

THE NATURE OF THE HEAD COVERING IN 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-16

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Outline

- I. Was The Head Covering Artificial, Or Was It Hair?
 - A. The Text and the Case for an Artificial Head Covering.
 - B. The Text and the Case for Hair as the Covering.
 - C. Evaluation of the Textual Evidence.
 - D. Evidence from Contemporary Sources.
- II. Contemporary Statuary And Portraiture Evidence.
 - A. Evidence for Men.
 - B. Evidence for Women.
 - C. Evaluation of the Evidence.
- III. How Is Paul's Statement In Verse 10 To Be Interpreted?
 - A. The Meaning of *exousia*.
 - 1. Four options.
 - 2. Evaluation.
 - B. "Because of the angels."
 - 1. Five positions.
 - 2. Evaluation.

Conclusion

THE NATURE OF THE HEAD COVERING IN 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-16

Of all the writings of the apostle Paul, few passages have confused biblical scholars more than 1 Cor. 11:2-16. Fee states that “this passage is full of...exegetical difficulties.”¹ Roberts notes that the passage is a “seemingly prosaic instruction.”² Martin declares that Paul’s argument in the passage is “notorious,” and states that it “is frequently criticized for being logically convoluted and confused.”³ Furnish concludes, “His argument is obscure, at least to modern interpreters, and it may well have seemed unsatisfactory even to the apostle himself.”⁴ Nevertheless, interpretations abound. Among the many issues raised in the passage is the nature of the head covering. Was it artificial, or was it hair itself? Concerning the custom of wearing an artificial head covering, was it widespread in the Roman Empire, and did it carry significant social and religious implications? How is Paul’s statement in verse 10, including “because of the angels,” to be interpreted?

It shall be the purpose of this paper to address all of these questions—in particular, the nature of the head covering, since much in the passage hinges around one’s understanding of it. Arguments from the text for both an artificial covering and hair will be examined. Evidence from contemporary writers, images, statues, and other data will be presented. Paul’s unusual argument in verse 10 will also be addressed, focusing on the meaning of *exousia* and *tous aggelous*. Because of space limitations, this study will not examine every issue of 1 Cor. 11:2-16; for the purposes of this study, it is assumed that Paul is indeed the author of the passage. There have been questions raised by some concerning Pauline authorship, but they seem to be motivated

¹Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 492.

²J. W. Roberts, “The Veils in 1 Cor. 11:2-16,” *Restoration Quarterly* 3 (1959), 183.

³Troy W. Martin, “Paul’s Argument From Nature for the Veil in 1 Corinthians 11:13-15: a Testicle Instead of a Head Covering,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123/1 (2004), 75.

⁴Victor Paul Furnish, *The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 77.

more by feminist criticism of Paul's affirmation of the headship of man.⁵ However, it is hoped that a fresh look at the passage will generate a renewed appreciation for Paul's handling of difficult questions.

Was The Head Covering Artificial, Or Was It Hair?

The Text and the Case for an Artificial Head Covering. Verse four reads, "Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head." The key phrase to be understood is *kata kephales echon*, literally, "having down the head."⁶ Since there is no object, it must be supplied. But, what is Paul talking about? Roberts contends that it is "certainly right" to assume that the word *kalumma* ("a covering") "is the word understood."⁷ Waltke says "it seems reasonable to suppose" that a head covering is being considered.⁸

Within the context of the passage, the corresponding phrase is in verse five: "but every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head." Specifically, *akatakaluptoi tei kephalei*, literally, "with the head uncovered."⁹ Additionally, verse seven reads, "For a man ought not to cover his head." The phrase here is *aner men gar ouk opheilei*

⁵For examples of this view, see William O. Walker, "1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and Paul's Views Regarding Women," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94/1 (1975), 94-110; Lamar Cope, "1 Cor 11:2-16: One Step Further," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978), 435-36; and G. W. Trompf, "On Attitudes Toward Women in Paul and Paulinist Literature: 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 and Its Context," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980), 196-215. This has been effectively countered by Jerome Murphy O'Connor in his response to Walker, "The Non-Pauline Character of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976), 615-21; and to Trompf, "Interpolations in 1 Corinthians," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48 (1986), 87-90. Fee comments, "But there is a certain danger in assuming that one knows so well what Paul could or could not have written that one can perform such radical surgery on a text, especially when nothing in the language or style is non-Pauline!" Fee, *The First Epistle*, 492f.

⁶Fee, 505.

⁷Roberts, "The Veils," 186; also, see G. G. Findlay in W. Robertson Nicoll, *The Expositor's Greek Testament, Volume Two* (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson, 2002), 872.

⁸Bruce K. Waltke, "1 Corinthians 11:2-16: An Interpretation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (Jan.-March 1978), 50.

⁹Mark C. Black, "1 Cor. 11:2-16—A Re-investigation," in *Essays On Women In Earliest Christianity, Volume I*, ed. Carroll D. Osburn (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1993), 200.

katakaluptesthai ten kephalen. Fee claims that the phrase implies an external covering,¹⁰ though he acknowledges the difficulty associated with such an understanding.

The Text and the Case for Hair as the Covering. Nowhere in the text is a word used that indicates an artificial head covering.¹¹ Indeed, O'Connor insists that the rendering "having something on the head" is "an unacceptable translation," and says that "the only grammatical alternative" is "having something hanging down from the head."¹² Padgett adds, "*kata* does not generally mean 'on' (as it would have to for 'head covering'). Usually it means 'down,' or accompanied by a verb of motion 'against.'"¹³ Verse fifteen is also a factor. It reads in part, "For her hair is given to her for a covering." The pertinent word is *anti*, which in translations of the verse is usually rendered "for." However, even Fee recognizes the possibility of a different rendering: "a woman's long hair is given to her instead of a *peribolaion*."¹⁴ Padgett advances a third alternative for *anti*: equivalence.¹⁵ In this understanding, there is "little logical difference in Paul asserting that by nature women have hair instead of a covering, and his asserting that hair is, for women, the equivalent of the covering in question."¹⁶ He illustrates this point by saying,

You come by my office, asking for a dollar bill. I give you four quarters. This could be understood in three ways. I give you four quarters "instead of" one dollar; or I give you four quarters "as the equivalent of" one dollar; or I give you four quarters "as substitute for" the dollar bill, or "to serve as" a dollar bill. The

¹⁰Fee, 496.

¹¹William J. Martin, "1 Corinthians 11:2-16: An Interpretation," in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on his 60th Birthday*, eds. W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 233.

¹²O'Connor, "1 Corinthians 11:2-16 Once Again," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988), 268; later republished in O'Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians* (London: Oxford, 2009), 161.

¹³Alan Padgett, "Paul on Women in the Church; The Contradictions of Coiffure in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 20 (1984), 70.

¹⁴Fee, 496; however, he examines this view later, and finds an "Achilles' heel" in the sentence, since it seems to argue against everything Paul has discussed thus far, 529.

¹⁵Padgett, "The Significance of 'Anti' in 1 Corinthians 11:15," *Tyndale Bulletin* 45/1 (1994), 185.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 186.

meaning of these sentences is surely different. But the basic point is the same. The same thing can be said of our different interpretations (of *anti—dh*)...These sentences mean different things, but they make the same basic point.¹⁷

Evaluation of the Textual Evidence. The position that hair is the head covering under consideration in the passage is attractive. O'Connor suggests that verse 14 furnishes "one clear hint, viz., *ean koma*."¹⁸ He goes on to make the case that long hair on Greek and Roman men was associated with homosexuality—thus, the explanation of how a man would dishonor his head.¹⁹ Hurley speculated that the man was prophesying "with his hair up as a woman's,"²⁰ which is similar to the view of O'Connor. However, this is difficult to reconcile with scripture. Paul stayed in Corinth eighteen months, according to Acts 18:11. In Acts 18:18, Luke writes, "After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow." If Paul was so concerned about Greco-Roman hairstyles, why did he allow his hair to grow long—in opposition to what he would write to the Corinthians later, who could have undoubtedly remembered the incident?

Additionally, Padgett suggests that verse ten indicates that "women ought to have the freedom, right or power to do what they wish with their heads. In the context...it would mean that women ought to have the right to choose whatever hairstyle they wish."²¹ With this interpretation, *exousian* is understood as giving freedom of choice instead of a symbol of

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸O'Connor, "Sex and Logic," 484.

¹⁹Ibid., 483-87.

²⁰James 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 Journal* 35:2 (Winter 1973), 202.

²¹Padgett, "Paul on Women," 72.

authority on the head. While Fee expresses misgivings over this option,²² he nevertheless indicates that such an understanding of *exousian* “seems to be the best of the possibilities.”²³ He concludes resignedly, “but what that means in this context remains a mystery.”²⁴

On the other hand, the evidence seems to indicate that an artificial hair covering is what Paul was discussing. The lack of the term *kalumma* in verse four does not necessarily indicate that no artificial hair covering is involved. A number of examples from Plutarch concerning head coverings shed some light; whether they discuss head coverings or not, one cannot discern a recognizable pattern.²⁵ The term *kalumma* is not present in many of these examples. Other sources, while not mentioning an artificial head covering, still explicitly state that the head is covered.²⁶

Evidence from Contemporary Sources. A number of sources indicate that *kata* with the genitive can refer to an artificial head covering. Esther 6:12 states, “But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered;” the LXX uses the phrase *kata kephales*.²⁷ Plutarch similarly uses the phrase *kata kephales*.²⁸ Various examples from contemporary Greek literature also indicate that *kata kephales* can include the idea of an artificial head covering.²⁹

²²“The problem with that, of course, is that it sounds so contradictory to the point of the argument.” Fee, 520.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., 521; the meaning of *exousian* will be addressed below.

²⁵Plutarch, *Aetia Romana et Graeca* 267C; *Caesar* 739C-D; *Brutus* 991F; *Cicero* 885C.

²⁶Livy, *ab Urbe Condita* 1.18.7. Livy, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961) vol. 1, 64, 66; *ab Urbe Condita* 10.7.9-10, vol. 4, 383, 85; Naphthali Lewis & Meyer Reinhold, *Roman Civilization. Sourcebook II: The Empire* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1966), 557; Lucretius, *de Rerum Natura* 5.1198-1200. *Lucretius de Rerum Natura*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1982), 424.

²⁷LXX, E-Sword version 9.0.3 (2009), personal computer.

²⁸Plutarch, *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* 200F; *Vitae decem oratorum* 842B; *Pyrrhus* 399B; *Pompeius* 640C.

²⁹Flavius Josephus, *De bello Judaico libri vii* 2.48; *Antiquitates Judaicae* 1.50, 5.252, 13.117.

In one other example from Plutarch, he speaks of Scipio the Younger as “having the toga down the head; the phrase *kata kephales echon* is identical to the wording of 1 Cor. 11:4.³⁰ In this case, the *himation* is what is “down the head,” indicating that it was pulled up and over the head for a covering. Normally a part of the robe or tunic, it could also be separate. Eventually, the Jews adopted the separate garment as their *tallith*, or prayer shawl, though there is no evidence as yet that indicates the Jews of the first century had such a practice.³¹

Contemporary Statuary and Portraiture Evidence.

One mistake that some have made is in interpreting contemporary data from Corinth through “Greek eyes” instead of “Roman eyes.” Gill illustrates this:

Paul's teaching on the use of law courts, for example, needs to be understood against the background of litigation against the social élites of the Roman world. If we are to understand the background or cultural context of these letters we need to read them against the backdrop of a Roman colony, not a Greek city. Institutions, legal procedures, social customs, architecture, public images and to some extent language owed more to Rome than to the Greek world.³²

Padgett is typical of those who make the mistake of interpreting 1 Cor. 11 through a Greek lens; he writes that verses 4-7 “requires women to bow to Greek cultural norms with respect to coiffure;”³³ he goes on to describe “the typical Greek fashion;”³⁴ “Greek men during this period wore their hair short;”³⁵ “The Jews at the Corinthian church, now thoroughly Hellenized, wear their hair in the Greek style in church...”³⁶

³⁰Plutarch, *Moralia* 200F.

³¹Fee, 507.

³²David W. J. Gill, “The Importance of Roman Portraiture for Head-Coverings in 1 Corinthians,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 41/2 (1990), 245.

³³Padgett, “Paul on Women,” 69.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 70.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 71.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 77.

There are those, however, who despair of ever seeing a recognizable pattern from archaeological data. Fee writes, “There is almost no evidence (paintings, reliefs, statuary, etc.) that men in any of the cultures (Greek, Roman, Jew) covered their heads.”³⁷ Having made that eye-opening statement, he goes on to conclude, “In the final analysis, however, we simply have to admit that we do not know. In any case, it was hypothetical, whatever it was.”³⁸ One is perplexed as to why Fee made such an assertion. Oster responded, “It is a pity that Prof. Gordon Fee has dismissed the possibility of a Roman context to 1 Cor. 11.4.”³⁹

Thompson attempts to accurately portray the styles of head coverings worn in Corinth by men and women during the time of Paul’s stay: “Discussions of this passage have seldom paid much attention to relevant archaeological evidence. Such evidence, however, can be very helpful in clarifying the historical context in which Paul and his congregation lived.”⁴⁰ The evidence she examines, taken from “the museum of the Corinth excavations,” concentrate on portraiture from both before and after Paul’s stay—specifically, “marble statues, miniature clay statuettes, and coins.”⁴¹ Thompson justifies her choice of Greco-Roman artifacts in connection with the church at Corinth: “Both before and after the passage in question Paul reminds his Corinthian audience that they were formerly pagan...In addition, the objects presented here, or similar ones, would have been very familiar to the Christians at Corinth.”⁴²

Evidence for Men. Among the evidence presented is a statue of Augustus making a sacrifice; it was displayed in the Julian Basilica in Corinth. Augustus is portrayed with his toga worn over

³⁷Fee, 507.

³⁸Ibid., 508.

³⁹Richard Oster, “When Men Wore Veils To Worship: The Historical Context of 1 Cor. 11.4,” *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988), 505.

⁴⁰Cynthia L. Thompson, “Hairstyles, Head-Coverings, and St. Paul: Portraits from Roman Corinth,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 51 (1988), 99.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., 100.

his head “as it was characteristically in a Roman religious sacrifice.”⁴³ Thompson goes on to explain the significance of this portrayal: “The religious symbolism of Augustus' covered head would have been unmistakable and quite appropriate, since Augustus had become pontifex maximus, the chief priest of Rome, in 13 B.C.E.”⁴⁴ Two other items depict Nero; in one, a bronze coin shows him with his hair “combed forward in locks that form a fringe around his face. A crown of paired laurel leaves runs from the back of and over the head.”⁴⁵ A statue portrays Nero similar to Augustus, in that the toga is also pulled over the back of his head.

These depictions corroborate the findings of Oster in this regard. “The Roman psyche had a special interest, if not fixation, with proper apparel, proper for both secular and sacred occasions.”⁴⁶ This made Romans distinctive. “In religious matters, both Greeks and Romans acknowledged that there was a ‘Greek way’ (*ritus Graecus*) and there was a ‘Roman way’ (*ritus Romanus*) to worship.”⁴⁷ After examining the variety of meanings for the Latin word *caput*, and listing certain Roman sacerdotal officials’ practice of keeping their heads covered, Oster correctly states:

...There was a distinctly different apparel worn by others while performing priestly functions. This garment was used in private as well as in public devotional acts such as prayer, sacrifice and prophecy and was typically referred to by the phrase *capite velato* (Oster then describes the toga being pulled over the head and forward—dh)...It is this widely disseminated devotional gesture...used by both permanent Roman clergy and by officiating laymen, that provides the matrix of the devotional apparel mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11.4.⁴⁸

Even though the practice of men covering their heads was in connection with idolatry, Gill observes, “This passage has probably nothing to do with shunning the worship of idols

⁴³Ibid., 101.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., 103.

⁴⁶Oster, “When Men Wore Veils,” 493.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Oster, 496.

(10:14). Paul had already dealt with food offered to idols and keeping a distance from Pagan cult.”⁴⁹ Gill postulates that the head-covering on men has more to do with social division: “If they continued to wear the toga over their heads it would indicate that there was continuing inequality in the church.”⁵⁰ While this may be true, Gill seems all too quick to discount the possibility that Paul rejects the head covering on men at least in part because of the practice’s connection with paganism. Indeed, the very reason Gill gives is a reason why this should be considered. It fits the overall context, and would be immediately apparent to the Corinthians—who, one must remember, lived in a Roman colony.

Evidence for Women. Thompson presents several pieces of evidence. The overwhelming majority of them depict women with hair wrapped, coiled, and braided; in one clay figurine, “On both sides are tiers of four braids extending in an arc around the face toward the ears.”⁵¹ This style, or something akin to it, is repeated in several variations among all of the portraiture Thompson presents. To be sure, on occasion women did wear a devotional head covering; Juvenal writes of a Roman noble woman, “There she stood before the altar, thinking it no shame to veil her head on behalf of a harper; she repeated, in due form, all the words prescribed to her; her cheek blanched when the lamb was opened.”⁵²

That being said, most of what has been unearthed at Corinth shows women having uncovered heads. “This indicates that the lack of a head covering was socially acceptable in

⁴⁹Gill, “The Importance,” 251.

⁵⁰Gill, 250.

⁵¹Thompson, 110.

⁵²Juvenal, 6.390-92. *Juvenal and Persius*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 115.

Paul's day."⁵³ To this, Thompson agrees.⁵⁴ Gill says that the women in view in 1 Corinthians 11 were wives, as does Winter,⁵⁵ but the context does not necessarily demand such an interpretation. Oster falls disappointingly short when discussing the women of 1 Corinthians 11; he asserts, "Many, if not all, of the Roman women in the Corinthian assembly would have been wearing head coverings at the time of Paul's writing."⁵⁶ This seems to be at odds with the entire context of the chapter, since Paul gives reasons why women ought to cover their heads.⁵⁷

Evaluation of the Evidence. It is evident that there was a religious significance attached to head coverings worn by both male and female worship leaders in Rome. Such significance would have been apparent to the Corinthians, and Paul definitely alludes to it in connection with male head covering. Less evident from 1 Cor. 11 is the connection of the practice with idolatry, though given what Paul wrote in chapters eight and ten, it must not be discounted.

That being said, women could be seen in public bareheaded without stigma. A wide variety of female hairstyles abound in statuary and numismatic evidence.⁵⁸ One must be careful not to overstate the social significance of women uncovering their heads, understood in a Roman context. A separate issue is whether Paul connected it with a rebellious spirit. Nevertheless, the

⁵³Linda L. Belleville, "Kephale and the Issue of Head Covering in 1 Cor. 11:2-16," in *Paul and the Corinthians: Studies on a Community in Conflict: Essays in Honour of Margaret Thrall*, ed. Trevor J. Burke & J. Keith Elliott (Boston: Brill, 2003), 219.

⁵⁴Thompson, 112.

⁵⁵Gill, 254-56; Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 77-96.

⁵⁶Oster, 503.

⁵⁷ A rather bizarre twist concerning women's covering is put forth by Martin, who contends that *peribolaion* in verse 15 should be understood as "testicle" ("Paul's Argument," 83). Though he attempts to show from ancient sources that it could be interpreted thus, the concept does not fit the context of 1 Corinthians 11—to say the least. Martin tries to connect his argument with the "angels" of verse 10 (see below), but it seems that, because of the rather detailed nature of his descriptions, there may be other reasons why he came out with his position.

⁵⁸Belleville, "Kephale," 217-20, Gill, 251-56; Thompson, 107-12; see also Laura Breglia, *Roman Imperial Coins: Their Art & Technique* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), 46-47, 54-55, 62-65.

covering—at least in connection with men—seems to have been similar to that summarized by the Latin phrase *capite velato*. However, given what Paul says in 11:10, another angle must be examined in connection with women.

How is Paul’s Statement in verse 10 to be Interpreted?

The Meaning of exousia. Verse ten states that the woman “*exousian echein epi tes kephales*,” or “ought to have authority on her head.” What does *exousian* mean, and how should one render *epi* in connection with it? There are four options available:⁵⁹

- (1) A passive meaning of *exousia* is given, along with *epi* being rendered “over.” In this meaning, someone else has authority “over” her, symbolized by the covering.
- (2) Some interpret *exousia* as the covering, and *epi* as “on.”
- (3) Others render *exousia* in the sense of “as a means of exercising authority.” By this they mean that the woman now has the freedom to pray and prophesy with men.
- (4) Still others interpret *exousia* as “freedom to choose,” and *epi* as “over.” In this, she has the freedom to do as she wishes with her head.⁶⁰

Evaluation. Option (1) should be rejected, given the structure of the sentence itself. Roberts states, “No exact parallels of this objective interpretation of the metonymy seems to have been found.”⁶¹ To this, Fee is in agreement: “There is no known evidence either that *exousia* is ever taken in this passive sense or that the idiom ‘to have authority over’ ever refers to an external authority different from the subject of the sentence.”⁶² Option (2) also has a fatal flaw. Why would Paul have chosen *exousia* as the word for “covering,” when several much clearer words could have been used? Roberts cites several attempts to render it thus, and finds them wanting.⁶³ Fee also points out that the word *peribolaion* is used in the context to mean what *exousia*

⁵⁹Fee lists four options, while Roberts lists three; Fee includes an option, as will be seen, from a feminist perspective.

⁶⁰Fee, 519-20; Roberts, 193-95.

⁶¹Roberts, 193.

⁶²Fee, 519.

⁶³Roberts, 195.

supposedly indicates.⁶⁴ Option (3) must be rejected, given what Paul has already stated in verse three—as well as what he will argue in chapter 14. Fee nevertheless finds this option as an attractive solution. However, he admits, “one must finally admit that it is not adequately supported in the text.”⁶⁵ Option (4) better fits the context of the passage, as well as Paul’s usage of the word earlier in the book. Roberts points out, “This meaning agrees with the other Biblical uses of *echein exousian*, which are all subjective”⁶⁶ Indeed, in the five occurrences of *exein exousian epi* (Lk. 19:11; Rev. 11:6, 14:18, 16:9, 20:6) this is what it means; it is analogous with Mark 10:1, Rom. 9:21 and 1 Cor. 7:37. Padgett adds:

For example: at John 10.18 *exousian echo* means that Jesus possesses the power or right to take up or to lay down his life; at Acts 9.14, *exei exousian* means that Saul possesses the authority or right to jail the Christians. When this phrase is followed by the preposition *epe* it means: possessing the authority or ability to do something with, or act in some way, upon the object of the preposition.⁶⁷

“Because of the angels.” Stuck at the end of verse ten is the phrase *dia tous aggelous*, “because of the angels.” Roberts admits, “This is one of the most difficult verses.”⁶⁸ Black states that the verse “presents the most difficult interpretive problems of all.”⁶⁹ The assessment of Moore is appropriate; “Nearly everyone agrees that this verse is somewhat perplexing.”⁷⁰ Paul’s statement is admittedly “cryptic.”⁷¹ Paul does not elaborate, and all sorts of conclusions have been drawn; however, it is most likely that the phrase was known in Corinth.⁷²

⁶⁴Fee, 520n.

⁶⁵Ibid., 520.

⁶⁶Roberts, 194.

⁶⁷Padgett, 71.

⁶⁸Roberts, 192.

⁶⁹Black, “1 Cor. 11:2-16,” 208.

⁷⁰Kevin L. Moore, *We Have No Such Custom: A Critical Analysis of 1 Corinthians 11.2-16* (Wanganui, New Zealand: Kevin L. Moore, 1998), 56.

⁷¹Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction Through Paul’s Rhetoric* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990), 121.

⁷²Ibid., 123.

Some have postulated that the “angels” in mind are spirit beings—whether bad angels or good angels, and that the head covering keeps them from lusting after women. In response, Roberts says that the meaning of the phrase “is to be referred to this context and not to...fanciful theories.”⁷³ The conventional understanding is that these are indeed spirit beings in heaven. Two possibilities as to the meaning of the phrase in this connection have been offered, both from the context of 1 Corinthians. In 4:9, Paul states, “we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.” It is thus affirmed that either the angels in 11:10 are (a) guardian angels who watch over the natural order⁷⁴ or (b) those who give assistance in public worship.⁷⁵ The second option is seen in connection with 6:3: “Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!” It is then suggested that women should exercise authority over their heads in trivial matters—given the fact that someday they will participate in judging angels.⁷⁶ Fee suggests an additional possibility concerning heavenly beings, related to the position of the women in their own mind. In light of 13:1, the women may have thought that they “were speaking the language of the angels.”⁷⁷ Consequently, the women should exercise their freedom by continuing to be covered.

⁷³Roberts, 193. A prime example of what Roberts speaks is that of T. Martin; he again goes into excruciating detail concerning the workings of the male reproductive system, and makes a very strange claim: “Being male, angels are susceptible to sexual excitement by feminine hair.” Martin, “Veiled Exhortations Regarding the Veil,” in *Rhetoric, Ethic, and Moral Persuasion in Biblical Discourse*, ed. Thomas H. Olbricht and Anders Eriksson (New York: T & T Clark International, 2005), 269-70. Aside from the fact that nowhere in Scripture is there evidence that angels are sexual beings, Jesus contradicts this bizarre position when he replies to the Sadducees concerning the nature of resurrected souls: “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mt. 22:30). One can only speculate as to why Martin has come out with his view.

⁷⁴Moore, *We Have*, 65. The modern concept of “guardian angels” finds no merit in Scripture.

⁷⁵Fee, 521; “It is difficult to imagine how the angels themselves are affected.”

⁷⁶Moore, 65.

⁷⁷Fee, 522.

It must be admitted that each of these options is less than satisfying. How could the congregation at Corinth have drawn these understandings, given the language that Paul uses? To be sure, they would have understood Paul (or he would have used different words); yet, it is difficult to see the connection. There is another position which stands opposite of the conventional understanding of *aggelous* in the passage, yet it is not new. Lightfoot held that Paul refers to human messengers.⁷⁸ There is precedent for this in the NT (Mt. 11:10; Lk. 7:24; 9:52; Jas. 2:25, possibly Rev. 2-3); additionally, Josephus uses the word in this way.⁷⁹ O'Connor suggests, "In line with 1 Cor. 10:32 and 14:23, Paul would be concerned that practices at Corinth should not shock envoys from other churches."⁸⁰ To this Padgett agrees.⁸¹ Winter suggests two other possibilities: first, that the messengers were those who were sent to spy out Christian gatherings in order to see if the women were inappropriately dressed, according to Roman tradition; second, that these messengers were sent to find out if such gatherings were political, and thus a threat.⁸² However, it seems more in line with the text to envision the messengers as simply visitors who could possibly take offense, either way, to the practice of the women at Corinth.

The main objection to this view is articulated by Fee, who says: "One is hard pressed to find linguistic support in Paul for such a view. Moreover, it overlooks the significance of angels

⁷⁸J. B. Lightfoot, *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae* (4 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University, 1859), 4. 238.

⁷⁹*Life* 17 §89; the edition used is *Josephus. The Life. Against Apion* (LCL; 9 vols.; ed. H. Thackeray; London: Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1926) 1. 35.

⁸⁰O'Connor, "1 Corinthians 11:2-16," 272.

⁸¹Padgett, "Paul on Women," 81-82. Padgett also advances the view that these messengers were female, such as Phoebe or Priscilla; while they were co-workers with Paul, there is no indication in the context that they would be sent in such a manner. Additionally, Padgett puts forth the idea that Phoebe was a "deacon" in the church, and that she and Priscilla were "female church leaders." One searches in vain for further explanation of what Padgett means by these statements.

⁸²Winter, *Roman Wives*, 90-91.

in the Corinthians' own theology.”⁸³ Fitzmyer is even more dismissive—he contends that *aggelos* “is never used thus by Paul.”⁸⁴ To this O'Connor replies, “Meaning is determined by context and, if the assumption that the reference is to heavenly beings has yielded no satisfactory interpretation, then the only possible alternative meaning has a strong claim.”⁸⁵ As to the lack of a similar reference elsewhere by Paul, O'Connor adds, “Moreover, in the one instance of Paul's use of *aggelos* where the meaning might be ambiguous, he introduces a qualification, ‘if a messenger from heaven should evangelize you’ (Gal. 1:8). At the very least this indicates that Paul was fully aware that *aggelos* could mean a human messenger.”⁸⁶

Evaluation. Given the options available, the possibility that these messengers were human fits the context better—if one understands *exousia* to indicate the woman's freedom over her head. If this is the case, then she would be able to not give offense to those who would visit—both from the city itself and from other congregations. This interpretation is not completely satisfactory, given the fact that Paul does not elaborate further; nevertheless, it should not be perfunctorily dismissed as per Fitzmyer.

Conclusion.

The congregation at Corinth had adopted the practice of the head covering, and Paul recognizes it for what it is—a custom. His language throughout the passage (“ought, “should”) does not suggest apostolic command. In commenting on 11:16, Hutson says, “Paul recognizes that his suggestions may not be agreeable to everyone, so he says the issue is not worth fighting

⁸³Fee, 521n.

⁸⁴J. A. Fitzmyer, “A Feature of Qumran Angelology and the Angels of 1 Cor. 11:10,” in *Paul and Qumran*, ed. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor (London: Chapman, 1968), 38.

⁸⁵O'Connor, “1 Corinthians 11:2-16,” 271n.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 271-72n.

over.”⁸⁷ He bases this on the wording of the verse: “we have so such custom, neither the churches of God.” The rendering in the NIV (as well as the RSV and NAS), “no other practice,” cannot be justified from the Greek text.⁸⁸ Hutson concludes, “Each local community should develop its own customs about worship attire, and members should respect one another’s cultural differences.”⁸⁹

From the available evidence—from both the text and elsewhere—it is apparent that the head covering Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is artificial. It likely was the hooded part of the robe, which was used by both men and women who led Roman liturgical practices. The evidence also indicates that there was not necessarily a stigma associated with women being bareheaded; indeed, women could wear a wide variety of hairstyles in public.

⁸⁷Christopher R. Hutson, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Transforming Word*, ed. by Mark W. Hamilton (Abilene: ACU Press, 2009), 928.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid.

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