful" (vv. 4, 5, 6)
B Appeal to creation	vv. 7–10	"image of God (v. 7); "created" (v. 9)
C Appeal to "new creation"	vv. 11–12	"in the Lord" (v. 11)
A' Appeal to culture	v. 13	"proper"
B' Appeal to creation	vv. 14–15	"nature" (v. 14)
Concluding appeal to tradition	v. 16	"such a custom"

Although the argumentation may not match our expectations, it accords surprisingly strongly with other ancient arguments for maintaining gender differences.⁹

FOCUS OF THE PASSAGE: WOMEN

Who is Paul really interested in: only the men, only the women, both the men and women? A striking feature of this passage is the consistency with which Paul's language about men parallels his language about women. Eight times when men are treated, women are also treated. The stress, however, falls on the women.¹⁰ That is, between the introductory and concluding appeal to tradition (11:2, 16), every excursus (4x), except one (11:12b), treats the women more fully, as the following diagram shows:

- | | | | |
|----------------------------|--|--------|--|
| 1. | "The head of every man is Christ." (11:3) | | |
| | "The head of woman is man." | | |
| 2. | "Every man praying or prophesying with his head ... shames his head." (11:4-5) | | |
| | "Every woman praying or prophesying with her head ... shames her head." | | |
| <u>Excursus A</u> (11:6) | | | |
| | "For if a woman..." | | |
| | "Now if it is shameful for a woman ..." | | |
| 3. | "For a man, on the one hand ..." | (11:7) | |
| | "A woman, on the other hand ..." | | |
| 4. | "For man is <i>not</i> from woman, (11:8) | | |
| | " <i>but</i> woman is from man." | | |
| 5. | "For man was <i>not</i> created from woman, (11:9) | | |
| | " <i>but</i> woman was created on account of man." | | |
| <u>Excursus B</u> (11:10) | | | |
| | "On account of this, a woman ought to have authority over her head because of the angels." | | |
| 6. | "Nevertheless, <i>neither</i> is woman anything without man, (11:11) | | |
| | " <i>nor</i> is man anything without woman in the Lord." | | |
| 7. | "For <i>as</i> woman is from man, (11:12a) | | |
| | " <i>so</i> man is through woman." | | |
| <u>Excursus C</u> (11:12b) | | | |
| | "But all things are from God." | | |
| <u>Excursus D</u> (11:13) | | | |
| | "Judge for yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God uncovered?" | | |
| 8. | "Does not nature teach you that (11:14-15a) | | |
| | " <i>if</i> a man wears long hair, it is a dishonor for him, | | |
| | " <i>but if</i> a woman wears long hair, it is a glory for her?" | | |
| <u>Excursus E</u> (11:15b) | | | |
| | "Because [<i>her</i>] hair is given [<i>to her</i>] for a covering." | | |

The extensive comparisons and contrasts between men and women suggest that gender distinctions are at issue. The emphasis on the women,¹¹ seen in the excurses, points to actions on the part of women in which these distinctions are not being upheld, thus bringing shame to the church.

FEMALE PROPHETS

The congregation in which I was reared did not mention female prophets. Since others may share a similar history, a word about female prophets and prophecy may be in order. Found both in the Old Testament and New Testament, female prophets play a role, often significant, in the life of God's people. From Miriam (Exodus 15:20) to Deborah (Judges 4:4), from Philip's four daughters (Acts 21:9) to the female prophets at Corinth (1 Cor 11:5), mention of their activity dots both testaments.¹²

WHAT DOES A PROPHET DO?

If we were to walk into the assembly at Corinth where prophets were prophesying, what would we see? Based on the evidence from Acts 15:30–32 and 1 Cor 14:1–4, 19, 29–32, several characteristics are clear. We can say something about the context of prophecy, the actions, the length of the speaking, a means of prophecy, and the control of prophets, as the following chart illustrates:

	Acts 15:30–32	1 Cor 14:1–5, 19, 28–33
Context	Congregation gathered (v. 30)	The church (vv. 3–5, 28, 33)
Actions	Exhort (v. 32)	Up-building (v. 3)
	Strengthen (v. 32)	Exhortation (vv. 3, 31)
		Comfort (v. 3)
		Edify (v. 4)
		Instruct (v. 19)
Length	“Many words” (v. 32)	Teach (v. 31)
Means		Revelation (v. 30)
Control		Be silent (v. 30)

In other words, a prophet is someone who speaks for an extended period of time in the context of the gathered body of believers, proclaiming words that exhort, strengthen, comfort, edify, and teach. This description sounds much like what most would now call preaching. Two points of clarification are needed. First, prophecy and preaching do overlap to a high degree, more than many have realized. Second, prophecy and preaching are not entirely identical, despite the overlap, since we also have to reckon with the unexplained aspect of “revelation” (1 Cor 14:30) and the predictive element with one New Testament prophet.¹³

HEADCOVERING, NOT HAIRSTYLE

Some interpreters have seen the issue as one of hairstyle, but several factors militate against this interpretation. First, the expression in 11:4—“[while] having [a covering hanging] down from [his] head”—is not found connected with a hairstyle, but often with a garment.¹⁴ Second, the language of 11:5 has the clear sense of “uncovered” in ancient sources.¹⁵ Third, there is no evidence that the wording of 11:6 (“cover”) ever has the sense of “binding, wrapping.” Fourth, those who would translate *peribolaion* (“garment”) as “wrapper” go against the clear OT evidence, where the verb is connected with a headcovering (Gen 24:65) and the noun is paralleled with a garment (Psalm 101:27, LXX). In short, the language does not support the hairstyle interpretation in four key verses of 1 Cor 11.

“BECAUSE OF THE ANGELS”

The phrase “because of the angels” has prompted numerous proposals but little consensus. In my opinion, the most convincing argument is that angels are thought of as watching over the activities of humans, including worship. A number of texts from diverse sources point to this idea, as the following quotations illustrate. From the Septuagint and the Apocrypha, one finds:

I will praise you, Lord, with all my heart, because you heard the words of my mouth, and I will sing to you before the *angels* (Psalm 137:1 [LXX]; cf. Psalm 138:1 Hebrew “*gods*”).

I am Raphael, one of the seven holy angels who present the prayers of the saints and enter into the presence of the glory of the Holy One (Tobit 12:15).

From the Dead Sea Scrolls, one finds the following description:

No madman, or lunatic, or simpleton, or fool, no blind man, or maimed, or lame, or deaf man, and no minor, shall enter into the Community, for the Angels of Holiness are with them...¹⁶

In the Greco-Roman realm, one finds this same idea in Jewish, as well as pagan authors:

In the midst of men and angels, Moses sang his hymns with every kind of harmony and concord, in order that both humans and ministering angels might give heed; that humans might learn thankfulness similar to his own; that angels, as overseers watching, might listen in accordance with their own musical expertise, lest there be any dissonance in his song. (Philo, *On the Virtues*, 74)

Plutarch also depicts “daemons,” whom Philo equates with angels, as “posted on earth as guardians and overseers of the deeds of humans.”¹⁷ Elsewhere Plutarch envisions these daemons as “overseers of the holy rites of the gods” and as a “ministering class, midway between gods and men, in that they convey thither the prayers and petitions of men, and thence they bring hither the oracles and the gifts of good things.”¹⁸

What can we conclude from these passages? Those across the religious and ethnic spectrum, from sectarian Jew to Greco-Roman pagan, would understand Paul’s comment about the angels. Thus the Corinthians would understand 11:10 to be saying, “For this reason (that is, woman reflects the glory of man, not God) a woman ought to exercise control over her head [and cover it while praying and prophesying] because of the angels [who watch over worship and report shameful behavior to God].”

THE RESULTING INTERPRETATION

Appeal to Tradition (11:2)

What picture emerges when all of these pieces are brought together? Paul begins by praising the Corinthians for remembering him and maintaining the traditions, likely referring to something similar to Gal 3:28. This tradition had been used to justify the practice of women praying and prophesying with their heads uncovered (11:2). The women likely argued that gender distinctions do not exist in Christ. Since Paul disagrees with how the women are praying and prophesying, he makes a series of appeals for headcoverings on the women in an attempt to restore gender distinctions.

Appeal to Culture (11:3–6)

Next, Paul appeals to culture (11:3–6). He argues for gender distinctions, the key word being “head,” which is used seven times in 11:3–5. The concentration of uses of the word “head” in 1 Cor 11:2–16 (9x)

Although not Paul’s point, here the implied relationship between male and female appears hierarchical.

probably indicates that Paul is picking up this term from the language of the Corinthians. Although not Paul’s point, here the implied relationship between male and female appears hierarchical.

The language of “shame” controls the ensuing discussion, occurring three times in 11:4–6. In an entirely balanced way, Paul points out that both men and women can incur shame while they are praying and prophesying because of a headcovering. In other

words, the call for headcoverings on the women does not unfairly target only women; men too will be critiqued if they do not pray and prophesy with their heads attired in a proper way. Paul concludes his argument from culture and shame with an extrapolation. To paraphrase Paul in 11:5b–6, “If a woman wants to

act like a man (i.e., pray and prophesy with her head uncovered), then she might as well look like one and shave her head.”¹⁹ Paul hopes that each woman will recognize that eliminating gender distinctions (i.e., shaving off her hair) brings shame. And if she concludes that her behavior brings shame, then she will “cover herself” (11:6).

Appeal to Creation (11:7–10)

Based on 11:4–6, two natural questions arise: Why is it that men should not be covered? Why is it that women should be covered? To answer these questions, Paul appeals to creation in 11:7–10, the key word being “glory” (2x in 11:7). In response to the first question, Paul states that man is the glory of God (11:7a), the implication being that since man reflects this glory, he should not be covered because he would be covering God’s glory. Paul then answers the second question. He states that woman is the glory of man (11:7b), the implication being that since woman reflects man’s glory, she should be covered while praying and prophesying because only God’s glory should be reflected during worship.

At this point, one can imagine a Corinthian woman asking, “How is it that woman is the glory of man?” Paul anticipates this question and responds in two ways. First, he points out that “woman is from man,” implying that one reflects the glory of one’s source (11:8). Second, turning now to the purpose of creation, Paul points out that “woman was created on account of man” (11:9).

Paul appeals yet again to creation in 11:10 (“on account of this”). Paul presumes that angels watch over creation. Thus he counsels the women to exercise control over their heads by covering them while they pray and prophesy, lest angels see and report this shameful behavior to God.

We are male and female because we live in the present age, but we are also members of a community shaped by Christ’s sacrifice, rendering gender a matter of indifference (Gal 3:28).

Appeal to “New Creation” (11:11–12)

Paul’s argument takes a turn at 11:11 (“nevertheless”). Lest anyone conclude that he disagrees with the rationale for the actual practice of women praying and prophesying, Paul appeals to the “new creation,” where “neither is woman anything without man, nor is man anything without woman in the Lord.” Two features are noteworthy in 11:11. Paul changes the order; “woman” is mentioned first. Also, Paul emphasizes the “new creation” in Christ by breaking the parallelism of the verse with the addition of the phrase “in the Lord.”

In yet another appeal to creation, Paul explains (*gar*, “for”) the interdependence of woman and man with an analogy in 11:12: “For as woman is from man (echoing 11:8), so man is through woman (i.e., birth).” This interdependence is God’s plan, since “all things are from God” (11:12b), a phrase emphasized by Paul’s break in the parallelism.

Appeal to Culture (11:13)

Paul’s second appeal to culture comes in 11:13 (“proper”). Focusing on the woman, Paul returns to his primary task of restoring gender distinctions. Picking up “pray” and “uncovered” from 11:5, he asks rhetorically, “Is it proper for a woman to pray to God uncovered?” Of course, he is prompting a response of “no.”

Appeal to Creation (11:14–15)

Paul appeals to creation for a third time (11:14–15), here described as “nature.” Using the example of “long hair” (3x), Paul argues that nature teaches both men and women that how one’s head is covered can

bring “dishonor” or “glory” (echoing 11:7). Paul’s point is clear; just as nature teaches women that “long hair is given for a covering,” so a woman should grasp that headcoverings are given to women for a covering while praying and prophesying.

Appeal to Tradition (11:16)

Paul concludes in the same way he began in 11:2: with an appeal to tradition. In 11:16 Paul calls on those who might be “contentious” to consider that “neither we nor the churches of God have such a custom,” namely women praying and prophesying uncovered.

CONCLUSION

What have we seen, and what should we conclude? First, Paul’s call for the women to cover their heads functions in two ways: (1) to preserve gender distinctions by calling for the women to cover their heads; and (2) to enable the women to continue to pray and prophesy, *not* to restrict women from praying and prophesying. Second, Paul addresses *how* the women are to pray and prophesy (viz., with a covered head), *not that* they are praying and prophesying. In fact, it would not make much sense for Paul to address the *how*, if he thought those actions in themselves were wrong. Third, there are tensions inherent in the argument. Creation is used both in a hierarchical context (11:7–10) and in an egalitarian context (11:11–12). Paul’s argument implies both an ontological hierarchy (11:3) and an ontological interdependence (11:11–12).²⁰ What is going on here?

For the interpreter, the temptations are two-fold: either to have the hierarchical verses trump the interdependent verses or to have the interdependent verses trump the hierarchical verses. But Paul does neither, and neither should we. To collapse either side is to commit one of two errors. First, to act as if gender distinctions do not exist is “a sign not of authentic spirituality but of an adolescent impatience with the world in which God has placed us.”²¹ Second, to act as if the creation order of 11:7–10 determines faith and practice is to ignore the “in the Lord” (11:11) existence of God’s people. In other words, it would be acting as if Christ came, but nothing changed. Furthermore, it is worth noting that creation is used in both a hierarchical (11:7–10) and interdependent context (11:12); that is, those who stress the argument from creation in 11:7–10 usually ignore the appeal to creation in 11:12, not to mention the implications for headcoverings.

Why does Paul preserve that tension? It seems to reflect the tension in his own eschatological framework, where Christians live an “as if not” life (1 Cor 7:29–31). For Paul, Christians are those “upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor 10:11). In other words, we Christians live on the “hinge” between the present age and the age to come; we are in a sense amphibious. We are male and female because we live in the present age, but we are also members of a community shaped by Christ’s sacrifice, rendering gender a matter of indifference (Gal 3:28).

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NOTES

*All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

- 1 For further uses of “now concerning” in 1 Corinthians, see 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 14:1; 16:1, 12.
- 2 The italicized words reflect words from 1 Cor 11:2–16. Including even more of the wording might result in the addition of the following: Furthermore, they support their actions by saying, “If the *head* of man is *Christ*, and the *head* of woman is *Christ*, then neither is the *head* of the other. To call anyone “*head*” is *shameful* for those *in the Lord*. The spiritual realm does not have distinctions based on gender. After all, *angels* do not marry. Since both *men* and *women* are *created* in the *image of God*, both are the *glory of God*. To *cover* our *heads* is to *cover* the *glory of God*.” Compare the “letter” by Richard Hays in *First Corinthians* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching; Louisville, Ky.: John Knox, 1997), 182–183.
- 3 For primary sources, see Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, 7.29–36; Livy, *History of Rome*, 34.2.9–14; Valerius Maximus,

- Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, 6.3.10–11; 8.3.1–3; Juvenal, *Satire*, 6.398–401; Plutarch, *Lycurgus and Numa*, 3.5–6.
- 4 Carl R. Holladay, *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* (Austin: Sweet, 1979), 138.
 - 5 Mark C. Black, "1 Cor. 11:2-16: A Reinvestigation," *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, ed. C. Osburn, vol. 1 (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1993), 194.
 - 6 Holladay, *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*, 140. See also 1 Cor 14:2–4, 26, 29–33.
 - 7 Holladay, *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*, 140.
 - 8 See Epictetus, *Discourse*, 1.16.9–14.
 - 9 The contrast is between men and women, not husbands and wives, the latter pair creating non sequiturs when read in 1 Cor 11:3, 4, 9–10.
 - 10 According to Black, there are "103 words to discuss the women and only 39 regarding the men" ("1 Corinthians 11:1–16," 1.195).
 - 11 For other female prophets, see also Huldah (2 Kings 22:8–20; 2 Chron 34:14–28); Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3); Anna (Luke 2:36); daughters and maidservants (Acts 2:17–18 quoting Joel 2:28–29). Other possibilities include Elizabeth (Luke 1:41–45 comparing 1:67) and the women admonished in 1 Cor 14:34–35. Beyond the NT period, see the description of Ammia (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.17.1–4). Note also the false female prophets Noadiah (Neh 6:14) and Jezebel (Rev 2:20–25).
 - 12 See the description of Agabus in Acts 11:27–28; 21:10–11.
 - 13 See *kata kephales echon* in Plutarch, *Sayings of Romans*, 200EF and *kata kephales* in Plutarch, *The Roman Questions*, 267BC; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 12.16.4; 15.9.1–2; Esther 6:12 (LXX [implied]). Thanks go to my research assistant Robert Merchant for collecting these sources.
 - 14 See *akatakalyptos* in Philo, *Special Laws*, 3.52–63, esp. 56, 60; Lucian, *Essays in Portraiture*, 1.
 - 15 Damascus Rule (CD) 15 in G. Vermes, ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 3d ed. (Penguin: New York, 1987), 92. See also Messianic Rule (1QSa) 2.
 - 16 See Philo, *On Dreams*, 1.141; Plutarch, *On Fate*, 573A.
 - 17 *Obsolescence of Oracles*, 417A; *Isis and Osiris*, 361C in Frank Cole Babbitt, trans., *Plutarch's Moralia*, 16 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1927–67), 5.65. For further descriptions of these daemons, see also Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 123, 253; Plato, *Symposium*, 202E–203A; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 1.77; Plutarch, *Obsolescence of Oracles*, 415AB, 416C–F (cited by Babbitt, 5.64–65); Plutarch, *The E at Delphi*, 390EF (cited by Babbitt, 5.379).
 - 18 For women looking or acting like men, see Deut 22:5 and Juvenal, *Satire*, 6.444–447.
 - 19 Judith M. Gundry-Volf, "Gender and Creation in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16: A Study in Paul's Theological Method," in *Evangelium Schriftauslegung Kirche: Festschrift für Peter Stuhlmacher zum 65. Geburtstag*, J. Ädna, S. Hafemann, and O. Hofius, eds. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 160–171.
 - 20 Hays, *First Corinthians*, 191.