

VEILS AND VOICES: RECEPTION-HISTORICAL TRAJECTORIES OF 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2–16

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1 Corinthians 11:2–16 is a bewildering passage. David Garland comments that “the complexity of 11:2–16 continues to vex modern interpreters, and its comments about women rile many modern readers.... The danger lurks that interpreters will try to make it say what they would like it to say.... To penetrate its meaning we need more cultural information. But which bits of cultural information apply to this situation?”¹

I intend to propose a reading with only a few modifications from the primary historical interpretations, while following the more recent consensus on application—Paul’s instructions are intertwined with 1st century concerns that must be principalized for the present. But my greater interest is with the concern that Garland raises. Is missing cultural information the key? If so, how would we recover it and settle with any confidence which bits are the relevant ones? And extending this hortatory passage to its proper end, how would we properly apply the text to today? I propose that reception history provides an important interpretive key and that there are reasons to principalize the text that are not dependent on reconstructing the original cultural context.²

¹ David E. Garland, 1 Corinthians, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 505.

² Elsewhere I have argued that whenever interpreters allow the original culture setting to materially reshape or redirects their readings, it raises damaging questions about the sufficiency, authority and perspicuity of Scripture. Truly, in how many cases can we establish the original cultural setting to the level of “preponderance of the evidence,” let alone “beyond reasonable doubt”? But to the degree that our understanding of original culture is uncertain and to the degree that these projections are critical for interpretation or control our interpretive conclusions, are we not left with an indeterminate text?

But this paper is an attempt to move forward from the problem of original culture upwards through the entire interpretive process. For not only original authors have a culture; so does every interpreter. With this, other problems arrive. While the original culture is mostly unknown, the interpreters’ culture can be better known but it is often hostile towards the ethical mandates of Scripture. Our problem is not only with establishing meaning, but the potentially harder question of allowing established meaning to find a place in our new cultural settings. What of the real possibility that the problem of our contemporary culture—our subjectivity—might be more disruptive for our hermeneutics than the problem of original culture?

A Proposed Reading

I understand the passage as follows:

1. Unlike many of his instructions across the book, Paul is not confronting a problematic issue in this passage. Based on Paul's opening commendations in v. 2 ("I am commending you"), what is already happening in Corinth seems to be functioning acceptably.³ This mutes some of the more fanciful reconstructions of the Corinthian situation, leading us to expect that the original cultural context is not a key to our understanding.
2. While the lexical questions are complex and far from settled, I suspect that the head covering Paul describes is additional to the hair.⁴ As we will see, one of the key arguments for this view is how early interpreters read the passage.
3. Moving slightly apart from some traditional interpreters, I understand the primary purpose of the command not as seeking a symbol that supports gender hierarchies, but the recognition that a woman's hair is a beautiful feature and in a worship context ought to be covered if it is distracting or alluring. The cautions in 1 Tim. 2:9–10; 1 Pet. 3:3–4 are an important support for this reading, as are the early interpretations in Tertullian and others.⁵

³ Notice also the reprise of "traditions" (v. 2) in v. 16 ("we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God") or much later in 14:33b. This positive commendation sharply contrasts with the next set of instructions where Paul's tone changes ("Ἐπαινῶ δὲ ὑμᾶς" in v. 2 with "Τοῦτο δὲ παραγγέλλων οὐκ ἐπαινῶ" in v. 17 and ἐπαινέσω ὑμᾶς; ἐν τούτῳ οὐκ ἐπαινῶ in v. 22) This also fits nicely with rhetorical analysis where under one heading Paul gives two addresses two issues—one positive and one negative, capped with the summary in 11:34b.

⁴ This reading should not be dismissed too quickly. A vigorous case can be made that the various expressions for a covering might refer to long or uncut hair. A. Philip Brown II, PhD. "Veil vs. Hair, Uncut vs. Long?: Assessing Recent Claims in the Light of Available Data." Unpublished paper presented at the Aldersgate Forum, 2011. Κατὰ κεφαλῆς ἔχων (v. 4) more naturally reads "having something down from his head." κομάω and κόμη can refer to long or uncut hair which could fill in the missing object of κατὰ κεφαλῆς ἔχων. This then informs our reading of ἀκατακαλύπτος ("uncovered" in v. 5, 13; verb 2x in v. 6, 7). Phil Brown points out that (1) Paul's language is ambiguous enough that even native Greek readers in the 3rd century could differ from one another on what Paul was commanding. (2) There is at least one early author who considers hair as the possible covering. (3) There seem to have been transmission issues with at least some texts of v. 10 apparently reading that "she ought to have a veil [κάλυμμα in place of ἐξουσίαν] on her head." (4) The assertive views of Tertullian and Irenaeus enjoyed a massive influence. (5) Interpreters were blind to the issue of head coverings in the OT.

⁵ Of course, the controlling structure of the entire passage is shame (κατασχύνω, αἰσχρός, ἀτιμία in v. 4-6, 14) and glory (δόξα in v. 7, 15) within the structure of headship (1 Cor. 11:3-5, 7, 10). Arranged in their logical or even causal order Paul's propositions are:

- (1) God has created ordered structure within human relationships relating specifically to gender.
- (2) There is an ethical mandate to not bring shame to one's head (metaphorical for authority relationship).
- (3) Covering one's physical head is an important way to avoid this shaming.

The link between the first two is relatively transparent, though my reading shifts the primary concern slightly from maintaining gender hierarchies to propriety. The harder link is between the latter two. By what mechanism does a head covering avoid bringing shame on one's relational head? Paul never explains. And in fact, the symbolic view rests on words that must be added in v. 10 (see note 11 below) and essentially arises as a solution to the fact that Paul's expression is difficult (these interpreters presume metonymy) when there is an entirely natural way to understand ἐξουσία + ἐπὶ (see point #6 below).

I believe that the categories of modesty make better sense of this connection because (1) enticing a man's desire through ostentation in public is inherently shameful, (2) it brings dishonour to the woman's

4. This has the significant advantage of explaining Paul's logic in vv. 5–6 that to be uncovered is tantamount to being shorn.⁶ Other readings fail to trace why the lack of an external covering or even cut hair would lead to simply shaving.⁷ But Paul's logic seems to be that if a woman insists on letting her hair be a distraction in a worship setting, she would better to cut it off entirely. Since cutting it off is clearly shameful, a more sensible way is to preserve her husband's honour and hers by covering her hair instead.
5. This also fits with my understanding that "the angels" refers to male messengers—the preachers (c.f. Matt 11:10; Jam. 2:25; Rev 2–3), since a complex, distracting coiffure might draw away attention and even desire and away from the message.
6. I also move away from the traditional understanding of ἐξουσίαν ἔχειν ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς (v. 10) translated as "having [a symbol of] authority on her head" for several reasons: (1) it requires adding words ("a symbol of") (2) it is forced to significantly complicate the meaning of ἐξουσία as "the structure of male authority" or "delegated authority" and (3) it ignores the consistent meaning for ἐξουσία + ἐπὶ where the authority is over the object of the preposition.⁸ Ramsay memorably comments that this reading is "a preposterous idea which a Greek scholar would laugh at anywhere except in the New Testament."⁹ A further problems for this understanding is that the same symbol operates in two opposite ways for men and women—it brings the woman the right to speak while for the man to wear the same symbol is dishonourable, even though his authority is also derived from his head.¹⁰ But, a more natural understanding of ἐπὶ leads to Paul

male head who ought to protect her more wisely, (3) it makes sense of why a woman would need such a covering while the men do not, and (4) it allows us to read 1 Corinthians 11 in the context of other modesty passages in 1 Tim. 2:9–10; 1 Pet. 3:3–4.

This view does not set aside categories of headship / authority. In fact, one way of viewing the logic of the modesty view is that it simply supplies the enthymeme bridging Paul's propositions #2 and #3 above—head coverings protect one's modesty which protects both the woman and her head from shame.

⁶ Too often interpreters over-read v. 5–6 as a complete equivalence so that "uncovered" = shaven. In fact, Paul's argument assumes that there is a difference between οὐ κατακαλύπτεται ("uncovered") and κείρασθαι ἢ ξυράσθαι ("to be shorn or shaved") and argues from the greater shame to the lesser.

⁷ The all-too-common assertion that baldness was a marker of prostitution turns out to lack any actual support. See Garland, 532, note 15.

⁸ Phil Brown observes that Irenaeus (Greek speaking, 120-200) quotes 1 Cor. 11:10 as "a woman ought to have a veil on her head" (κάλυμμα in place of ἐξουσίαν; also preserved when Epiphanius quotes Irenaeus in Panarion). Several copies of the Itala, one ancient edition of the Vulgate, and a witness in the Bohairic Coptic tradition also represent this reading. A. Philip Brown II, "Chrysostom & Epiphanius: Long Hair Prohibited as Covering in 1 Cor. 11:4, 7" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Francisco, CA, November 16, 2011). No extant Greek witnesses preserve the corruption, but it confirms that early readers found the expression in v. 10 difficult and may explain the interpretive trajectory for Irenaeus and others.

⁹ W. M. Ramsay, *The Cities of St. Paul: Their Influence on His Life and Thought* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960). Εξουσία + ἐπὶ very consistently describes the domain over which someone has and exercises authority (Luke 5:24; 9:1; Rev. 2:26; 13:7) and inserting "symbol" in the EVV simply lacks linguistic basis.

¹⁰ Recognizing that neither man nor woman stand on their own independent authority, why does the women bring shame if she lacks a symbol of authority, but the man brings the same shame if he does? Is not as necessary for males who more regularly proclaim divine truths in the assembly to visually express that they do so under Christ's commission and authority?

giving a charge for a woman to take responsibility (ἐξουσία) over her physical head, not leaving her hair to be gazed on and desired, but modestly handling her appearance with true dignity.¹¹

7. Finally, I do understand Paul's requirement of an additional covering as an injunction particular to the Corinthian context.

This passage has been read and discussed endlessly with little progress towards a consensus. What provides greater clarity is the history of interpretation from the church fathers.¹²

The Ante-Nicene Fathers

Irenaeus makes the first extant comment on 1 Corinthians 11 which is only a citation from the Valentinians but does record a possible variant in 11:10.¹³ The Valentinians seem to have drawn a link between a woman (Achamoth) drawing a veil over her face in Jesus' presence (in keeping with Paul's instructions), and Moses' veiling his face (Exod. 34:29–35), acknowledging a NT / OT tension we will consider below.

While discussing 1 Cor 11, **Clement of Alexandria** emphasizes the need for veils to avoid temptation—"But by no manner of means are women to be allotted to uncover and exhibit any part of their person, lest both fall, — the men by being excited to look, they by drawing on themselves the eyes of the men."¹⁴ Later, he expects that "a covering ought to be assumed as is requisite for covering the eyes of women," and "it has also been enjoined that the head should be veiled and the face covered; for it is a wicked thing for beauty to be a snare to men. Nor is it seemly for a woman to wish to make herself conspicuous, by using a purple veil."¹⁵

¹¹ The EVV split into three approaches: (1) Some EVV supply words such as "symbol, (ASV, NRSV, ESV, NASB, NAS2020, NET, HCSB, CSB, BBE, NLT, CEV, NKJVS, Young, Weymouth). This ought to observe either the convention of italics or a note (ESV has neither). (2) The NIV and TNIV represent the reading above—"ought to have authority over her own head." This leaves possible confusion about whether "head" is physical or metaphorical. (3) The older translations likely handle this the best by simply conveying the text—"she ought to have power on her head," though even here the rendering of the preposition inclines towards one view or another (Tyndale, Bishop, Geneva, Douay-Rheims, KJV, WEB, Darby, also Luther).

¹² For a survey extending to modern interpreters, see A. Philip Brown II, "A Survey of the History of the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16" (paper presented at the Aldersgate Forum, 2011).

¹³ See note #8 above. Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*, [Book 1, chap. 8](#).

¹⁴ Clement of Alexandria. *The Paedagogus*. [Book 2, chap. 2.](#). In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2. Later, "let the woman observe this, further. Let her be entirely covered, unless she happen to be at home. For that style of dress is grave, and protects from being gazed at. And she will never fall, who puts before her eyes modesty, and her shawl; nor will she invite another to fall into sin by uncovering her face. For this is the wish of the Word, since it is becoming for her to pray veiled" (Book 3, ch. 11).

¹⁵ Ibid. [Book 2, chap. 11, "On Clothes."](#)

When the **Shepherd of Hermas** sees a vision of a virgin representing the church, she is “veiled up to her forehead, and her head was covered by a hood,” representing beauty, modesty, and dignity.¹⁶

Tertullian tells us that Jewish women can be recognized by their veils, which seems to imply that pagans or other groups did not consistently do so.¹⁷ He sternly warns believers not to accept laurel wreaths or gold crowns—men should not because their head is free in Christ not to wear a covering. Women who are required to wear a veil should also refuse, since it is mere ostentation and the actual purpose of the veil is modesty to avoid seduction and “setting temptation on fire.”¹⁸ Likewise, veiling “because of the angels” is because “that face which was a snare to them should wear some mark of a humble guise and obscured beauty.”¹⁹

But Tertullian gives nearly a full exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11 when he makes the case that not only married women but virgins must be veiled.²⁰ He argues that the veiling of women is a universal principle, not merely a cultural custom (ch. 1). He observes that veiling is practiced in most of the Greek churches—especially those established by the apostles, and insists that this shows its apostolic origin rather than being a holdover from pagan society (ch. 2). Throughout the treatise, he expresses concern that some newer or more innovative churches (especially in Africa) are relaxing the standard. He adds that even in his own day the Corinthians veil their virgins, saying, “What the apostles taught, their disciples approve” (ch. 8). Married women continue to veil, and Tertullian sees this as compelling evidence that virgins ought to do the same.

He notes the irony that some women who go unveiled now claim to be scandalized by those who do veil and likens the removal of the veil from a modest virgin to a violation of her chastity (ch. 3). Asking whether veils are only required during times of worship, Tertullian insists instead that women should always veil themselves in public (chs. 4-5).

The later chapters explain the dynamics in more detail. Once young women reach marriageable age, they begin adorning themselves and advertising their availability by being unveiled in contrast to the married women (ch. 12) and attract male attention (ch. 14). But if the heathen expect modesty in public, why would Christians remove the veil in the assembly? He asks pointedly, “To what purpose, then, do they thrust their glory out of sight abroad, but expose it in the church?” (ch. 13)

¹⁶ *The Shepherd of Hermas*. [Book 1, fourth vision, chap. 2](#). In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2.

¹⁷ Tertullian. [The Chaplet](#), chap. 4. In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3.

¹⁸ Ibid., [The Chaplet](#), chap. 14.

¹⁹ Ibid. [Five Books Against Marcion, Book 5, chap. 8](#). Later, Tertullian links this specifically to the immorality of the wicked angels in Genesis 6. Tertullian. [On Prayer, chaps. 21–22, “Of Virgins”](#).

²⁰ Ibid. [On Prayer, chaps. 21–22, “Of Virgins”](#), in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3. Also [On the Apparel of Women, Book 2, chap. 7](#), vol. 4. The excerpts that follow are from [On the Veiling of Virgins, chap. 4ff](#) in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4.

He concludes with specific instruction to married women: their covering must not be limited to a turban or only hair only. “Its limits and boundaries reach as far as the place where the robe begins. The region of the veil is co-extensive with the space covered by the hair when unbound; in order that the necks too may be encircled. Arabia’s heathen females will be your judges, who cover not only the head, but the face also, so entirely, that they are content, with one eye free, to enjoy rather half the light than to prostitute the entire face” (ch. 17)

We can draw several summary observations:

- The Ante-Nicene fathers universally understand veiling to refer to a covering in addition to hair, and while there is some variety in the veils they command, it is more than a turban. Veils should completely cover the hair at a minimum and several of the fathers would prefer that it cover all but the woman’s eyes.
- With some variations, the default cultural practice even outside the church seems to have been veiling for women in public settings for women of marriageable age.
- Nearly all of the Ante-Nicene fathers understand the purpose of the covering as modesty rather than as a symbol of authority.

Augustine

Writing between 395 and 430, Augustine cites “headship” from 1 Cor. 11:3 to describe authority and submission.²¹ But he over-reads the figurative language as well, highlighting that Jesus was anointed on his head,²² drawing out the importance of washing and anointing our physical heads,²³ and enjoining believers to safeguard their physical heads since Christ is our head.²⁴

Augustine specifically addresses the practice of head coverings when he argues that the mind is the centre of the image of God and a head covering displays a limitation on the mind. Though both men and women both have cognitive capacity, women physically represent the “more concupiscential part, over which the mind bears rule.... when life is most rightly and orderly conducted,” and in “two human beings, man and woman, [this is] exhibited in a figure. Of which sacred import the Apostle speaks when he says, that the man ought not to be veiled, the women ought.”²⁵ “It was possible rightly to represent under her bodily covering that part of the reason which is diverted to the government of temporal things; so that the image of God may remain on that side of the mind of man on which it cleaves to the beholding or the consulting of the eternal reasons of things.”²⁶ And

²¹ [*On The Trinity*, Book 6, Ch. 9](#); also [*On Marriage and Concupiscence*, Book 1, Chap 10](#); also [*Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount*, Book 1, Ch 12, sec 34](#).

²² [*Sermon 39*, sec 5](#).

²³ [*Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount*, Book 2, Ch 12, sec 42](#).

²⁴ [*Sermons on Selected Lessons*, Sermon 14, sec 3](#).

²⁵ [*Of the Works of Monks*, sec. 40](#).

²⁶ [*On the Trinity*, Book 12, ch. 7, Section 9–12](#).

so when Jesus tells the woman at the well to go call her husband, it is symbolic for calling the more enlightened part of the soul and ultimately telling her to call Christ.²⁷

Regarding the mechanics, “it is not becoming even in married women to uncover their hair.”²⁸ Augustine’s strictures go equally both ways. Addressing the *Works of Monks*, he complains of men who in flagrant disobedience against Paul wear long hair and fail to show God’s full glory as the image. Augustine grants that OT Nazarites, Moses and Samuel had long hair, but in the New Covenant the veil is now removed (2 Cor 3:16). The monks of Augustine’s day aver that long hair is a point of humility, but in fact they seek only attention, as Samson did. In so doing, they offend and trouble the Church.”²⁹

This exposes several summary insights from Augustine’s understanding.

- Augustine shifts the purpose of the covering from modesty to maintaining the male-female hierarchy.
- It is also interesting that Augustine’s context is not already aligned with Paul’s instructions—at least in respect to men’s long hair—and that Augustine is prepared to correct cultural trends from 1 Corinthians 11. And yet this dynamic is more complex, for Augustine seems to be addressing a smaller, counter-cultural group—monks who chose to dress in a way that stands out from prevailing cultural trends, since they cite “humility” as the basis for their decision.
- It is also interesting that the causal link between the physical head and the concept of authority is entirely natural for Augustine, as opposed to an idea such as “source” or another metaphorical connection.
- But most significantly, Augustine has a different conceptual base from his predecessors. His concern is not primarily modesty (curtailing sexual attraction) or because of cultural custom.³⁰ His primary ground for Paul’s instructions is as a symbol highlighting Augustinian intellectualism—the primacy of the mind and eternally oriented reasons over sensual desire and temporal functions, even though this framework is entirely alien to Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 11.

²⁷ [Tractates on John, Tractate 15, sec 19](#). Augustine reaches his most typological and eccentric handling of 1 Cor. 11 when he links Peter’s request not to be anointed with the Song of Solomon. “The night He speaks of is iniquity: but His dew and drops are those who wax cold and fall away, and make the head of Christ to wax cold, that is, the love of God to fail. For the head of Christ is God.” [Tractates on John, Tractate 57, section 4](#).

²⁸ [Letter 245](#).

²⁹ Ibid. [Of the Work of Monks, section 39–40](#), in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4.

³⁰ Augustine does link veils with modesty and attraction in his work, *Of Holy Virginity*, sec. 34, charging unmarried women not to display sophisticated hair arrangements underneath their veils. “There is a certain aim of pleasing, either by more elegant dress than the necessity of so great profession demands, or by remarkable manner of binding the head, whether by bosses of hair swelling forth, or by coverings so yielding, that the fine network below appears: unto these we must give precepts, not as yet concerning humility, but concerning chastity itself, or virgin modesty.”

Chrysostom

The earliest full-length exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11 is from Chrysostom.³¹ Like Augustine, Chrysostom assumes special significance for one's physical head. Confronting the practice of smearing mud on children's heads to protect them from the spirits, Chrysostom warns that this is no mere trifle, but "the source of great evils.... For, tell me, what can be less than a man's covering his head...? Yet observe how great a matter he makes of this and with how great earnestness he forbids it; saying, among many things, 'He dishonoreth his head.' (1 Corinthians 11:4). Now if he that covers himself 'dishonoreth his head'; he that besmears his child with mud, how can it be less than making it abominable?"³²

Chrysostom agrees with Augustine that what is at stake is symbolic with important divine intentions behind that symbolism. "Symbols many and diverse have been given both to man and woman; to him of rule, to her of subjection: and among them this also, that she should be covered, while he hath his head bare. If now these be symbols, you see that both err when they disturb the proper order, and transgress the disposition of God, and their own proper limits, both the man falling into the woman's inferiority, and the woman rising up against the man by her outward habiliments." Proper practice of head coverings helps "the governor and the governed [to be] regularly kept in their several places by it."³³

This includes "keeping of [the veil] with all care and diligence. For he said not merely covered, but 'covered over,' meaning that she be carefully wrapped up on every side." Chrysostom also expects that women should be constantly covered, while men might still wear a covering outside of worship times. He supports this with the observation that (1) to be shaved or unshaved (v. 5) is not a condition one could quickly switch between when entering or exiting worship and (2) the angels are always present.³⁴

Chrysostom also offers a very clear discussion of cultural backgrounds when he projects a specific situation in Corinth. "Their women used both to pray and prophesy unveiled and with their head bare, (for then women also used to prophesy;) but the men went so far as to wear long hair as having spent their time in philosophy, and covered their heads when praying and prophesying, each of which was a Grecian custom. Since then he had already admonished them concerning these things when present, and some perhaps listened to him and others disobeyed; therefore in his letter also again, he... corrects the offence."³⁵

Several observations can be drawn:

³¹ [Homily 26 on 1 Cor 11:2ff](#), written around 400.

³² [Homily 12 on 1 Corinthians 4:6, sec 14.](#)

³³ [Homily 26 \(on 1 Cor 11:2ff\) sec 4.](#)

³⁴ [Ibid.](#)

³⁵ [Homily 26 \(on 1 Cor 11:2ff\), sec. 2.](#)

- Like Augustine, Chrysostom also definitely adopts the symbolic view over the modesty concerns of the Ante-Nicene fathers. It seems plausible that this shift also corresponds to the rise of monasticism and the hardening of sacramentalism during this time.
- Chrysostom's projection of the cultural situation in Corinth seems questionable, especially given that it disagrees with earlier comments (Tertullian) and assumes the opposite of what Paul actually says in 11:2 ("I commend you").

Symbols of Submission or Patterns of Propriety?

This allows us to return to 1 Corinthians 11 and ask how to apply it today. Perhaps head coverings are an abiding symbol for authority and submission, and the application stands across time and space. More recent interpreters have understood it as culturally relative, generally resting on projections of the contemporary culture in Corinth. On this framing, Paul's instructions should be read within the matrix of Corinthian culture.³⁶

The question is precisely where we began—can we establish the original context with any confidence? From there, how would we demonstrate that our own culture ought to be preserved rather than corrected? Ken Casillas wisely warns that “we must exercise great caution in this area lest we dismiss a divine requirement as a human custom, offering two further criteria. (1) We ought to “consider any reason a text states or implies for a particular duty” remaining particularly sensitive to a “theologically oriented reason” such as arguments based in the creation order. (2) We ought to “compare the teaching at hand with the rest of the Bible.”³⁷ I suggest that the situation-specific view need not rest on our knowledge of Corinthian culture at all, because important patterns from within the text of Scripture itself point to something more complex at work.

Old Testament Context

If 1 Corinthians 11 gives us a timeless mandate based on the abiding facts of man's dignity in God's image and male and female relationship, this practice is never mandated elsewhere in Scripture. Why did the OT never require head coverings for women in the temple (note Exod. 15:20–21; Judges 5; 1 Sam 1:10–16; 2:1–10). Why do we discover this ethical mandate only in the Epistles? Worse, a number of Old Testament indicators run the opposite direction. High priests were specifically required to wear a head covering (Exod. 28:4, 37, 39; 29:6; 39:28, 31; Lev. 8:9; 16:4) as were the regular priests

³⁶ Hinting at how complex this question actually is, sources sometimes turn to Grecian culture, or perhaps Roman because Corinth was a Roman colony, or perhaps Jewish because Paul appeals to the Torah. If we are unable to clearly establish which cultural framework we are drawing from, are we sure that we can reconstruct the entire cultural situation?

³⁷ Ken Casillas, *Beyond Chapter and Verse: The Theology and Practice of Biblical Application* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 225–226.

(Exod. 28:40; 29:9; 39:28; Lev. 8:13) as part of their ongoing, regular ministry in the temple that clearly included prayer (Numbers 6:22–27) and prophesying (Deut 33:10).³⁸

Several other Old Testament passages also command that a woman's hair is cut or shorn (Deut 21:12 with the captive woman; Micah 1:16 as mourning). Granted, these are cases of mourning, but it still raises difficulties if 1 Corinthians 11 mandates a clear ethic.

In the Nazarite vow (Numbers 6:1–21), a man or a woman could dedicate themselves especially to the Lord for a determined period, but this would include leaving their hair untouched. Significant here is that the text makes no particular distinction between the genders (Num. 6:12, 18).³⁹ It seems difficult to maintain that a time of dedication to God is also dishonouring to Him. And while the details are uncertain, it seems oddly coincidental that well before writing 1 Corinthians, Paul took a vow which culminated in cutting his hair in keeping with Jewish traditions for the Nazarite vow (Acts 18:18).⁴⁰ Furthermore, Paul had just completed 18 months in Corinth—a clear opportunity to “deliver the traditions” to them. The most natural reading of the evidence is that Paul observed some tradition of growing longer hair in a way that allowed room for ongoing OT precedents.⁴¹

Augustine recognizes the dilemma and offers an interesting solution—“the difference between that prophetic veil, and this unveiling which is in the Gospel, of which the

³⁸ Clement of Rome exegetes the mitre of the high priest as a symbol of Christ's great authority, immediately after referencing 1 Cor. 11:3. But ironically most of the fathers understand the head covering in 1 Corinthians as a symbol of submission and delegated authority. This opposition was likely less problematic for him, since he seems to understand the role of the veil as curtailing sinful desire. Clement of Alexandria. *The Stromata. Book 4, chap. 8*. In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2.

³⁹ The Samson account (Judg. 13:5; 16:13, 17, 19, 22) highlights the requirement for long hair over any other elements (touching a carcass in 14:8–9 or immorality in 14:1–3; 16:1, 4). 1 Sam. 1:11 never specifies that Samuel was a Nazarite, but Hannah vows that “no razor shall touch his head.”

⁴⁰ So Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*, *UBS Translator's Handbooks*. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972). Richard N. Longenecker, “Acts,” in *Luke-Acts*, vol. 10 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Revised Edition*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 998. Also I. Howard Marshall, “Acts,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 596. Also Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 65C of *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 155. Bock considers a private vow instead, but also with Paul's hair cut at the end of the vow. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 585. Whether Nazarite or private, commentators are at a consensus that the hair was trimmed at the end of the vow. See also *Mishnah Nazir 1:1-9:5*. It is also possible to read Josephus to say that it was customary to shave one's head continuously for the 30 days of a vow but this reading seems unlikely. Josephus, *The Jewish War*. 2.15.1.

⁴¹ Did Paul then disobey his own teaching that “if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him” (v. 14, ἀνὴρ μὲν ἐὰν κομᾷ ἀτιμία αὐτῷ ἐστίν)? Rather, the passage is primarily focused on women (note the asymmetry with instructions addressed only to women in v.6, 10). This fits my understanding that Paul's primary concern here is with a coiffure that would be distracting in worship. Furthermore, for both genders, the driving concern is a matter of perceived dishonour. But Paul would not have dishonoured himself or the authority of the proclaimed word when he had the chance to clearly explain his intentions in person. Nor does his choice to follow a framework detailed in the Old Testament violate his instructions in 1 Corinthians 11. In fact, the best way of resolving this conflict is exactly the argument I am making—that Paul's instructions to Corinth fit a culturally situated concern that is also compatible with the Old Testament pattern in the Pauline philosophy of becoming all things to all men. (Note 1 Cor. 10:32–33 just prior to ch. 11).

Apostle saith, ‘When thou shall go over unto Christ, the veil shall be taken away.’ That, namely, which was signified in the veil interposed between the face of Moses and the beholding of the people Israel, that same was also signified in those times by the long hair of the Saints.”⁴² However, if we argue that Paul’s argument rests on timeless, creational foundations in 1 Cor. 11 in order to support a timeless practice, we cannot also say that they are abrogated as matters of OT / NT discontinuity.

New Testament Context

The complexity is not only between the testaments. It is interesting that a very niche topic—women’s hair styles—is addressed in three different passages (1 Cor 11:2-16; 1 Tim. 2:9–10; 1 Pet. 3:3–4). Read together, all three passages pinpoint hair styles as distracting or undermining NT worship. All three point to modesty. They share propriety ideas. They are all concerned about hair. And yet there is nothing in 1 Peter or 1 Timothy about a head covering—only about avoiding sophisticated coiffures.

Oddly, 1 Tim. 2:9–10; 1 Pet. 3:3–4 seem not to be sufficiently incorporated into most modern examinations of 1 Corinthians 11 while earlier interpreters seem to be conscious of the connection. Tertullian’s admonitions two centuries later sound strikingly similar when he rebukes virgins for appearing in church without a veil because they are seeking attention from marriage prospects.

This seems to support a broader pattern in the ancient world of elaborate hair styles to attract male attention.⁴³ In Apuleius’s novel *Metamorphoses* (*The Golden Ass*), Lucius describes interaction with Photius, a slave girl. “Saying this she turned towards me and laughed. But I refused to go till I’d diligently explored every aspect of her appearance. My first delight has also been—why speak of anything else—the hair on a woman’s head; to consider it carefully first in public, and enjoy it later at home. The reason behind this preference of mine is perfectly well-considered: namely that as the main part of the body openly and clearly seen it’s the first thing to meet the eyes.”⁴⁴ The lovers tryst specifically includes Photius “having loosed her hair into cheerful wantonness.”⁴⁵

⁴² *Of the Works of Monks*, sec 39. Philip Schaff, eds. *St. Augustin: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, & Moral Treatises*. vol. III of [A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church](#)

⁴³ Elsewhere I have proposed a rudimentary criterion for limiting our dependence on original cultural background—it can help to colour or enrich our readings, but ought never to be the basis for a wholesale reinterpretation of a particular passage. My use of backgrounds does not redirect the exegetical data; it only corroborates complexities that already arise between the texts when read together.

⁴⁴ Lucius Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* (*Metamorphoses*), trans. A. S Kline (2013), chap. 2.8, accessed July 29, 2025, [Fordham University's Internet History Sourcebooks, PDF](#).

⁴⁵ Carl Schlam, *The Metamorphoses of Apuleius* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 71. This may hint at a more fundamental difference between ancient life and our own. Textiles were prohibitively costly, such that an average person would not have many changes of clothing. The limits of dye technology and difficulties of colour fixing add further to a culture where clothes could not be the easy, abundant source of attraction that they are today. But even a poor woman could find ways to arrange her hair. For a delightful and exegetically helpful look at the world history of textiles, see Virginia Postrel, *The Fabric of Civilization: How Textiles Made the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).

All of this ought to recenter Paul's motivation for his commands away from maintaining hierarchy and towards modesty concerns. And this in turn, opens the door for us to think more about how the command would be contextualized.

A Missionary Faith

Before mandating external coverings in worship, we ought to recognize that the implications are significant. Ours is a missionary faith. Christianity has only two mandated, external symbols—baptism and the Lord's supper. It is part of the beautiful flexibility of the Christian message that it is so suited for application in every time, place, and culture. There is no mandated Christian style of dress as in Islam or a mandated diet as in Buddhism. Certainly, there is no reason that the New Testament could not mandate head coverings for all places and times. But it would be a surprising and significant requirement, analogous with the two Christian ordinances, and it would leave us in a difficult position for explaining the symbol, given how little biblical exposition we have and how complex the data is. It ought to at least give us pause that our sole basis for this practice derives from a complex passage in which multiple critical parameters are unknown.

Cultural Propriety

But one problem still stands, for Paul seems to base his argument on unchanging norms—the taxis of woman, man, Christ, and God (v. 3); the image of God (v. 7) and the woman's created relationship with the man (v. 7); man and woman created as interdependent (v. 8-9); and embedded structures in nature—"does not nature itself teach you" in v. 14 and the fact that "hair is given to her for a covering" in v. 15. Paul builds his case with an eye on Genesis 1-3. These timeless realities are just as true in every place and era as they were in 1st century Corinth; do we have the liberty to adapt Paul's instructions to our own contexts? And once we grant that ethical mandates in one passage are merely situational for Corinth, what follows next?

Several qualifications can guide us. First, Paul argues here and in the passage that extends from it using concepts of propriety. He invites the believers to judge for themselves whether this is proper (πρέπω). Honour and shame support this notion by the fact that they are social and relational categories. The companion passage that resonates closely concludes with the summary that "all things should be done decently and in order."

Second, on closer inspection, it is entirely unremarkable that Paul appeals to unchanging and universal theological realities to ground his practical applications. In the previous chapter He uses similar bases to support applications that are situation specific. Because of the eternal truth that "the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof" (10:26), a believer ought to eat meat offered to idols, but because one "cannot partake of the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons" they ought not partake in other situations (v. 21-22). The question is not whether the theological grounds for Paul's commands are permanent—all legitimate grounds are. Rather, contextualization takes place in the movement from grounds to application.

And it is here that the considerations above guide us. The problem of OT priestly head-coverings alerts us to time-specific brackets in how we apply 1 Corinthians 11. Reading 1 Corinthians 11 together with 1 Tim. 2:9–10; 1 Pet. 3:3–4 leads us towards modesty as a primary reason for veils. The trajectories of how the early fathers understood this text confirm both. And most importantly, all of this can be understood and explained without needing to project or establish the original culture of Corinth.⁴⁶

Conclusion

It is at least possible to responsibly read 1 Corinthians 11 in a way analogous to Paul's instructions for admitting someone into the group of church-supported widows in 1 Timothy 4—a helpful exercise in practical theology applied to the church, but that will be expressed differently across various culture settings. Garland helpfully summarizes:

To apply this concern to another cultural context requires one to take into account significant cultural differences related to honor and shame. This passage is “not about wearing hats to church or about proving that women are intended to be subordinate to men” (R. Williams 1997: 59). The command “let her be covered” (11:6) communicates different things in different cultures. The common denominator is that the “covering” is a sign of personal rectitude, and its absence an implication of the opposite. The basic issue resolves around what is “proper” (11:13). Faithfulness to the teaching of the text can be maintained by female participants in the worship service by observing the proprieties of polite society.⁴⁷

If Paul's controlling concern is modesty, the practical applications follow easily. The church assembly is not the place to attract attention or turn heads. Let God's people live according to what is proper, acting decently in order. This extends to each aspect of male-female relationships and the rightful concern to avoid shameful living but to properly honour our head, both within human relationships and ultimately before Christ Himself.

⁴⁶ Phil Brown summarizes the rather strong consensus that veils for modesty were quite common in 1st century Roman, Greek and Jewish culture, so that whichever influence we believe was operative in Corinth, the conclusion is the same. “Survey of the History of Interpretation,” 14-15.

⁴⁷ Garland, 511-512.