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Setting the Scene –II

- A Review of Some Alternative Views



A woman wearing a Roman “palla”
from a painting by J. W. Godward
(1861-1922)

In this chapter, I wish to discuss seven alternative views regarding the interpretation of 1 Cor. 11:2-16 to that proposed in the present book. Four of these relate to the traditional view of the passage (with which the author is nevertheless broadly in agreement) and three to some of the more recent interpretations. Before giving these however, I would like to offer a few reflections on underlying reasons for this disagreement.

Why is There So Much Disagreement About this Passage?

Why is there so much disagreement about this passage? The first thing to note is that this widespread disagreement is a recent, primarily Western, phenomenon: the traditional view that women should wear headcoverings in church as well as at other times is actually a sort of “expanded version” of the biblical argument in 1 Cor. 2:11-16—the latter being restricted to women *praying or prophesying* in church. This wider view has basically been unchallenged throughout church history until the 20th Century.

Since then alternative views have been put forward. How have these alternative views come about?

Well, some of it, I suggest, results from reading with a conscious or unconscious prior desire for a particular “outcome”. In recent times, this prior desire often takes the form of a hope that the passage will not require the wearing of a headcovering by women today perhaps because it is held to symbolise “submission” or because it jars uncomfortably with current clothing norms, and it would require considerable courage for a woman to “swim against the tide” by wearing such a headcovering - an important factor, even when she is surrounded by hopefully kind and sympathetic fellow believers. On the other side of the argument, it is likely that the desire *for* women to submit has no doubt on occasion driven the exegesis in the *opposite* direction! (I cannot disguise that I often have a secret “preferred outcome” in my own theological assessments too, though I plead *mea non culpa* in the present instance!) However, there seems to me to be much more variability than can be accounted for by these sorts of considerations alone.

My suggestion is that there are two related reasons for the additional variability. The first of these is that the passage is, in fact, not straightforward - far from it! - and it requires careful thought and reflection for some of Paul’s points, which are often implied rather than explicitly stated, to be appreciated. It is perhaps impossible to avoid making some prior assumptions in order to make sense of the passage, and these are a further source of variability in interpretation.

The second is that almost all expositors, whether traditional or “progressive” have, in my humble opinion, failed adequately to avail themselves of the help provided by the very careful way in which Paul has structured the passage—a structure which, if better appreciated, would help in understanding what Paul is saying: the “how” of the structure is closely related to the “what” of the meaning! As a result, I felt that expositors often conflated, rather than keeping separate, different parts of Paul’s reasoning. Both the tendency to “mis-read” Paul and to see him as arguing for some of things beyond his rather limited remit in the passage were, in my view, largely a consequence of this lack of attention to the precise and well-structured nature of Paul’s arguments.

Seven Alternative Views Regarding the Passage

First, here are four “traditionalist” interpretations:

“And if it [the long hair] be given her for a covering,” [v. 15b] say you, “wherefore need she add another covering [i.e. a veil]?” That not nature only, but also her own will may have part in her acknowledgment of subjection. For that thou oughtest to be covered nature herself by anticipation enacted a law. Add now, I pray, thine own part also, that thou mayest not seem to subvert the very laws of nature; a proof of most insolent rashness, to buffet not only with us, but with nature also.”

The final quotation below (but with my underlining) brings the correlation of veiling and having long hair together both in presence and absence:

“Having taken then what was confessedly shameful, and having said, “but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven,” he states in what follows his own conclusion, saying, “let her be covered.” And he said not, “let her have long hair,” but, “let her be covered,” ordaining both these to be one, and establishing them both ways, from what was customary and from their contraries: in that he both affirms the covering and the hair to be one, and also that she again who is shaven is the same with her whose head is bare. “For it is one and the same thing,” saith he, “as if she were shaven.”

In both of these quotations, hair and veil are closely correlated both in presence and in absence: in colloquial language we could say they “sink or swim” together.

Earlier, I have tried to show that this is a misunderstanding of the passage with regard to the second of these proposed analogies since a) the display of glory is a wrong form of behaviour for a woman in public (and so therefore cannot correspond to “fittingness” with respect to prayer), and also b) that the notions of glory and covering are actually antithetical to each other. However, there are other ways in which I believe both analogies are wrong, and hope to demonstrate this below.

1) Lack of a veil when praying/prophesying produces shame (v. 5) and lack of hair (v. 6) also produces shame, so it is claimed that hair and veil, (or in this case, lack of veil and lack of hair!) are working together “in tandem”. One problem with this claim is that whilst Paul indeed teaches that the lack of a veil when a woman is praying/prophesying *necessarily* produces shame (regardless of the condition of the hair!) it is not true that being shaved or shorn is *necessarily* a cause of shame—so the two situations do not work together in tandem!

Looking again at verse 6, it is clear that being shorn or shaved is not *in-*

trinsically a cause of shame: it only becomes a cause of shame if the woman is also simultaneously unveiled. If the woman is veiled, then being shorn or shaved is not a cause of shame since the cause of shame is concealed. Honour and shame are primarily “social” concepts. It may well be that a woman who has been shorn or shaved is not happy about this, but, whilst veiled, she is not experiencing shame in this social sense. I agree that shame can be, particularly in the “individualistic” West, a purely individual feeling, unrelated to other people’s perception of oneself. For example, if I am ashamed of my appearance, I might still have this feeling of shame, or something akin to it, even if I were alone on a desert island. The reasons for this are complicated, but I do not think that that is included in what Paul has in mind here, since he assumes in v. 6 that veiling, (which means that no-one can see the otherwise “exposed” head) will solve the problem for the woman—otherwise why does he suggest veiling?!

Anyway, the above shows that “hair” and “veil”, or rather the lack of them do not necessarily work together exactly in tandem.

2) The claim that lack of veil and lack of hair both produce shame was not quite accurate, as I have tried to show above. However, the claim was, nevertheless, that they both produced the same thing—namely shame.

When we come to look at the view that presence of a veil and the presence of hair work together in tandem, we have already seen that the woman’s long hair brings glory to her, but a veil conceals that glory, so hair and veil cannot be said to be working it tandem—rather the reverse!

As regards both being a covering (where we are here assuming the correctness of the “standard” translation of v. 15b), then indeed, the long hair and the veil do seem to be working together in tandem since they both cover up the woman. However, even here, the parallel is not exact since the long hair is a glorious covering, whereas the veil just prevents the woman who prays from being “unfitting”. If a woman is prevented from being “unfitting” in some respect, then, in principle, she could occupy any of a wide range of “positions” on the glory-shame axis all the way from neutral to glorious. However, since we are talking of a veil which conceals glory, it is probably safe to conclude that what is made available by veiling is to be “fitting” - strictly speaking—i.e. a “neutral” position on the honour-shame axis. This is a good place to be, but it doesn’t correspond all that closely to “glory”.

So, here again, veil and hair do not work exactly “in tandem” since long

hair produces glory, but the veil produces neutrality on the glory-shame axis.

All in all, I think we are on surer ground if we work with the (admittedly somewhat counter-intuitive!) view that Paul is comparing praying and prophesying behaviour with hair behaviour, rather than comparing veiling and hair behaviour.

2) *The Woman's Veil is a Symbol of Subjection to Male Authority?*

This has already been discussed in Section 5 of the previous chapter and is mentioned again here for completeness.

When this *a priori* assumption is made, it can obscure the correct understanding of the passage. An example of this I believe is found in the helpful book *Head Covering—A Forgotten Christian Practice for Modern Times* by Jeremy Gardiner. (Jeremy Gardiner is the founder of The Head Covering Movement.) Although the views in this book are basically followed in the present book, (and I'm very grateful to the Head Covering Movement, and to Jeremy in particular, for all their insight and work in this important area), I would like humbly to suggest that there *may* be an inconsistency in the view advocated in Jeremy Gardiner's book. (I may well have misunderstood Jeremy Gardiner at this point. If so, I hope he will graciously forgive me!)

On p. 30 of the book we read, "*The woman reflects the glory of man and her submission to the proper male authority in her life by praying and prophesying with her head covered*".

However, on p. 95, we read, "*So when a woman covers her head, she's symbolically concealing the glory of man so that only God's glory is on display*".

These two statements appear to me to be somewhat difficult to reconcile! Does the woman reflect the glory of man by wearing a headcovering or does she conceal it? I currently believe that the statement on p. 95 above is the correct one. I also believe that the contradiction, if it exists, is related to the *a priori* assumption made in the traditional interpretation that the woman's headcovering/veiling *in this passage* is a symbol of male authority. The passage never says this. (In fact there is no word for "symbol" in the Greek text of v. 10: this word is an interpolation provided by the translators of the verse.) Also v. 10 does not indicate that the authority in question is *male* authority—it simply speaks of authority. Please note, I'm not opposing male authority—it's a biblical concept after all!

3) The Passage Teaches that Women Should, Wherever Possible, Have Long Hair?

A view often associated with the “traditionalist” position is that Christian women should be encouraged, as an outworking of Christian obedience to Scripture, to have long hair wherever possible. In this view, long hair is usually set against the alternative of very short hair. (There is an alternative to this “all-or-nothing” assumption and that is to allow the possibility—indeed the reality! - that a woman may have medium length hair!)

Long (or, as some claim, beautified hair - the latter is thought to also be a possible meaning of the Greek word *kome* (please see the entries for *komao* and *kome* in BDAG p.557)) - on a woman is certainly attractive and glorious, as “nature” indeed teaches (1 Cor. 11:15). This is a glory however, which, according to my understanding of our passage, Paul, and the Corinthians who are expected to agree with Paul(!) assume should not be on display in public: it should be covered up for reasons of modesty. In the interpretation of the passage presented in this book, Paul uses this truth as a teaching aid, as a little parable, or as an analogy, for appropriate modest headcovering behaviour regarding the honour and glory when a woman is exercising the wonderful privilege of praying publicly to God in the meeting of the church—a glory which surely exceeds that of hair! The nature of the argument is technically an “*argumentum a minore ad maius*”. (It is also to be noted that, in passing, Paul is also teaching that since displaying the glory of the long hair itself is inappropriate, it should be veiled, when the woman who has long hair is praying in this public way.)

However, unlike with most versions of the traditional view, I do not think Paul is here specifically *supporting* such a hair length (or possibly hair style) for Christian women, rather he is noting a reality about it, and (as noted above) arguing, in passing, for the consequent need for it to be covered if worn in that way when a woman is praying to God. (Please note that in v. 15 Paul says “*if a woman wears her hair long . . .*” - he does not appear to be explicitly arguing for this course of action.) As an aside, I suggest that some female Christian slaves in Corinth may not in any case have been allowed the status of having long/coiffured hair (which might “compete” with the hairstyles of their mistresses!) and I think it unlikely that Paul would add to their discomfiture by now condemning them as less spiritual or less obedient than higher status women in the congregation because of their somewhat shorter length or less-styled hair. Indeed, in the rest of the chapter, Paul sees behaviour which accentuates status

differences and shames the “have nots” in the Corinthian congregation as extremely un-Christian (e.g. v. 22).

A proponent of a modified version of the view that Paul is here teaching the need for women, wherever possible, to have long hair is C. K. Barrett. He sees the value in a woman wearing the long hair supplied by nature is that it is “an outward sign that the woman is fulfilling her role in creation”. This may be true, but it can hardly be said to be something that Paul is teaching in this passage!

In order to arrive at this result, it is necessary for C. K. Barrett to re-define glory in v. 15b from its conventional meaning in v. 7. Thus, C. K. Barrett in his commentary says (p. 257) that, “*Glory* here [in v. 15b] is used in a sense different from but related to that of v. 7.”

C. K. Barrett’s explanation on p. 257 of his commentary as to how the meaning of glory in v.15b is related to the meaning in v.7 (the latter meaning excellently described on pp. 254-255 and owing much to Morna Hooker’s earlier analysis) is not clear, at least to me. On the one hand, glory in v. 7 is the glory of man inappropriately manifested (because the woman who prays or prophesies is representing the man—a representation that is focused on the woman’s physical head—in the presence of God and the congregation and so the head is to be concealed by veiling, whereas C. K. Barrett describes the glory in v. 15b of long hair in the following way,

*“. . . obediently to be what God intended them to be is the highest glory that human beings can achieve. To wear her hair long, in a womanly fashion, is an outward sign that a woman is fulfilling her role in creation. A further ground is given for this: **For her long hair has been given her to serve as . . . a covering**”.*

(There has been, I suggest, possibly been some exegetical *leger de main* exercised here! C. K. Barrett has defined glory in terms of obedience to God, but it is not at all clear that a woman having glorious long hair is an outward sign of such obedience! (What if a Christian woman is a slave and not allowed to have long hair?) However, such long hair—which, for women, in general grows naturally, does suggest a state of conformity with creation, and so could indeed act as an external sign that the woman is fulfilling her role in creation. All that is needed is to “join up the dots” and infer, without actually stating the case, that obedience to God and fulfilling one’s role in creation are one and the same. However, it is not clear to me that they really are one and the same—for example, marriage and child bearing are relativised in the New Covenant.

The more substantial point here is that C. K. Barrett (see p.257) sees the long hair as a sign of a certain type of glory connected with the woman's role, and part of the way the long hair works as that sign of glory is because the long hair is a **covering** (I'm referring here to the above quotation from C. K. Barrett.) C. K. Barrett goes on to say that, as a result of having been given, "in her hair, a primitive form of covering . . . she must follow the hint her naturally long hair supplies" [i. e. by veiling when praying to God]. (It is not clear however why "taking the hint" is required specifically at times of prayer).

It does seem to me then that C. K. Barrett sees that the nature of the glory under discussion is such that an appropriate outward sign of that glory is something (i.e. long hair) that covers the woman, and that "taking the hint" involves putting on a veil that will cover her even more. This is so much at odds with the conventional understanding of glory as something which requires manifestation, that the glory in v. 15b is approaching an "inversion" of the conventional meaning found in v. 7—or so it seems to me.

I think that C. K. Barrett has, very commendably, attempted to make sense of v. 15b as given (i.e. in the standard translations), and many of the insights he has provided are very good and helpful - for example, the insight that obedience to God is, (or results in), the highest glory for human beings. However, I think that the basic "problem" in terms of exegesis of this part of the passage (vs. 13-15) is the translation used! I think that glorious long (or coiffured) hair, which draws attention to a woman, is perhaps not a particularly apt outward sign of a "trans-valued" understanding of glory for which being covered and concealed is an apt outward sign! The problem is basically with the translation of v. 15b which requires that long hair can simultaneously be a glory and a covering: these are essentially opposite concepts!

4) *The Passage Teaches that Women Should Have Long Hair and Wear a Veil or (Other Headcovering) on All Public Occasions?*

I think that most expositors, whatever their views on veiling and other head coverings, would see that Paul does not in 1 Cor. 11:2-16 explicitly teach veiling on all public occasions, even if such behaviour (in particular for Christian women with glorious long or coiffured hair) can be inferred from the passage. One expositor who did understand the passage in this more comprehensive way was John Chrysostom, and his views on

this topic have been very influential in much of Christian history

His understanding was that, in effect, there was no difference, as regards hair and veiling behaviours, between the situation of praying/prophesying and the situation of “everyday life” (at least, in the public aspects of everyday life), and further that long hair was required for women in both situations and that veiling was required in both situations. Chrysostom seems to have understood that this was what Paul was teaching here. Here are two representative quotations from Chrysostom (both of which seem to me to adopt a fairly “creative” approach to hermeneutics, but I leave it to the reader to decide!) . . .

“Well then: the man he compels not to be always uncovered, but only when he prays. For every man, says he, praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. But the woman he commands to be at all times covered. Wherefore also having said, Every woman that prays or prophesies with her head unveiled, dishonors her head, he stayed not at this point only, but also proceeded to say, for it is one and the same thing as if she were shaven. But if to be shaven is always dishonorable, it is plain too that being uncovered is always a reproach.”

“And if it [i.e. long hair] be given her for a covering, say you, wherefore need she add another covering? That not nature only, but also her own will may have part in her acknowledgment of subjection. For that you ought to be covered nature herself by anticipation enacted a law. Add now, I pray, your own part also, that you may not seem to subvert the very laws of nature; a proof of most insolent rashness, to buffet not only with us, but with nature also.”

Now here are three (sometimes overlapping) “more recent” interpretations . . .

5) *Social Anthropology*: The Importance of Social Customs in Interpreting 1 Cor. 11:2-16?

The first of these is the now widely held view (which I believe nevertheless to be largely unsupported by the contents of the passage itself, with the possible exception of the teaching regarding “nature” in verses 13-15) that Paul’s teaching to the Corinthians cannot really be understood without detailed consideration of headcovering and hairstyle practices and cultural values current in 1st Century Corinth and the surrounding Mediterranean area, and that the conclusions to be drawn from the passage would therefore only really apply directly to the Corinthian church and to churches

embedded in similar cultures. This approach could (perhaps somewhat unfairly!) be described as a “social-science-at-the-expense-of-theology” approach. Examples of this approach would be the claims that Paul is teaching in this passage that i) Christian women in Corinth should avoid very short hairstyles because otherwise they will be assumed to be women of a disreputable lifestyle and ii) that the shame associated with the lack of women’s headcoverings in the church in Corinth was culturally conditioned - reflecting values and behaviours of the 1st Century Mediterranean world - rather than reflecting “theological truths operative when a woman prays or prophesies in church”. As a result of this “cultural relativist” approach, it is held that any application of Paul’s teaching to churches today does not automatically have “normative status”, and would “work” only by means of “relevant principles of application” such as “the establishing of equivalent contemporary cultural semiotic symbols”.

There is much to discuss about this whole line of arguing, including, somewhat incidentally, the fact that there is a more or less total lack of evidence that disreputable Corinthian women had shorn or shaved heads!) At any rate, the net result of this type of approach as regards headcoverings for women in modern Western churches is predictable: headcoverings are optional—even when the woman is praying or prophesying!

Here are some thoughts about why I think that the “case” for “the explanatory power of social customs in Corinth” has been overstated.

When I started studying 1 Cor. 11:2-16, I knew about the view that Paul’s teaching was “culturally circumscribed” and that this limitation might also hold for any modern application of that teaching. As I have been studying the passage I have provisionally come to the conclusion that this view is overstated, and offer some perspectives that have influenced this conclusion below.

i) The purpose of 1 Cor. 11:2-16 is to persuade the Corinthians that a woman should be veiled/covered when praying or prophesying. Paul nowhere in the passage directly refers to the head/hair covering social customs either in Corinth or in the wider Roman Empire. I believe that knowledge of these customs is important and provides valuable background information for understanding the New Testament, and we should be very grateful to the scholars who have studied this area. However, in the particular case of 1 Cor. 11:2-16, I believe that secular headcovering practices have only been used by Paul in an indirect way, and that that way does not at all affect the conclusions that Paul reaches.

ii) As noted in i) above, Paul's teaching concerns veiling behaviour when a woman is praying or prophesying in church, and this immediately sets the teaching at a step removed from the category of "appropriate headcovering behaviour in everyday life" for Christians, and two steps removed from corresponding secular behaviour! This view concerning the relative "isolation" of Paul's teaching in this passage from wider cultural considerations contrasts with the vigorous interaction with the surrounding culture which characterises much of Paul's teaching elsewhere in the NT.

Following on from this, but on a more general note, I realise that there are many topics where the arrival of Christianity in a culture creates all sorts of situations where the values of the culture are variously to be agreed with, accepted, accommodated to, adapted to, improved (Christianised) or opposed by Christians, and as with the case of "meat offered to idols", there is sometimes no one single prescribed "best practice". Furthermore, as the role of Christianity within a society develops and increases, the appropriate ways of interacting with the culture change—most markedly when Christianity *becomes* the prevalent culture. It is a wonderful feature of Paul's teaching that it allows for the valuing and endorsing of cultural behaviours if they are already "pointing in the right direction" (e.g. the good "shame" associated with modest dress in women) whilst at the same time resolutely opposing wrong behaviours such as idolatry. The many "worked examples" of this in the New Testament thus provide patterns and principles for how Christianity should interact with different cultures as Christianity spreads across the world. New Testament Christianity thus, in this respect too, represents the Age of the Spirit, not of Law: the latter, both with regard to its much more rigid prescriptions and in respect too of its relative inability to see the good things and the potential in other cultures is unsuited to the Age of the Spirit.

iii) As noted in i) above, Paul refers in this passage primarily to headcovering behaviour in the church rather than directly to headcovering behaviour in the wider culture. Thus, with his extreme, amusing and ironical command (which will be discussed later!) "let her be sheared!" (v. 6), the woman referred to is, or could be, a member of the church. Likewise, when Paul says, "Judge ye among yourselves . ." in v. 13, he means that the church is the court of appeal, and that it, not the wider culture, provides the standards by which behaviour should be assessed. Also, even when Paul appeals to "nature" (Greek: *physis*) - which could certainly include the customs of the wider culture, or cultures in which the Corinthian church was located—Paul is emphatic in asking, "Does not nature teach you that . . .", rather than the more general, "Does not nature teach that . . .". "Physis" is

discussed further later in this chapter.

iv) Paul appeals to the fixed practice of all the churches of God (v. 16)—a clearly “trans-cultural” consideration—and one which must surely take into account the Jewish churches in Judea and Palestine generally which would have had very “traditional” hair- and head-covering values for women!

v) Nevertheless, it seems true that the head- and hair-covering practices in everyday life upon which Paul and the Corinthians agree, (and those which Paul actively enjoins in 1 Timothy 2:9-10) are broadly in line with “best practice” (improved upon where necessary!) in the secular culture, in particular Roman culture, and directly opposite to the scandalous behaviours in both female dress and morals, which were gradually spreading across the Empire from Rome itself. This latter tendency, particularly amongst high-class Roman wives (the so-called “New Women” of more recent books and articles) is helpfully described in Bruce Winter’s book, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows—The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities*, Eerdmans, 2003, and also in Judith Lynn Sebesta, *Women’s Costume and Feminine Civic Morality in Augustan Rome*, *Gender and History* Vol. 9 No. 3, November 1997, pp. 529-541.

Broadly, “best practice” in the Roman world would include the covering of the head when in public by Roman wives (*matrona*). (Plutarch famously uses the word “often” (rather than “always”!) in connection with this practice however.) Head covering does not seem to have been indicated for other classes of women e.g. lower class, slaves and unmarried: the veil does seem to have been particularly associated with marriage in the Roman world, and unmarried women would perhaps, in this strict Roman context, have been frowned upon for wearing a veil (though it is to be noted that it is the long pleated dress known as the *stole* rather than the *palla* (an outer garment which could be used to cover the head—please see the illustration at the start of this chapter) which is the definitive garment of the Roman wife.) The restriction to wives is not one that Paul sees as operating in connection with women praying and prophesying in church: married, unmarried, slave and free are all treated alike! (An example of the Gospel “levelling up” as regards the dignity of women!) Paul also teaches against men covering their heads in worship—in marked contrast to the Roman custom. These observations place limits on the “explanatory power” of Roman customs in connection with headcovering practices in the Corinthian church.

vi) The motive for the Roman practice of married women veiling in pub-

lic, mentioned in v) above, (to the extent that it was actually carried out) was primarily to indicate the woman's elevated married status, and the protection, both socially and legally, that this would afford, although modesty, prized in best practice in the Roman context, would also have been a reason. (This head-covering is often interpreted as an indication of the wife's submission to her husband's authority, though submission aspect of the marriage, may not have actually been the main connotation of the headcovering). In 1 Cor. 11:13 however, it is all women publicly praying in the church, not just wives, who should be veiled, and in v. 15, it is all women having long hair whose hair is a glory to them who should be veiled (according to my understanding of v. 15b) and the reason (presumably) is the intrinsic glory of the long hair itself: at any rate, Paul does not describe it as an indicator of status such as marriage.

vii) I also note that the population of the church would have included a considerable number of Jewish Christians—likely a minority, but nevertheless an influential minority. (For example, we read in Acts about the founding of the church as a result of Paul's initial synagogue preaching, and also about his "turning to the Gentiles", Acts 18:6). This "sub-population" of the Corinthian church would presumably have been particularly conservative as regards women's head- and hair-covering behaviour in everyday life—likely practising some of the modest behaviours of the Palestinian churches and Palestinian Jewish customs.

viii) Having said that however, the main point that I am suggesting in this section is that I do not think that this secular reality, which in any case in a city like Corinth would have been diverse, is part of Paul's argument in 1 Cor. 11:2-16. For example, although Bruce Winter devotes an entire chapter of his book to "the appearance (in both senses!) of unveiled wives in 1 Cor. 11:2-16", and provides in the course of his book, lots of interesting information about Roman history, legislation and customs, he does not at all deal with the concept of "glory" which features in Paul's actual explanations for why women in Corinth should be veiled when praying or prophesying.

ix) In ii) above, I suggested that Paul expects the Corinthian Christians to assess head- and hair-covering behaviour in everyday life from a Christian rather than a secular perspective, and that this reduces the significance of secular practices as influences on Paul's line of argument in our passage. Furthermore, according to my understanding of Paul's arguments, the two specific behaviours being considered (involving lack of hair and abundance of hair respectively as briefly described in the previous chapter) are actually only examples, analogues, parallels or parables for what Paul is actually "driving at" in this passage—namely the correct veiling behaviour, not in everyday life, but in church, and not in everyday activities, but whilst pray-

ing or prophesying before God. This further “distances” the secular practices in this area (which at best could have an indirect role in the “analogy” components of Paul’s arguments) from the main thrust of Paul’s teaching in our passage.

x) Paul’s “hair illustrations” are not about head- and hair-covering generally, but only deal with two “extreme” cases—the absence of hair and the abundance of hair. This further limits the significance of secular head- and hair-covering customs in Paul’s arguments, since many of these secular customs do not apply to these “extreme” cases.

As regards the first of these “extreme cases”, Paul describes the shame that accrues to a woman when her head has been shaved or shorn. We do not need to know about the head- and hair-covering customs in Corinth or Rome generally to appreciate the universal truth here, even if there were additional local cultural nuances to the significance of a woman being shaved or sheared!!

The second extreme situation concerns an abundance of hair or to the coiffuring of the hair (Paul refers to “*komaioing*” the hair). This abundance or careful attention would not have been the case for all women either in Corinth generally or in the church in particular, (or, even more particularly, for the “sub-set” of women publicly praying in the church). The Roman background as already noted applies particularly to Roman *matrona*, married women from the upper echelons of Roman society, who presumably would, in the main, have had long or coiffured hair, but Paul’s illustration concerns women either generally, or specifically women in the church, with long hair—not the same group in the church as the higher class married women in the church (although there would be overlap between these groups). This again limits the direct applicability of the secular situation to Paul’s reasoning.

xi) One word in the text that might support, at least in part, a “Corinthian social customs” interpretation of Paul’s teaching in the “second argument” of 1 Cor. 11:2-16 is actually the word translated as “nature” in v. 14. This is the Greek word *physis*. This word is discussed in Ch. 3, as well as extensively in the commentaries with a wide variety of different, sometimes overlapping, interpretations. One view is that it refers primarily to the social customs which the Corinthian Christians would have encountered in their social environment. Thus John Gill (1697-1771) says,

“Doth not even nature itself teach you, . . . By nature is either meant, the law and light of nature, reason in man, common sense, or rather custom,

which is second nature; and which, in this case, must be restrained [i.e. limited S.F.] to the Greeks and Jews; for though among the Grecians the men cut their hair, and did not suffer it to grow long, as also did the Jews, yet there were many nations who did not, even at that time, observe such a rule or custom; but as the Jews and Greeks were the persons chiefly, if not solely, known to the Corinthians, the apostle signifies, that the usages of these people might direct and inform them in this matter.”

I currently think that although Paul’s (nature’s) “teaching point” that long hair brings glory is valid for any woman who has long hair, the application of the teaching point—namely that a covering garment is therefore characteristically to be worn - is directed specifically to “you” i.e. to the Christian community in Corinth i.e. it refers to what was held to be the case within the Christian community in Corinth, and that “nature” here, in context, simply means “how things are amongst you” or “how things are when rightly understood from a Christian perspective”. Thus, as noted above, Paul sees “nature” as teaching them concerning “kome” hair on men and on women. If nature taught these things generally or to all people “universally”, Paul might simply have said, “Does not nature itself teach that . . .” but rather he says, “Does not nature itself teach you that . . .”: Paul is appealing to what they already believe or know to be the case. A more weighty reason however for limiting nature’s “remit” is the text of v. 13: Paul, in v. 13, emphasises that the Corinthians should judge *within or amongst* themselves. He says,

ἐν	ὑμῖν	αὐτοῖς	κρίνατε . . .
in or amongst	you	yourselves	judge . . .

It is the Corinthian church that is the appropriate “court” or forum where judgement can be made—not the world - a distinction that Paul has previously emphasised e.g. 1 Cor. 6:1-4.

Paul then goes on to ask whether it is proper or fitting for a woman to pray to God unveiled. Again, what is “fitting” or “appropriate” for praying to God is something that we assume can only be properly determined within a Christian context. That is an example of the bold claim of our Christian faith!

(Finally, I believe that verse 15, as well as v. 14, is all part of “what nature teaches the Corinthians”. This thus includes the “covering” (the *peribolaion*) described in the second half of v. 15. (The relationship between long hair, if worn, and the *peribolaion* is an important (and contested!) topic and is extensively discussed in this book, especially in the two chapters

which consider the likely correct translation of v. 15b). Thus, it seems that nature's teaching includes teaching on hair length and also on hair coverings.)

However, I don't think any of the basic conclusions in this book really depend on this particular view of "nature" suggested above since Paul in any case assumes that all the churches of God will see these matters in the same way as he is teaching here: they are thus universal practices within the churches albeit often coinciding with local "secular" customs. Presumably "all the churches of God" would include the church in Jerusalem and other Jewish or largely Jewish churches in which conservative habits regarding the requirement for women's headcoverings would have prevailed.

xii) In v. 16, Paul specifically claims that the views he is advocating are what is practised in all the churches of God (including Corinth). This relativises the determinative significance of local customs in any given church—for example Roman customs in the Roman colony of Corinth—at least in respect of the topics treated in 1 Cor. 11:2-16. The churches of God thus form a distinctive "sub-culture" in any society.

xiii) Paul's two arguments for veiling when praying and prophesying are specifically concerned with the covering up of glory: the woman is the glory of the man and the long hair is a glory for a woman. The first of these is part of the actual argument for veiling when a woman is praying or prophesying, and has no equivalent in the rationale for secular head/hair covering customs.

However, the second of these is Paul's "glory of long hair" illustration or analogue in "everyday life" for veiling when a woman is praying to God, and this analogue overlaps with the "modesty" aspect of the best practice in headcovering behaviour in Roman secular culture. Although the word glory is used in the long hair illustration, and not used in the secular context, the need for such glory to be covered up is sort of similar to the ideas behind two of the Greek words used in the Roman context, *sophrosune* ("moderation") and *kosmiotēs* ("decorum") as well as the Latin word, *pu-dicitia*. These would all be appropriate words to use when a Roman wife was using her head-covering, in addition to its other purposes, to conceal glorious long or coiffured hair. So, it is not simply a case of the Corinthian Christians endorsing Roman "best practice", they also endorse "best motive" too! (It is nevertheless also true however that "correlation does not imply causation"!)

I would like to conclude this section with a quotation from the opening words of Michael Marlowe's helpful article *Headcovering Customs of the Ancient World—an Illustrated Survey*, freely downloadable from: www.bible-researcher.com/headcoverings3.html

“I offer this survey of ancient headcovering practices in the hope that it will clear away some common misconceptions, and bring into sharper focus the customs which many biblical expositors have held to be so important for an understanding of the Apostle Paul's instruction to the Corinthians regarding headcoverings. Too often I find that the statements made by biblical expositors on this subject are inaccurate and simplistic. The more research I have done on the subject, the more I have come to see how problematic is the widely-accepted interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 which asserts that Paul is merely urging the saints in Corinth to conform to local and secular customs. In my opinion this idea raises more problems than it solves.

I conclude that Paul's explanations pertain to an established Christian custom, which may or may not have corresponded to any Jewish, Greek, or Roman custom of the time. Most "cultural background" treatments of this subject have failed to recognize the importance of the fact that in the first century the Church was itself a sub-culture, having its own traditions and customs”.

6) “Long Hair as Covering”?

A second recent strand of interpretation holds that Paul's passage is a bit of a “storm in a teacup”. In this interpretation, Paul is teaching that actually, the woman's *hair*, (possibly specifically *long* hair and possibly including a particular hairstyle), was, all along, the only headcovering required, but for some reason, Paul needs fifteen closely reasoned verses to tell us this! This approach has been discussed elsewhere in the present book

7) Markers of Gender Identity”?

Finally, a third “recent” category, which can actually be a more specific and focussed version of the first category (i.e. “social anthropology”), is the view that, underlying 1 Cor 11:2-16, is a deeply felt need by Paul to establish appropriate markers of gender identity, and that the need for clear differentiation between the sexes was the underlying purpose of his teaching on different hair lengths and/or headcovering practices for men and women. This view often stresses the need for these gender identity markers to be culturally appropriate (rather than “theologically” appropriate - though these are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories!), and hence this view as already noted is closely related to the first classification above.

I do not see Paul as having this concern with gender identity markers (with the possible exception of v.14—please see below), and I suggest that this is an example of eisegesis in which modern concerns are being read into the passage. I suggest that Paul’s injunctions were to ensure appropriate deportment for Christian women in worship before God and before the congregation specifically when praying or prophesying, and that the standard of appropriateness was what is proper deportment for women *as women* in contrast to what is *improper* deportment for women *as women*, not in contrast to *men’s* deportment. (There are, after all various ways in which women can fail to be properly attired *as women*, and whilst one of these ways is deliberately to “ape” the styles of men, there are plenty of other ways for a woman to be improperly attired). Paul never argues that a woman should be veiled when praying or prophesying because, if not veiled, she is looking like or behaving like a man, (even if that might conceivably have formed part of the original “problem” at Corinth which Paul is addressing) but because she is incorrectly attired relative to what is appropriate for a Christian woman when praying or prophesying!

Nevertheless, it is certainly true that in two places, Paul contrasts what is appropriate in dress and hairstyle for men and women and in one of these places Paul does seem concerned about “gender identity markers”, and that is in v. 14 where, he points out that nature teaches that a man’s long or coiffured hair is a source of dishonour, and this is followed by the contrasting case for women. It does seem to me a reasonable inference that the source of that dishonour for men likely has to do with the effeminacy associated with that hairstyle. Nevertheless, Paul seems confident that everyone at Corinth will agree that this hairstyle is unsuitable, and part of the purpose of introducing the *dishonour* of long/coiffured hair on men at this point seems to me, by a sort of “theological *chiaroscuro*”, to emphasise the contrasting *glory* when long/coiffured hair is worn by women—the latter glory pointing to the accepted practice of covering such hair in public—with the “teaching aim” as already noted of appropriate headcovering when a woman is praying in church.

In general, I think that neither Paul, nor the Corinthians *en masse* have concerns about “gender identity” or its “markers”. Rather, the proper distinguishing clothing and hairstyles of men and women form the broadly agreed upon backdrop for Paul’s theological arguments in our passage: they form part of the underlying assumptions, not the conclusions, to Paul’s discourse!

