

Prophets Under God’s Authority: Headcoverings in 1 Corinthians 11:1–16

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1 Corinthians 11:1–16 is a challenging passage, and breaking the code is deeply satisfying. Unlike 1 Tim 2, 1 Cor 11 is clearly describing the assembly of God’s people worshipping together.¹

Paul’s concern in vs. 1–16 is convincing the Corinthian church that women must cover their hair—and so their heads—while praying aloud or prophesying.² Some denominations have understood these verses to mean that all women should cover their heads in public, or at least during worship. Not so! The text clearly restricts this command to women while they are praying or prophesying (vs. 4–5).³ (By implication, as this prophesying is public, out loud, in the worship setting, we should see this as public prayer, as well, and not private, silent prayer.) There is *no* mention of any requirement for *all* women to cover their heads. When these chosen women have finished praying or prophesying, evidently, they may uncover. (Do these women know in advance they will be praying or prophesying and so bring a headcovering with them? Is one provided, passed out to the women as necessary? We don’t know.)

Why is Paul concerned about these women covering their heads? Burton claims it is so men are not attracted to these women while they are praying or prophesying.⁴ I find no warrant for this assumption in the text. It would be odd

¹ See my “Women, Teaching, Authority, Silence: 1 Timothy 2:8–15 Explained by 1 Peter 3:1–6,” *JATS* 10/1-2 (1999), 249–254.

² My friend Keith Burton has provided an excellent rhetorical analysis of this passage in his “1 Corinthians 11 and 14: How Does a Woman Prophesy and Keep Silence at the Same Time?” *JATS* 10/1-2 (1999), 232–248. This analysis reveals the care with which Paul makes his arguments.

³ Ralph P. Martin refers to 1 Cor 14:3 (“But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort” KJV) as a clue to the modern corollary of this sort of prophecy in his “New Testament Worship: Some Puzzling Practices,” *AUSS*, 31/2 (Summer 1993), 122.

⁴ He’s not the only one to make this claim. In an otherwise exemplary article, so does M. D. Hooker in “Authority on her Head: An Examination of I Cor. XI. 10,” *New Testament Studies*, 10 (1963–1964), 410–416, though it contradicts her own thesis. Many others have also believed this.

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if men were especially drawn by the hair of women who are praying or prophesying. Given what we know of Greek attitudes toward women and their proper societal roles in Paul's day, "the lust of the eyes" would not likely be their reaction to such a public ministry.

What then is the answer to this question? We find in v. 3 that God is the head of (or authority over) Christ, Christ the head of the man, and the man the head of the woman. In the normal course of events, a woman has no authority over her man (1 Tim 2:12), just as her man has no authority over Christ, and Christ receives His authority from His Father (Matt 28:18).

However, when she is praying or prophesying during public worship, a woman speaks with authority, either as she petitions or praises God on behalf of the entire assembly or speaks for God to the entire assembly. In Paul's day, there needs to be a symbolic way of indicating when a woman *is* speaking with authority and where that authority comes from.

Drawing on Gen 1:27 and Ps 8:5, as Burton correctly notes, Paul argues in v. 7 that man is both the image and the glory of God. Thus there can be nothing unseemly in a man praying or prophesying with his head uncovered, because that head brings glory to God. Indeed, if a man covers the head on his shoulders which brings glory to God while praying or prophesying, he instead brings shame to his spiritual Head, Christ (v. 4).⁵

However, drawing from Gen 2:21–24, Paul also argues in v. 7 that while man is the image and glory of God, woman, taken *from* man, is the glory (though not the image) *of* man, not God. While the Greek words *aner* and *gyné* in the passage in 1 Corinthians cannot be accurately translated "husband" and "wife" in this context, the allusion to Gen 2:24 indicates it is the wife who brings glory to her husband. (This is similar to Paul's argument in regard to the importance of a woman's inner beauty in 1 Tim 2:9–10 and Peter's in 1 Pet 3:3–4.) It would be odd if the beauty and submission of someone else's wife brought glory to me, any more than the obedience and good breeding of someone else's children brings glory to me.

If a man is God's glory and a woman is man's glory, what is a woman's glory? In 1 Tim 2:15 Paul says, "She shall be saved in childbearing," but in 1 Cor 11:15 he argues that her glory is her glorious hair, so long as it isn't cut short or shaved, which would be shameful (in that, cutting off her glory, it would fill her with shame and bring less glory to her husband).

⁵ Hooker writes, "Since he is the reflexion of God's glory, any attempt to disguise this fact in worship, where God is expressly glorified, would be shameful—especially when he is speaking to or from God in prayer or prophecy. Similar ideas are found in the Old Testament story of Moses (used by Paul in II Cor. iii), whose face shone with the reflected glory of God after speaking with him on the mountain, and who was then forced to wear a veil—which he removed every time he went in to speak to the Lord—because the Israelites were unable to bear the sight of this reflected glory" (414–415). Hooker's article, now thirty-six years old, is still much-cited and has influenced a generation of scholars. For example, C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 254–255; Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce, Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), 602–608. I discovered it after writing the first draft of this article and was pleased to have my exegesis confirmed.

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If a man's hair is long, it hides his glorious physical head (Paul's argument; not mine) and so fails to bring glory to his spiritual Head (v. 14).⁶ A woman's hair, however, is the glory God has given her, a glory meant to cover her (v. 15), and yet because it covers her a modest glory meant for all to see and enjoy.⁷

When a woman is praying or prophesying in public worship, however, all glory should go to God, not to her or her husband, so her head (and hair) must be covered.⁸ These are only symbols, of course, but potent symbols in Paul's day.

But what else did the covering on the woman's head symbolize? In v. 8 Paul says the woman came from the man (at the creation). In v. 9 he says the woman was made for the man (at the creation). (As all women were not made for all men, but the man and the woman were to be "one flesh" [Gen 2:24], the context of these two singular nouns points to husband and wife, even though "man" and "woman" are the correct translations.)

How then can a woman have the authority to pray for and prophesy to men in a congregation? Paul answers this question in v. 10. It reads, literally, "Therefore the woman ought to have authority on her head because of the angels." According to *Vine's Expository Dictionary*, the word used here which is translated as "authority," *exousía*, implies "the power of authority, the right to exercise power," "the power of rule or government, the power of one whose will and commands must be obeyed by others," "apostolic authority," "the power of judicial decision." These are appropriate for one bearing a prophetic message. The word translated "authority" in 1 Tim 2:12, however, is *authentain*, which Vine says means "to domineer over" someone. That sort of authority is denied to wives.

When she covers her head before praying or prophesying in the worship service, a woman indicates she is speaking not with her own authority—she has none that is granted in this chapter and as a wife she is already under her husband's authority⁹—but as a prophet with authority from God,¹⁰ as His messen-

⁶ W. Harold Mare writes, "Although it was not proper for a first-century Jewish man to cover his head for prayer (a custom, originally meant to indicate Sorrow, that evidently really developed as a practice in the fourth century A.D.), yet the act seems to have been innovatively tried in the Jewish synagogues in Paul's time" *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 10:255–56.

⁷ Greek women in Paul's day did not usually wear head coverings in public. See James B. Hurley, "Did Paul Require Veils or the Silence of Women?: A Consideration of 1 Cor 11:2–16 and 1 Cor 14:33b–36," *Westminster Theological Review*, 35/2 (Winter 1973): 194.

⁸ Hooker, "In her case, therefore, her uncovered head will reflect his glory, both because she is his 'glory', and because he is her 'head'" (415).

⁹ See Num 5:19, 20, 29, "under your husband's authority" (*hupandros* in the LXX, lit. "under husband"). However, 1 Cor 7:4 specifies that *both* husband and wife have authority over each other's *body*. To be under one's authority also means to be under one's protection, and the woman speaking for God wears a covering on her head to indicate that she is not to be harmed, because she is under God's protection, as if He were her husband. Consider Ruth 2:12, "'May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.'" Similarly, Ruth says to Boaz, "I am your servant Ruth, . . . Spread the corner of your garment over

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ger, *under* His authority,¹¹ with His covering *over* her head.¹² By covering her own glory, in this case, she is not lessening her attractiveness to men, as Burton claims, but indicating that she is not speaking as a woman or wife but as a messenger. (Consider how in Britain, judges and barristers wear white wigs on their heads when they are exercising authority in the name of the state. In days past, when British judges delivered the sentence of death, they placed black coverings on these wigs, again symbolizing that they spoke not with their own authority but with the authority of the state.)

This may also suggest a reading of the next phrase, “because of the angels.” The Greek word *angeloi* also means “messengers.”¹³ The text may mean that a woman praying or prophesying in the assembly needs a sign of God’s authority on her head because messengers need to show evidence of their authority.¹⁴ It

me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer.” In Ezek 16:8, God says, “Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough to love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine” (all NIV). One might also consider, in the context of headcoverings, Jacob covering the heads of Ephraim and Manasseh with his hands as he prophesies over them and gives them authority as his adopted sons (Gen 48:5, 14, 20).

¹⁰ Hooker, “if now woman also, in contrast to Jewish custom, takes part in prayer and prophecy, this is because a new power has been given to her” (415).

¹¹ Cf. Matt 8:9, in which the centurion tells Jesus he himself is “a man under authority, having soldiers under me.” Hooker, “The head-covering which symbolizes the effacement of man’s glory in the presence of God also serves as a sign of the [*exousia*] which is given to the woman; with the glory of the man hidden she, too, may reflect the glory of God” (415–416). Many have seen this head-covering as a woman’s open recognition that though she speaks, she is under her husband’s authority. E. B. Allo responds, “Cependant il a été observé avec justesse (J. Weiss, Ramsay), que tous les emplois connus du mot [*exousia*] sont actifs, et se réfèrent à une *puissance exercée*, et non à une *puissance subie* par quelqu’un.” [“Meanwhile it has been observed with justice (J. Weiss, Ramsay), that all known uses of the word [*exousia*] are active and refer to an *exercisable power*, and not to a *power imposed* by someone.”] *Saint Paul: Première Épître aux Corinthiens* (Paris, 1934), in his comments on this verse.

¹² Vine calls it “a sign of the Lord’s authority over the church.” W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, [1940] 1966), 89, “Authority.” W. R. Domeris writes, “Within the idea of the veil is to be found the most important theological contribution of the term *māsāk*. The veil denies access, but also points to the awesome mystery that God inhabits and so signifies the gulf between the holiness of God and humankind’s profanity.” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997): 3:252.

¹³ H. Bietenhard writes that classical Greek “uses *angelos* for the messenger, the ambassador in human affairs, who speaks and acts in the place of the one who has sent him. He is under the protection of the Gods and is inviolate.” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 1:101. Isa 4:5 says, of the pillar of cloud and fire, “the glory will be a canopy” NASB. Thus, it formed a canopy that symbolized that God’s people were protected by being under His glory.

¹⁴ The Hebrew word *malʿak* can be translated not only as “angel” or “messenger” but as “ambassador.” In Zech 6:11–13 the Lord orders that a crown be placed on the head of Joshua the high priest as a sign that the “Branch” will “bear the honor and sit and rule” (NASB). A head covering is also a symbol of authority in 2 Kgs 11:12. Here, receiving “the testimony” is also a sign

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may also be that Paul's intention was to write "because she is a messenger," but that's speculation.

Is there biblical support for this? Yes, there is. Jesus calls John the Baptist a prophet in Matt 11:9, then in the next verse paraphrases Mal 3:1 using the phrase *ton angelon mou* ("my messenger") as a synonym for "prophet" (see also Mark 1:2 and Luke 7:27). We find the same parallelism in 2 Chron 36:16: "But they mocked the *messengers* of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His *prophets*, . . . (LXX translates "messengers" as *angelous*). The parallelism reveals that "messengers" and "prophets" refer to the same people. In Haggai 1:13 the prophet is called God's "messenger" (*angelos*).¹⁵

(By this light the "angels" of the seven churches of Revelation might be seen as people in each church who have the prophetic gift, fit for explaining the messages sent by Christ through the prophet/apostle John.)¹⁶

From this reading of 1 Cor 11:1–7 we learn several useful things. First, the passage does not support those who argue that all men are the head of all women. Second, the passage does not support those who argue that the husband's headship came after the fall. Third, the head covering is a symbol of God's authority, to be worn only by women while they are speaking with authority. Fourth, the passage is not meant to deny women authority, but to carefully provide a way for them to exercise authority within limits when called *by* God or asked to call *on* God.

of authority. Of course, 1 Cor 11 is not suggesting that women who prophesy are being crowned as queens, so while covered they are not crowned.

¹⁵ The LXX differs quite a bit from most English versions in this verse. For example, the NASB translates, from the Hebrew, "Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD, spoke by the commission of the LORD to the people saying, "I am with you," declares the LORD." However, the LXX reads, literally, "And spoke Haggai the Lord's messenger among the messengers of the Lord . . ." (. . . *Aggaïos angelos Kurïou en angelois Kurïou* . . .). The next verse says, "So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God" (NASB). It seems the translators of the LXX based their translation of v. 13 on v. 14, suggesting that they understood *angelos* ("messenger") to be an appropriate term for anyone with a spirit "stirred up" by God, even if not prophesying. The New Testament writers generally quote the LXX. This has important implications for our understanding of those "prophesying" in the New Testament church. Those who "prophesy" there, while speaking for God, may not be "prophets" in the way Isaiah or Ezekiel or Daniel were prophets.

¹⁶ Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich's *Greek-English Lexicon* also finds *angelos* used in reference to a human prophet in the apocryphal 1 Esdras 1:48f. They also mention, among others, that Maximus Tyrius, writing in the 2nd Century A.D., calls Plato *angelon*, "as one who brings messages from God." Liddell and Scott, in their *Greek-English Lexicon*, give, as meaning 2 of *angelos*, "one that announces or tells."