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**1 Corinthians  
11: 1-16  
A Rhetorical Reading**

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Much of Paul's letters continues to mystify Bible students all over the globe, vindicating Saint Simon's passing observation that certain first century writings were a 'stumbling block' to some first century Bible teachers (2 Peter 3:16). First Corinthians 11 may be taken as a concrete example.

Recently I discovered that a ubiquitous biblical phenomenon might be one of the keys to unlocking the tight treasure chest embedded in verses 1-16. And what is this key? The pun! Can you imagine? The pun.<sup>1</sup> We should have guessed this along, because all over the Scriptures we find the pun in some of the most important theological settings. For example, in Exodus 3 the famous I AM that I AM declaration, it is believed, is a word play in connection with *YHWH* (Thompson 2003, vii), which when translated may very well be the third person ("He is") of I AM.

Then there is the time when King David wanted to build a 'house' (Temple/Palace) for the I AM, who declined the offer but offered instead to

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<sup>1</sup> Or paranomasia. Today we pun mostly for fun; the biblical writers invariably employ this literary device to make serious points, while still maintaining their sense of humour. During 21<sup>st</sup> edition of the World Cup, we may have seen some inadvertent puns; e.g., 'Pope sent off in Italy tussle' (USA/Italy), and 'Henry is one and one with Juan' (Brazil/France)—and 'when Jamaicans (including Usain) hear gunshot *dem Bolt!*' For other rhetorical devices, see the brief but useful article, by Bradshaw (1997).

build a ‘house’ (dynasty) for David (2 Sam. 7). And how about Isaiah 7 (which is conceptually close to 1 Cor. 11:1-16)?

*When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it. 2 Now the house<sup>2</sup> of David was told, "Aram has allied itself with Ephraim"; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind. 3 Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field. 4 Say to him, 'Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood-- because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah. 5 Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, 6 "Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it." 7 Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "It will not take place, it will not happen, 8 for the head [capital, as in v. 9a] of Aram is Damascus, and the head [king, as in 9b] of Damascus is only Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people. 9 The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."<sup>3</sup>*

So when Collins (cited in Thiselton 2000, 822; cf. Blomberg 1994, 208) writes that “Paul’s rhetorical argument is constructed on the basis of a pun. He plays on the multiple meanings of ‘head,’”<sup>4</sup> we sense he is on to something.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘The house’ (cf. 2 Sam. 7) lasted until about the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when ‘termites’ destroyed it (2 Chron.).

<sup>3</sup> Verse 9b has another pun: “If you do not *AMEN* in your faith, you will not be *AMEN*ed at all.”

<sup>4</sup> The semantic range includes ‘priority’, ‘source’, Zidane’s former ‘weapon’ of choice, ‘origin’, and ‘authority’ (Waltke 1978, 48).

Fee (1987, 504), as well, may be on to something in rejecting the traditional view that we have within the passage some notion of hierarchy. For him the meaning of the verse is to be understood along the following lines: “In terms of creation, Christ is the source [i.e. head] of every man’s life; in terms of the new creation . . . the source of every Christian man. . . .” Looking at the verse chronologically, Fee continues, “Christ created man; through man came woman; [and] God is the source of Christ in his incarnation.”

Fee’s interpretation is plausible, especially in light of verses 8 and 9. However, if Paul is using a pun, a *double entendre* may also be present. Based on this consideration, we offer below a modified presentation of the traditional perspective under the following headings.<sup>5</sup>

### Commendational Matters

*Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you (v.2).*

Only one verse of commendation in this paragraph, but it may be taken together with verse 1, which enjoins the reader to follow the Messianic and apostolic pattern of sincere commendation before corrective measures are taken (1 Cor. 1:7; Rev. 2-3). The founder intends to bring this church in line with the others (v. 16). However, they must never get the impression that they are so far gone and there is no hope of redemption; so they are praised for their positive response to good tradition.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For an outline of the entire book and the complex structure of vv. 2-16, see, respectively, Palmer 1992, 91-92 and Garland 2003, 505-511; and for a well-written essay on the traditional position, Fish 1992, 214-251.

<sup>6</sup> That is, maintaining the groundbreaking tradition of freedom in worship and male/female equality (so Blomberg 1994, 208; contra Mount 2005? ).

### **Covenantal Matters**

*But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God (v. 3).*

The Corinthians who first heard this letter read were people of covenant (vv 17-34). They had entered into an everlasting relationship with the eternal God. In the next chapter, particularly verses 1-6, they will be reminded that their fellowship is with this triune God, Spirit (12:4); Son (12: 5); and Father (12: 6).

As in chapter 12, the unity and diversity characterizing the triune God are brought to bear on the issue at hand; there to shape their understanding of how spiritual gifts operate effectively, and here in chapter 11 to show how the nuclear family participate in worship in a way that does not jeopardize the vertical and horizontal covenant relationships.

In verse 3, then, the functional subordination<sup>7</sup> of the Son to the Father serves as a worthwhile paradigm for the husband and wife (diversity) team (unity) in worship. So what must be borne in mind is that the head of every Christian husband is Christ, and in turn the husband is the head (*PAL*)<sup>8</sup> of his wife. Just as how the unity of the God-head does not cancel out (but complements) its diversity, so it must not be thought that ‘wife’ and ‘husband’ are mutually exclusive. “Yes it is true that men and women<sup>9</sup> are equal in Christ before God, but that does not mean that all differences

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, in terms of their being, they are one (John 10:30), but as persons they have different functions both in the realms of creation and redemption.

<sup>8</sup> I.e., Primary Accountability Leader (*PAL*; cf. Rom. 5:12); the wife is *SAL*.

<sup>9</sup> Where Blomberg speaks of “men and women” we may more specifically speak of wives and husbands, at least in v. 3.

between the sexes may be blurred” (Blomberg 1994, 208; Dowdin 2016). Here is where the controversial covering<sup>10</sup> comes in.

### Conventional Matters<sup>11</sup>

*Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head-- it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head* (vv 4-6).

To unveil the truth behind these verses, we must understand them against the backdrop of the Graeco-Roman culture. Of course, this is already a given in any attempt to interpret first-century literature. What is problematic is that there is not a whole bunch of interpreters that are sufficiently conversant with that culture to properly re-construct the situation the apostle addresses in verses 4-6. Knowing fully well where I fall in this interpretative quest, I can only rely on people like Thiselton and Fee (1987) to help in charting the course.

Thiselton (2000, 803; italics his), for example, informs us that “certain *male* attire or hair-styles were deemed effeminate and overtly sexual, while appropriate head coverings for respectable Roman *women* served as protection of their dignity and status as *women not to be propositioned*.” Quite a number of these respectable women were wives

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<sup>10</sup> Is it hair (v.15)? Then brothers must pray bald, unless long hair is meant. In vv. 4-5 something other than natural hair seems to be intended. See also Chisholm’s (1985, 5) nuanced position championing the twin principle of headship and sexual differentiation; for him ‘covering’ refers to hair.

<sup>11</sup> Some “commentators who wish to defend Paul’s methods of argument find these verses embarrassing, on the ground that they are entirely relative to highly time-bound considerations. But this is no accident. Paul is concerned that the eschatological status of the Christian does not raise him above everyday questions about particular times and particular places” (Thiselton 1978, 117).

and, from the perspective of Paul, all Christian women were/are indeed respectable! But why would respectable wives, for example, want to put away their veils in church? Garland's (2003, 507) answer is worth pondering:

Possibly, the fuzzy boundary between the home and the house church caused them to neglect this covering. Since they were not accustomed to wearing the covering in their homes, they did not wear it when the church met in the home. Behaviour acceptable in the home may not be appropriate for the church gathering in the home. [But] We are still left with guesses as to the motivation behind their behaviour.

Another feature of Roman culture was the wearing of some kind of a headgear on the part of some pagan male worshippers (Oster 1988, 481-505).<sup>12</sup> Against this background, the shame and dishonour (in a culture where this was high on the agenda) mentioned in verse 4-6 is understandable. The Christian husband at the Lord's Table, for instance, cannot look like a pagan facing his altar (Witherington 1995, 239)--and his wife should not appear disrespectful<sup>13</sup> (vv. 16).

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<sup>12</sup> Says the first century biographer, Plutarch (Boring et al 1995, 423): "But if there is anything to be said, consider whether it be not true that there is only one matter that needs investigation: why men cover their heads when they worship the gods; . . . For they uncover their heads in the presence of men more influential than they: it is not to invest these men with additional honor, but rather to avert from them the jealousy of the gods, that these men may not seem to demand the same honor as the gods, nor to tolerate an attention like that bestowed on the gods . . . the Spirit within us entreats and supplicates the gods without, thus symbolizes by the covering of the head the covering and concealment of the soul by the body."

<sup>13</sup> This is what a conventional unveiled woman in the Graeco-Roman world would likely look like. One can understand some Christian women 'dissing' this cultural norm in the name of freedom; equally, a Christian brother feeling free to wearing his hair long, not bothering with the fact that many would mistake him to be a member of the 1<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of J-FLAG. "Everything is permissible" of course; but not everything is beneficial (10: 23a).

### Creational Matters

*A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels,<sup>14</sup> the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?(vv 7-13)*

Having partially grounded his argument in social norms and customs, the apostle now turns to higher ideals to persuade his ‘children’ to fall in line with the other assemblies (v. 16a). However, his tactics of persuasion are seldom appreciated today. Not surprisingly we hear complaints that “whenever, as in 1 Cor. 11: 1-16 or 1Cor. 14. 33b-40, appeals and arguments break down, he resorts to commands and claims the authority of Christ and that of the churches. His rhetoric does not aim at fostering independence, freedom, and consensus, but stresses dependence on his model, order and decency, as well as subordination and silence” (Fiorenza 2004, 159).<sup>15</sup> We have to grant, along with Peter, that Paul’s writing style has made it difficult for all of us. But sometimes his critics are

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<sup>14</sup> These are more likely to be supernatural forces (Zodhiates 1997, 55-57; Theissen 1987, 171-172). The right to pray and prophesy within the gathering must be duly exercised by both genders (vv. 4-5); if the wife/woman is singled out in v. 13, it is because the new-found freedom in Christ and the Spirit (2 Cor.3: 17) is felt more keenly by her. Cf. the lavish display in Lk. 7: 36ff.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. also Theissen’s (1987, 167): “To us Paul’s reaction is a riddle. According to everything we know, women without head covering were no scandal in Corinth! Yet Paul argues against the practice.” But if the founder of the assembly is articulating “ways in which the saints. . .[are] to constitute a community of new a new society” (Horsley 2004, 230), we should not be surprised if some of his directives seem strange to our modern ears.

even more difficult to comprehend. Is it true that Paul's rhetoric fails to engender independence and freedom, or does it seek instead to remind that such privileges have parameters? Verses 7-13, then, demonstrate that the parameters of worship are not only cultural but have their roots in creation as well.

Because Paul is perhaps at his "difficult best" in vv 7-13, one Greek scholar is led to write: "The woman was not created as the image and glory of God from the beginning, as the man was" (Zodhiates 1997, 45)—this despite the clear poetic testimony of Gen. 1: 27. Paul, in verse 7, appears to be ignorant of this fact as well, but he was simply employing a Jewish way of being emphatic by negating one side of the coin. For example, if we only take the Lord's words, 'you have not chosen me, but I have chosen you' on the surface, then we virtually have no personal testimony. And what about Paul's cheeky rhetorical question in chapter 10: "does God care for oxen?" Of course He does! And, of course, He made Eve in His own likeness and image (Robertson and Plummer 1914, 231). Essentially, that is what it means to be human (Hoekema 1986). What the apostle seems to be doing in verse 7, therefore, is to underscore the (what we have called above) *pal* character of the husband.

But what does the apostle mean that the wife/woman is the glory of the husband/man? If we understand the phrase in the sense of the wife being the one of whom the husband is proud (Adam: 'my wife is my glory'; cf. 1 Thess. 2: 20),<sup>16</sup> then the corresponding phrase below means that the woman's hair is something that brings her pride (her glory; Louw and Nida 1989, 311). Neither the wife's glory (v.15) nor the husband's (v. 13) should be the focal point of worship; and, equally important, God's glory, whether

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<sup>16</sup> Hear the pride of the first 'Iraqi' husband in his own words: "This is now bone of my bones . . ." It was shame (the same thing Paul warns against in 1 Cor. 11) that caused this husband to sing a different tune in chap. 3.

in a symbolic sense or not, must not be veiled (v. 7),<sup>17</sup> since we are New Covenant people (cf. 2 Cor. 3: 13).

### Christological Matters

One more thing. Neither the woman nor the man is called the ‘glory of God’ in the creation account. So why does Paul introduce that concept here, and why does he connect it only to one sex? Is this an example of his Jewish chauvinism? The answer lies, I think, in the writer’s intense Messianic consciousness. Every since he saw the glory of God in the face of Jesus, en route to Syria (Acts 9: 1-5; 2Cor.4: 3-6), his life has been, as the song says, “wrapped up, tied up, tangled up in Jesus”. So here we have a veiled Pauline reference to the ideal Man as the glory of God (cf. Heb. 2: 5-9; 2 Cor. 3:18). The other apostles knew before Paul that when God became a human being to display His glory, He became a male (“we beheld his glory”; John 1: 14b). Moreover, since He had to die, He had to become the ‘executable’ gender,<sup>18</sup> that is, the accursed gender (Gal. 3: 13). But even in this matter, the woman plays a vital role in that at the right time (Gal. 4: 4-5), and in fulfillment of Scripture (Gen. 3:15), Mary had a little Lamb (John 1:29)—for “In the Lord, . . . woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.”

Finally, some other . . .

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<sup>17</sup> Awkwardly expressed by Paul and more so by me; but it is not about him or me. It’s all about God’s glory; “The glory of God should not be veiled in the presence of God (that would be an acted contradiction in terms); by the same token the glory of man *should* be veiled in the presence of God’ (Bruce 1980, 107).

<sup>18</sup> We often take it for granted that under the Romans, women were not crucified.



Lund explains:

In this passage we find an interesting play upon the terms “man” and “woman”. In A/B man is found in the extremes and woman in the centre of the two chiasmic structures, while in B'/A' this order has been reversed. The division between the two kinds of structures is marked by C which contains the statement of what ought to be done . . . The whole structure is the central panel of the passage 11: 2-26.

If Lund’s analysis is correct, we have here yet another instance of the apostle’s literary strategy in the service of pastoral concern. The point of the embedded structure, then, is to lay stress on the C-section.<sup>21</sup> This may be confirmed by the fact that immediately following verses 8-12 we have the rhetorical question of verse 13.

*Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice-- nor do the churches of God (vv 14-16)*

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<sup>21</sup> “If the chiasmus is longer than four elements [as above], the center of the structure is emphasized and the corresponding parallels provide commentary on each other” (Lund 1970, xv). Cf. Mk 2: 27: (A) *the Sabbath* (B) was made for man (B') and not man (A') *for the Sabbath*; and Turner (2006, 111) on Matt. 7:6. Lund (xviii) also reports that “children in Roman times had to learn the alphabet forward, backwards and then both ways at once (alpha-omega, beta-psi, etc).” For a similar structure embracing only vv. 8-9, see Fee (2014, 569); he also sees another chiasmic structure involving vv 7 and 10.

The passage ends with another item of cultural concern: one that was ‘hair yesterday; gone today.’<sup>22</sup> If in the previous verses Paul is anxious to get believers understand the significance of ‘covering’ (or the lack of it) in worship, he is equally emphatic in his insistence that gender distinctions be maintained in verses 14-15.<sup>23</sup> Why so? Literature from Paul’s period demonstrates that the apostle was not alone in trying to counteract what may be considered an unwholesome trend. For example, a Jewish warning against pedophilia is expressed thus:

If a child is a boy, do not let locks grow on his head. Braid not his crown nor make cross-knots at the top of his head. Long hair is not fit for men, but for . . . women. Guard against the youthful beauty of a comely boy; because many rage for intercourse with a man (cited in Theissen 1987, 169).

Men with long hair and women with the opposite were also, according to Theissen (1987, 168), associated with transvestitism, something already condemned in the Hebrew Scriptures (Deut. 22:5).

In sum, any wo/man may pray or prophesy in church (Tee 2002; Palmer 2014), once s/he does so under the lordship of Christ (1 Cor. 14:37) and the leadership of the congregation. In this context, culture and convention used to play (and to a lesser extent still do) an important role, but the principles of the New Covenant are more crucial today.

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<sup>22</sup> In other words, hair length in our culture is not associated with the vices mentioned, else every Rasta would automatically become a ‘bald-head’.

<sup>23</sup> Similarly, one of Paul’s contemporaries writes: “Has she [i.e., nature] not by these means [hair appearance] distinguished between the male and the female? . . . Wherefore we ought to preserve the signs which God has given: we ought not to throw them away; we ought not . . . to confuse the sexes which have been distinguished in this fashion” (cited in Boring et al 1995, 426; cf. Chisholm 1985).

Finally, whatever principles are applied from the passage are best applied consistently. For example, if it is the policy of a church to allow sisters to prophesy and pray without some kind of ‘covering’, then brothers should not be censured for wearing caps or the like during worship. First Corinthians 11: 2-16 is about brothers *and* sisters. No discrimination should mar our attempt at proper application.

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## APPENDIX

**The Concentric Structure of 1 Corinthians 11: 2-16**

(Garland 2003, 511)

- A** Commendation for maintaining tradition handed on by Paul and the assertion of the basic principle that everyone has a head (vv. 2-3)
- B** Shame about coverings for men and women (vv. 4-5)
- C** Social impropriety for a woman to be uncovered; theological impropriety for a man to be covered (vv. 6-7)
  - D** Theological explanation from the creation account (vv. 8-9)
  - E** Central assertion: (vv. 11-12)
  - D'** Theological caveat from procreation (vv. 11-12)
- C'** Social impropriety for a woman to be uncovered (v. 13)
- B'** Shame (and glory): lessons from nature (vv. 14-15)
- A'** Admonition to conform to Paul's customs and those of the churches (v.16)