

The Women Prophets of Corinth: A study of aspects of I Cor 11:2-16

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Within the larger question of the place of women in the New Testament, this passage is of critical importance. All across church history various voices have found “regimental colors” or even “battle cries” in these verses. One quickly thinks of:

“the head of woman is man” and

“any woman who prays ... with her head unveiled, dishonors her head,” or

“man was not made for woman but woman for man.”

In its stark blunt form the interpretation of these phrases is often summarized as follows:

“This passage tells women that they are to live under male authority, keep their heads covered in public, and understand that they were created to serve men!”

Such a reading of the text is of great antiquity and has dominated church life for centuries. But does it represent what Paul intends? It is the purpose of this brief essay to focus on this question with some care.

In the attached article we argue that I Cor 11-14 is a single essay. Paul opens with a discussion of disorders in worship (ch. 11), turns to the topic of spiritual gifts (ch. 12), and brings the essay to its climax in the hymn on love (ch. 13).

He then has a matching discussion of spiritual gifts (ch. 14:1-25) and closes with a second discussion of disorders in worship, along with a summary statement (14:26-40). The great chapter on love is a river that is strategically placed in the center with the intent that it flow over what precedes (11-12) and over what follows (14). Thus our text is a part of the Apostle’s discussion of disorder in worship. What then is the problem?

Clearly the churches of his time had male and female leaders. Here the focus of the text is on prophets. The reader is told that the men who “pray and prophesy” are to uncover their heads and that the women who “pray and prophesy” must cover their heads. It is easy to read these two verses (4-5) and focus exclusively on the problem of head coverings. When we do that we overlook the fact that *the women and the men are doing the same thing*. They are both praying and prophesying. It is possible to understand “praying” as here referring to private devotion. But the act of “prophesying” is a public function carried out in front of other people. It is impossible to prophesy in the seclusion of one’s closet. Clearly St. Paul is talking about men and women who are leading public worship. This then gives us a clue to the problem of disorder that Paul is discussing.

From the NT records we know that Greek women of high standing were attracted to the preaching of Paul (Acts 16:14, 17:4, 12, 34). Such Greek women in that period were already struggling for a place in the sun and would not have been attracted to the preaching of a man who put them down. The church in Philippi met in the house of Lydia, a seller of purple cloth. The fact that Paul visited her (with the magistrates) on his way out of town indicates that she was the leader of the church (cf. Acts 16:35-40). One of the two ports for the city of Corinth was Cenchreae. The church there was led by Phoebe who is called a *deacon* (not deaconess) and a *prostatis* (leader). So how did these women dress as they led in worship, and did the fact of their presence in leadership roles cause waves?

It appears that some of these Christian women insisted on leading in worship with their heads uncovered. It is easy to imagine that they felt this to be their right as they affirmed their freedom in Christ where “all things are lawful” (as Paul had apparently taught, cf. I Cor 6:12; 10:23). The men led in worship with heads uncovered! So would they! But what signals did such an action give in the culture of the time?

In traditional Jewish culture (as evidenced in the Mishnah and the two Talmuds) women could be divorced if they uncovered their heads in public. A woman’s hair was to be seen only by her husband. (The Amish of Pennsylvania are a contemporary example of this ancient attitude. Conservative areas of the Middle East maintain these practices to this day.) On the Greek side the picture is not as clear. In museums in Greece I have examined the statues of women and most of them have their heads covered. Some do not, but it is impossible to know which of these were statues of women “at home” where their heads could be uncovered. In any case, the *dominant* pattern evidenced in these statues is for the women to have their heads covered. Even if this would not have been a problem for the Greek Christians, it would still have been a serious problem for the Jewish Christians. The *Jewish* Christian worshipers would certainly have seen the woman prophet, leading worship with head uncovered, as acting improperly. The outcry would have been:

What is this! Is she advertising her charms? How are we expected to concentrate on worship with this going on?

The problem is put to Paul in writing (cf I Cor 7:1). The easy answer would have been to say, “Let the women refrain from praying and prophesying when you meet in worship.” Rather, Paul affirms the rightness of having both male and female leadership in public worship. He then solves the problem by telling the women leaders to cover their heads in worship. The men are to conduct worship with heads uncovered. What then is his argument?

Paul starts with the general affirmation:

the head (*kefalia*) of every man is Christ,
the head (*kefalia*) of women is man,
the head (*kefalia*) of Christ is God.

Our problem is the word *kefalia*. As a Greek word *kefalia* has three meanings. These are: (1) the cranium, (2) origin, (3) authority over. In English we can approximate these three with the phrases:

1. My head hurts (head = cranium)
2. The head waters of the Nile flow from Lake Victoria (head = origin)
3. The head of this company is Ms. Jones (head = authority over)

In our text the first meaning does not fit. Traditionally we have read the verse with *kefalia* meaning “authority over.” But it is fully possible to select the second meaning of *kefalia* and read “origin of.” In this case the text would then mean:

The origin of every man is Christ (i.e. Christ is the agent of God in creation. In I Cor 8:6 Paul has just affirmed that Jesus Christ is the one “through whom are all things.”)

The origin of woman is man (i.e. Gen 2:21-23. Woman [*isha*] is “taken out of man [*ish*].”)

The origin of Christ is God (i.e. Jesus is Lord. Jesus comes from God. The origin of Jesus is God. The Greeks and the Jews talked about the “head of a river.”)

As noted, we use the similar phrase “the head-waters of a river.” This phrase does not affirm that the water which flows into the Nile is created by Lake Victoria but rather that it flows from Lake Victoria. In like manner,

“origin of” can here be seen as an affirmation of the divine source from which Jesus has come and thus an affirmation of his divinity.

This raises the question of “the orders of creation.” Traditional exegesis of the second account of creation in Genesis 2 sees that man is created first and woman second and has concluded that “created first” means “of first importance.” The difficulty with this conclusion is that the creation stories begin with the lesser forms of life and move on to the more advanced forms. If created earlier = more important, then the animals are more important than people and the plants are more important than the animals and the primitive earth “without form and void” is the most important of all! In spite of this logical inconsistency, traditional views of the creation story have affirmed men as more important than women because Adam was created first. (We note in passing that in Gen 1:27, male and female are created *together*.) Here Paul starts his discussion with the *second* story of Genesis, which is where his readers have focused their thinking. How then does he proceed?

Paul offers a solution to the problem of the women prophets and their leadership in worship. I hear him saying:

Let the women continue to pray and prophesy — only ladies, please, be reasonable! Cover your heads as you do so! Don’t send the wrong signal to the worshipers, male and female. Do not distract the worshipers with a fancy hair-do, or even with any hair-do. You don’t like my solution? I have an alternative. Cut it all off (v.6). Appearing bald will solve the problem. You would rather not go that route? Fine, then give my suggestion a try. You will preserve your rightful leadership role and will not distract or upset the congregation in the process. Cultural sensitivity is all I am asking for. You already *must* know that a woman’s hair, exposed in public, is seen as an intended sexual come-on in sections of the society in which you live.

I would submit the above as the intent of St. Paul as he deals with the problem of men and women prophets and how they are to dress. The problem of why the men should remain hatless escapes me. In the Middle East a servant should cover his head in the presence of his master. Modern Jewish practice preserves this custom. What the issue was for the man is not clear. Morna Hooker takes the discussion as far as the evidence we now have, and her reflections are helpful (cf. Morna D. Hooker, “Authority on her Head: An examination of I Cor. XI.10,” *New Testament Studies*, Vol 10 (’63-4), p 414). The literature on the problem is voluminous and most of it is not helpful. I prefer to suspend judgment until further evidence surfaces. But the problem we can investigate is: what is this bit about the angels in v.10?

For this concern we are obliged to look at the inverted parallelism (chiasmus) exhibited in the text. Following well-known models set forth in the classical writing prophets, particularly Isaiah, the text is composed as follows:

1. For *man* is *not* from (*ek*) *woman*, but (*alla*) *woman* is *from* (*ek*) *man*.

MAN - NOT FROM WOMAN
WOMAN FROM MAN (Gn 2:22)

2. For *man* was *not* created because of (*dia*) *woman*, but *woman* because of (*dia*) *the man*.

DEPENDENCE
Gen. 2:18

3. Because of (*dia*) *this*
the woman should have *authority* on the head,
because of (*dia*) *the angels*.

AUTHORITY

4. Specifically (*plen*), woman is not independent of man
nor man independent of woman in the Lord;

DEPENDENCE

5. for as the woman is from (*ek*) the man,
so also the man is (born) through (*dia*) the woman.
And all things are from (*ek*) God.

WOMAN FROM MAN (2:22)
MAN THROUGH WOMAN
Gen. 1:27, 2:22

Just before the verses quoted above Paul affirms that the man and the woman are created in the image of God. He writes:

he (the man) is the image and glory/reflection of God and woman is the glory/reflection of man.

The background to this verse is the *first* story of Genesis (1:27) rather than the second (2:18-23). As noted, in Gen 1:27 male and female are created together in the *image* of God. Here Paul tells us that the man is created in the image of God but he does not say that the woman is created in the *image* of man. This is because Genesis affirms and Paul assumes that they are *both* in the *image of God*. From this point onwards Paul builds on that equality. We must look at the high points of how he does it.

The material is set forth in a 1 - 2 - 3 - 2-1 pattern. No 1 is balanced and completed in No 5, and No 2 is balanced and completed in No 4 (the summary words on the right try to clarify the connections). The center in No 3 offers a climax or a central affirmation of the passage. These rhetorical styles were centuries old in the Jewish tradition and Paul's Jewish Christian readers could follow this kind of poetic logic with ease. For us to catch what he is saying we need to look at numbers 1 and 5 together and then examine 2 and 4 as a matching pair.

In No 1 Paul affirms that, yes, the woman was taken from the body of a man and is to that extent dependent on him. On the other hand (No 5), the man is taken (born) *from* the body of a woman and thus dependent *on* her. So what is the problem, he argues. We are dependent on each other! In No 5 he reaffirms what he has said in No 1, and then completes it by showing the interdependence of the two.

The climax of the entire passage from v. 2 - 16 comes in our numbers 3 to 5. The key is the Greek preposition *dia* which appears four times in a row. All four are in the same case and must be read together. The translator can render this preposition as "for" or as "because of." For centuries we have used "because of" in the last two cases of *dia* but have translated the first two as "for." Thus many translations give us some form of the following:

For man was not created *for* (*dia*) woman
but woman *for* (*dia*) man
because of (*dia*) this
the woman should have authority on the head
because of (*dia*) the angels.

It is this translation that has been used, perhaps more than any other, to shape the female self-understanding and the male understanding of the place of women in the Christian scheme of things. Why do we have women? God

has created them, the argument goes, "for men." That is, the only reason God created women is for them to serve men. This understanding of the place of women (in the minds of men and women) has existed for centuries. In the contemporary scene I have read entire books (written by women) that take this as a touch stone for defining the proper biblical place of Christian women in the church and in society.

The difficulty with this view is that it is built on a particular traditional *translation* of the text, not on the text itself. This traditional understanding of the verse twice translates the Greek preposition *dia* as "for" and then immediately afterwards twice translates the same word as "because of." Traditionally these second two occurrences of *dia* are always translated "because of." Thus we have for centuries affirmed that *dia* in this text can rightly be translated as "because of." So, what happens if we use "because of" as a translation for all four occurrences of the preposition *dia*? When that happens the text reads:

for the man was not created *because of the* woman
but the woman *because of* the man.
Because of this
the woman should have authority on the head
because of the angels.

This translation lets us see that Paul is referring to the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. It is not *Eve* who is lonely, unable to manage and needing help. No indeed! It is *Adam* who is lonely, unable to manage and needing help! Eve is then created as an "*ezar*." The word *ezar* in Hebrew is often used for God when God comes to help/save Israel. It appears in the name El-ezar which in Greek becomes Lazarus, i.e. "the one whom God helps/saves." This word does not refer to a lowly assistant to the boss but rather to a powerful figure who comes to help/save someone who is in trouble and cannot manage alone. In this light the image of the place of woman in the New Testament vision of things is transformed. Women, in Paul's mind are not created "for men," i.e. for their bed and board. Rather women, as descendents of Eve, are placed by God in the human scene as the strong who come to help/save the weak (the men). In this reading of the text, Paul, the gruff, old, unregenerate Middle Eastern male Chauvinist, disappears. In its place the real Paul emerges as a compassionate figure who boldly affirms the equality and mutual interdependency of men and women in the new covenant. I would submit that this latter is the real Paul whose views women of high standing found attractive and whose message caused them to flock to his banner.

When No 2 and 4 are reflected on together as two sides of a single coin, this same theme of interdependence surfaces again. Often translated as contrasts, these two sections affirm the continuation of a single theme. No 4 is introduced with the Greek word *plen* which usually means "more specifically." The common Greek word for a contrast is *alla* and that word appears (introducing a contrast) in the second line of No 1. Here at the opening of stanza No 4, *plen* introduces more details of the same idea set forth in No 2. This is the primary meaning of this particle. Thus Paul is saying

(No 2) woman (like Eve) was created because the man (like Adam) needed help. More specifically (*plen*) what I mean is (no.4), in the Lord (that is in Christ) men and women are mutually interdependent.

Finally, what on earth is to be made of the bit about the angels in the center? Many options have been proposed. Many are without evidence. With Morna Hooker of Cambridge it is clear that the background is rabbinic. (pp. 410-16). How does the rabbinic background help us?

To summarize, the rabbis argued that creation was such an astounding event that there must have been an audience to praise God for this wondrous accomplishment. But there were no people. Who was there to do it? Answer: The angels. The Angels were there to applaud. Even so, the authors of the New Testament affirmed the presence of angels gathered around the new creation of God, the Church. They were there for the same reason

— to applaud this wonderful event. (We can recall that each of the seven churches in the Book of Revelation had an angel watching over it.) Furthermore, a part of this new creation is the restoration of the equality and mutual interdependence between men and women in Christ (as seen in this text). Thus Paul says to the women of Corinth (and the whole church, cf. 1:2b; 11:16):

Do not be upset if I urge you to cover your heads when you lead in worship (i.e. pray and prophesy). Do not for a moment see this as a put down. Quite the opposite, let this be a sign of your authority (v.10) to exercise your prophetic gifts in leadership along with the men. Do it “because of the angels.” Let them applaud the wondrous fact of your restored status in the new creation and let the image of God that is within you shine forth.

How then might this directive regarding dress for women in leadership be lived out in the 21st century in the Western world? We are not living in first century Corinth. Yet great theological principles are here being affirmed. To men and to women, I hear Paul saying:

When leading in worship, do not dress in a manner that leads to any misunderstanding or in any way detracts from the task of bringing the faithful into the presence of God. You are created in the image of God — let that wondrous fact *alone* determine your dress code.

In conclusion, we can here see a finely tuned theological discussion on the place of men and women in Christian leadership that needs to have some very old barnacles scraped from its surface so that its original intent can once again shine forth with all of its grace and power.